

The following feature appeared in the September/October 1999 issue of *Endless Vacation* under the title, “Monte-Ste.-Anne’s Winter Joy”

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SKIING À LA FRANÇAIS ON AMERICAN SHORES

Take a big North American ski resort, season it the French way, and voilà: Mont Ste.-Anne, Québec

By Claire Walter

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The sun inches up over the southeastern horizon, raising a diaphanous layer of mist from the St. Lawrence River. A fire-engine red Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker threads through floes that sparkle against the slate-gray water like gemstones against velvet. On the south shore, the Île d’Orléans comes slowly to life. Residents of this agrarian island enjoy their winter leisure—time to linger over coffee and rolls from the *boulangerie*. On the north shore, a handful of the faithful have come to the Basilica of Ste.-Anne de Beaupré. It is one of North America’s most hallowed pilgrimage churches, but the sprinkling of elderly parishioners, their heads bowed, are too deep in prayer to notice the beauty of the low morning light filtering through the fine stained glass windows. If you are within earshot, you will hear that those prayers are being spoken in quiet French.

High above the basilica and the village of Beaupré, the language is the same, but the it’s a different world. At Mont Ste.-Anne, the largest ski resort in eastern Québec, tranquility has been replaced by an electric atmosphere. Skiers and snowboarders are boisterous, primed for great day on the slopes. The lift attendants are at their stations, and the first load of chattering skiers and snowboarders, anxious for first tracks on the corduroy surface of freshly groomed snow, is piling out of the horsedrawn sleigh shuttle from the parking lot. A sunny day in mid-winter is not to be wasted.

Eight people can pile into each gondola cabin, and soon the windows fog up, but stunning as the view is, most earlybirds are only interested in getting down the mountain just to ride back up again. Pierre, Claude, Patrick and Georges are off from work on this day, and fourteen-year-old Lucille and Josette somehow have a school holiday. They practice their English on you, telling you that Lucille was named after her mother’s idol, Lucille Wheeler, a Canadian ski racer who raced at Mont Ste.-Anne even before lifts were installed. Straining your high-school French to catch what the men are talking about, you think you understand they are betting on how many runs each will cram into the day, but all you definitely understand is a frequently grunted *oui*, which in the French of Québec sounds more like, “w-we-e-e-h.”

Québec winters are long and intense, and Quebeckers have learned to enjoy them. That means Mont Ste.-Anne scene is more about fun than fashion. Most locals—meaning

skiers and riders not just from the immediate surroundings but also from Québec City, half an hour away—spend more on gear than on garments. The latest models of skis, snowboards and boots are appended to many feet, but clothing tends to focus on function: Vintage anoraks over layers of expedition-weight longjohns, fleece pullovers or thick wool workshirts in whatever plaid came out of the *garderobe*, and perhaps a thick vest for good measure. Plus mitts over liners, neck gaiters, maybe even ski masks, and heavy hats or balaclavas. Men favor big, bushy winter beards. You're seeing the practical side of those who know how raw the Canadian climate can be. Even on a sunny day such as this, midwinter mornings are—well—crisp, and none of the earlybirds wants to miss a run because of a little factor like weather. If an outfit matches, so much the better.

Vacationers tend to linger longer over breakfast or need time to get their children into day care or ski school, so by the time they board the gondola, there's a good show below. La Gondoleuse, the lifeline run, sprouts big moguls, and Mont Ste.-Anne's best bumpers try to impress the passengers above. Maggie the St. Bernard rules the Mont Ste.-Anne summit, presiding beside her doghouse. belongs to a patroller, wears ski patrol bib and will gladly pose for a photo with you.

Some people do summit-to-base laps and ride the gondola run after run, but others prefer two chairlifts that each ascend partway up the mountain's frontside. The lower one is a bubble-domed high-speed, four-passenger lift, which not only provides a speedy ride but also offers a bird's eye view of the World Cup halfpipe. The higher chair, also quad, sails over Mont Ste.-Anne's terrain park. Snowboarders and, increasingly, skiers get air over tabletops, rolls and kickers built to the strong beat broadcast from the powerful sound system. Young and young-at-heart freeriders, many costumed in the universal snowboarding uniform of baggy grunge, perform astonishing acrobatics at both spots.

