

Gliding, Spinning and Sweating with the Best of Them: Québec City's Copious Sports Buffet

 Compte-Rendu

by Richard Whelan

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Many cities throughout the world offer you cultural riches, while others entice with vast green spaces just beyond their doorsteps. Then there are those rare gems that combine the best of both.

Now, no one would argue that Québec City compares culturally to New York or Paris or, closer to home, Montréal or Toronto. Yet, for its size (600,000 people), Québec City provides all the pleasures of big city life. Forget the world renowned winter carnival and international summer music festival, the Province's capital boasts a lively cultural scene, a small but vigorous opera company and symphony, and probably more restaurants per capita than anywhere else in Canada.

What Québec City may lack in metropolitan convenience, it more than makes up for with its beauty and hospitality. Its Old City, dating to the XVIIth century and perched high atop cliffs, affords a breathtaking view of the St. Lawrence seaway, Isle of Orleans and surrounding countryside. But it is under winter's snow that Québec City is utterly transformed.

Indeed, snow is the defining hallmark of Québec City. Three metres of white powder blanket the city every winter, enhancing its postcard charm. While in the hills, less than an hour away, up to 7 metres fall between mid-November and April. This combination of snow and space so close to an urban centre has given rise to over 30 cross-country ski centres in the region.

It is here in Québec City that the *Masters World Cup* is taking place at the Centre Myriam Bédard, named after the two-time Olympic biathlon champ. Used by the Canadian biathlon team, the site is just 20 minutes north-west of the city and is one of the better equipped cross country ski centres in the region. Designed for international competition, it definitely challenges the expert enthusiasts.

Centre Castor, a public centre right next door to the Bédard, caters to the skate-skier with 95 km of very well groomed classic-skate combined trails. The trail-quality and beautiful forest make Castor a popular destination for weekend and serious skiers alike.

But unquestionably the biggest snow resort in the region, and one of the busiest snow destinations in North America, is Mont Sainte-Anne. Often regarded as a mecca for alpine skiers, Sainte-Anne is, as well, the largest cross-country ski centre in Canada and second in North America, bragging 224 km of groomed trails for diagonal strides and 135 km for skate-skiers. Mont Sainte-Anne offers everything the gliding gourmet could demand. As an added bonus, Sainte-Anne is just a short hop from the city and offers numerous types of accommodations to fit any lifestyle and budget.

Camp Mercier is unquestionably Sainte-Anne's closest competitor in the region for classic skiers, kicking in with an impressive 192 km of diagonal trails. Just 50 minutes north of the city, Mercier has dry snow and a good long season. It's ideal for those who are looking for a touch of wilderness, and, as such, also offers a good choice of backcountry skiing trails and huts.

Ten minutes north of Mercier is the Forêt Montmorency, managed by Laval University's Forestry Department. Tucked away in the hills where the snow starts early and falls heavy, this is where the eager go to *kick off* the ski season around mid-November. Montmorency also hosts an extremely popular three day cross-country Master's clinic in mid-December. Best to book early though. Space at the Master's clinic is extremely coveted and fills up in less than a week after advertising.

Other local cross-country centres have their particular appeal and charm, be it well-groomed trails, proximity or scenery. Duschenay's extra-wide skate trails, for example, are laid down on logging roads and give you lots of gliding room. One of the prettiest centres is Le Refuge in Saint-Adolphe, again, along the road to Camp Mercier. However, as with many of the ski centres around North America, the traditional diagonal stride trails are longer and better developed than the skate trails, and it is advisable to call and inquire about trail type and difficulty.

For several years now, the cross country community here has joined forces to produce an excellent pamphlet, updated annually, providing essential information on almost all the ski centres in the region. It can be obtained through Tourism Québec, local news papers, Eko gas stations or on the internet (see Addresses, etc below).

One of the really special (and practical) sides of cross country in Québec City is being able to ski right in the heart of town near the big hotels at the Plains of Abraham. The city's biggest urban park now has the latest in high-tech machinery and good grooming, with a flat western loop just west of the Québec Museum and a hillier eastern loop guaranteed to get your heart pumping. For those who like a bit of competition, there are regular races and loppets held around the province. Finally, if you want an exotic never-done-that-before outing, try skiing on the St. Lawrence tidal flats. As the article in this review by André Mercier describes, the conditions can be a bit rough but the spectacular view more than compensates.