At Mont Ste.-Anne, the way you ski often determines where you ski. At the summit, beginners, intermediates and take-it-easy types bear right to a galaxy of broad groomers that range from gentle to moderate. (These runs are lit at night, for those who just can't quit.) Purists bear left to a half-dozen single- and double-black diamond trails that thread through the thick forest. The trail called La Crête has been the site of many major downhill ski races. On runs like these, Melanie Turgeon, a current Canadian Ski Team star, cut her teeth.

Stop at the La Crête Chalet, where you're likely to see some of those first-trackers forking up a late breakfast of omelettes or crêpes doused in maple syrup. Other gustatory traditions at Mont Ste.-Anne include the Summit Lodge's La Soupe Repas, a hearty melange of beef, vegetables and potatoes that looks like a soup but fills like a meal, and crêpes of various kinds at the Refuge du Nord, the north-side base lodge. If your sweet tooth aches, stop for maple sugar on snow at the old sugar shack along the La Prichard trail, or dine elegantly this evening at the Beauregard in the Chateau de Mont Ste.-Anne, where award-winning chef Jose Mariello presides. (His Beef Sirloin Carpaccio, thin sheets of marinated beef, is one of the best renditions anywhere.)

Such delicacies are not an affectation for tourists, but everyday fare in this province that is French in language, culture, cuisine, traditions and attitude. It's no coincidence that the phrase *joie de vivre* has become universal to describe an upbeat and energetic approach to life, and Québec marches to just such a joyful beat. Yet Québec's location, north of New York State, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, means that winters are long, snowy, so

in addition to general, year-round *joie de vivre*, Quebeckers practice what can be called *joie d'hiver*, joy of winter.

Mont Ste.-Anne is more than merely a mountain playground. It boasts Canada's largest cross-country trail system, but even a casual excursion on skinny skis or snowshoes, stopping at any of the seven trailside warming huts, is a great treat—and ideal when it's blustery on the mountain. You can also take a thrilling snowmobile tour or a dogsled ride (or simply stop to pet the pooches—Bruno the musher doesn't mind). You can even skate on an outdoor ice rink at the resort or even learn to ice climb at nearby Montmorency Falls, which are higher than Niagara Falls. If you can't imagine thrusting ice axes and crampons into the frozen 272-foot cascade, at least drive over to gaze at its glistening beauty and marvel at the massive ice hump that develops at the base every winter.

Skiing at Mont Ste.-Anne without visiting Québec City is like eating Thanksgiving turkey without stuffing—absolutely unthinkable. Founded as a fur trading post a dozen years before the Pilgrims stepped onto Plymouth Rock, it's historic to the core. Cobblestone streets and squares are lined with a few 17th- and but mostly 18th-century buildings. Most are solid of stone topped with steep roofs and small dormers, the characteristic architecture of French Canada. Many now house restaurants, cafes and shops. The “new” city on high a bluff largely dates from 19th. The riverview promenade known as Dufferin Terrace is flooded for ice skating, and a pair of toboggan slides enables you to take a rocket ride down to the heart of the old city, where you'll find yet another seasonal skating rink. If you're really adventurous, you can even learn to navigate the St. Lawrence River in a sturdy winter canoe.

City walls, built to protect the French against the English, stand as they did two centuries ago. These two long-time foes fought their last decisive battles in 1759 and 1760 on the Plains of Abraham, now a fine park for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and other winter activities. As the provincial capital, Québec City also boasts imposing government buildings and fascinating museums. And for a few wild weeks each winter, it celebrates Carnival, a snowy Mardi Gras festival that ranks as one of the world's best. You might think that your breath will freeze in the cold evening air, but locals warm theirs up with a throat-searing firewater called caribou so that they can enjoy the parades, the ice sculptures and all manner of street-scene merriment. Is that Pierre, Claude, Patrick and Georges passing a flask? Lucille and Josette are probably doing their homework. You can try caribou too—or just keep warm with a sensible Thermos full of hot tea or chocolate.

A Québec City excursion is as energizing as a trip abroad, and after a taste of its Euro-style urban ambience and its effusive winter action, Mont Ste.-Anne will feel like a quiet village—one that happens to offer some of the best skiing, downhill and cross-country, in the East. When you return, you'll relax, perhaps reliving the shopping portion of your Québec City excursion with a motherlode of purchases at your feet. There might be snowflakes outside your window, and if you watch their mesmerizing drift, you might, in your reverie, wonder whether there could possibly be a better place to sample the joys of winter than at Mont Ste.-Anne.

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