For a change of pace while you're in the region, you might want to try ice skating in a few of the lovely locations around Québec City. Besides numerous indoor and outdoor hockey rinks, last winter we could ice skate on the terrace of the Château Frontenac overlooking the St. Lawrence River, at Place d'Youville, just outside the walls of the Old City, at a speed-skating loop in Sainte-Foy named after double Olympic gold medallist Gaétan Boucher, alongside the St. Charles River in the Lower Town and on Beauport Lake, which has a big 2 km loop in a beautiful setting.

With the arrival of the new aluminium-plastic snowshoes, snowshoeing is undergoing a slow but steady renaissance in the region. Many of the cross-country ski centres now also have snowshoe trails, but with a good sense of direction, a compass and some caution, you can explore a lot of territory here. Because of snowshoes' greater versatility, it's even easier to snowshoe on the St. Lawrence tidal flats than it is to ski there. Just remember to go at low tide! More adventurous outings further into the bush will either require you using topo maps or joining one of the local outdoor clubs. This also holds true for backcountry skiing.

Once April rolls around, the snow starts melting and it's time to stow the skis and inflate the tires. The growing number of cycling paths is just one indication of the improving conditions for recreational cyclists here. Québec is also developing the Route Verte (green route), which is currently 2,400 km and will reach 4,200 km by 2005. The Route is made up of cycling paths, country roads and widened, paved shoulders on busier roads and is making it progressively easier and safer to cycle around the province. Particularly appreciated by the locals, old railway beds are being converted for cycling aficionados. The longest is the Corridor des Cheminots, a gentle 62 km climb. Check the local cycling specific guidebooks, which detail routes and degree of difficulty and list food and accommodations, from bistros to B&Bs. There are also two main cycling maps for the Québec City region, one for the south shore, another for the north.

If you're looking for a denser network of roads in the area, the best choices are west of Québec City out beyond Saint-Augustin and Neuville. For tougher riding, head to the hills north of the St. Lawrence to Tewkesbury and Stoneham. Cyclists looking for new sensations might rent a track bike and try out the new velodrome in Saint-Augustin. Finally, if you want to compete, road bike regional races are held once a week on Tuesday evenings and are generally from 40 to 50 km long. One – or two – day provincial races are held on the weekends. If you want to race while you're here, licences are necessary, so inquire beforehand.

Many local cross-country ski centres open their doors in the summer for that other popular form of biking. Mont Sainte-Anne, as a World Cup site, is a local hot spot for mountain bikers. Hard core enthusiasts might want to try out the toughest of the local races, the Grand Raid Pierre Harvey (3 days, 290 km) or its shorter offspring. There are also bi-monthly regional races that bring in up to 350 racers each time. But don't forget your licences.

Hiking, though not nearly as well-developed as in some European countries, is growing in popularity and the trail system is keeping pace. A few of the more well-known trails, most notably those of the Jacques-Cartier Park, Cap Tourmente and the Charlevoix district, have been integrated into larger provincial and national trails. These include the Sentier national au Québec, reserved for travel by foot, and the Trans-Canada Trail, which is multi-purpose. And if your heart so desires, you can now walk down to the Gulf of Mexico and will soon be able to cross Canada from sea to shining sea.

When you don't want to bike or hike, you might want to run or jog. Like any other place in the world, a lot of runners in Québec City head to the streets. However, the most popular place to run here (and be seen running) is the Plains of Abraham. As soon as the big park throws off its winter coat, it fills up with joggers and, soon thereafter, with in-line skaters. There are regular, monthly road races in Québec City from April to October, a 100 km triathlon in July and cross-country running races in the fall. For the LSD runners, the quite popular Deux rives marathon in late August follows a picturesque route up one shore of the St. Lawrence and down the other into the Old City.

There are, of course, many other sports that can be practised in the region. Soccer is now the most popular participatory sport in Québec City and in Canada, ahead of, would you believe it, ice hockey, though you'd never know it if you turned on a T.V. or picked up a newspaper. Ice climbing buffs set their picks into the ice-covered cliffs of the Montmorency Falls all winter long. Windsurfing conditions are said to be good in Beauport Bay five minutes from the city centre and even better at a few other spots along the shore. Hundreds of sailboats sweep back and forth in front of Québec City on sunny summer days. Rock climbing, baseball, sea and river kayaking, rugby, martial arts, and many other sports are also part of the local scene, so if you're ever thinking of coming back to/visiting Québec City, plan ahead and contact some of the organizations mentioned below. They might provide that little extra bit of information for accommodations, locations and events that can turn a good trip into a great one. Bon ski, bon sport et au revoir!