

QUEBEC

Skiing Quebec's top three resorts

Mont-Sainte-Anne, Stoneham and Le Massif offer peak experiences

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Skiing in Quebec

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Olympic mogul skier and resort ambassador Jean-Luc Brassard is a familiar face on the slopes at Quebec's Le Massif. LORI KNOWLES/Special to QMI Agency

There's no question Quebec has its own unique quality as a ski and snowboard destination.

The Laurentians and Eastern Townships are the very spots skiing was born in eastern North America. But Quebec City stands out in 2013, particularly for the so called "rubber-tire" ski set and families seeking a March Break ski getaway. There are several reasons for this.

First, the ski hills surrounding the historic city -- Mont-Sainte-Anne, Stoneham and Le Massif -- boast enough diversity that regardless of skier ability, there's compelling terrain. Long, meandering, easy-to-conquer runs snake down the sides of all three resorts. But there are also steep slopes and glades galore for experts. Perhaps most motivating, the runs are so long (5 km at Le Massif) that a single trail can have it all: Steeps, bumps, smooth runouts and twisty bits -- all stuff that keeps skiing and snowboarding interesting.

Second, the Quebec City ski region's proximity to Ontario delivers straight-shot access. Simply go east on Hwy. 401, which merges with Autoroute 40. Leave early and you'll be there by sundown. Quebec City is 795 km from Toronto; Mont-Sainte-Anne and Le Massif are another 30 minutes and 60 minutes drive beyond respectively.

Third, and perhaps most important, snow pack in the area is decent -- sometimes stellar -- through March. My visit there in March of 2012 was a cornucopia of winter conditions. While Vermont, Ontario and New Hampshire were sweltering in a weirdly timed heatwave, it was snowing at Mont-Sainte-Anne and Le Massif. We skied boot-top powder almost daily and were forced to dig out the family van more than once.

Finally, Quebec City is a spectacular and educational apres-ski family draw. Wandering the old city's cobbled, snow-laden streets, sampling fondue, touring the improbable Hotel de Glace (Ice Hotel) all served as my kids' first introduction to a European-style winter wonderland experience.

Topping the list: Quebec City's annual Red Bull Crashed Ice event, a cross between hockey, skiing and boardercross that thunders down the steep streets of Old Quebec during Ontario's March Break. This year's event is March 14-16 (redbullcrashedice.ca).

MONT-SAINTE-ANNE

One of the grand-daddies of Quebec skiing is Mont-Sainte-Anne (MSA). Its 625-metre vertical and 67 ski runs make it a force in the ski world -- and it attracts huge numbers of visitors come from Europe and Britain. It's known best for its slick, race-steep runs on the north side, and its Foret Noir (Blackforest) gladed section on the south side -- both worth the price of admission.

In March, MSA is less about the hardcore and more about family fun. Spring bumps build up on the mountain's steeper faces; meandering top-to-bottom runs are racecar-worthy. But the best spring family feature is a traditional slopeside Sugar Shack, dolling out maple taffy on snow so sticky and sweet it makes your teeth ache.

The newly renovated Chateau Mont-Sainte-Anne has an abundance of ski-in/ski-out lodging, a pool and a rec room. In 2014 watch for a new recreation centre.

MSA is the ideal resting point from which to access all three ski areas; it 's about 30 minutes from Quebec City, Stoneham and Le Massif. See montsainteanne.com.

STONEHAM MOUNTAIN RESORT

MSA's sister resort is Stoneham (both owned by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies). As the closest to Quebec City, it is known for its day-skier market, and is popular with snowboarders, and park and pipers. Music blasts from slopeside speakers; the apres-ski (bar) scene is consistently voted tops in ski country, and it hosts World Cup snowboarding events nearly every season. As a result, its halfpipes are world class, and not surprising, Stoneham is a hit with teens.

The shortest of the three, Stoneham is still no slouch with 420 metres of vertical and 39 runs spread over no less than four mountain faces! The slopeside Stoneham Hotel has 60 rooms and there are fully equipped condos at the base of the resort. See skistoneham.com.

LE MASSIF DE CHARLEVOIX

About 30 minutes past MSA -- and likely the most exciting resort on the Canadian ski map right now -- Le Massif is the lovechild of Daniel Gauthier, Cirque de Soleil cofounder. The entrepreneur began pouring money into the Charlevoix property about 10 years ago and the investment's really paying off for skiers and riders.

Everything is top notch, from the lifts and lodges to the grooming, the view and the perfect pitch of the runs. And it's the kind of place the whole family can ride together. Two family members can ski a high-rolling run, while others dip into the endless, well-gladed trees. Skiers meet up at various trail heads, then start all over again. With a 770-metre vertical, Le Massif has astounding views of the St. Lawrence and its ice-crashing freighters. To be frank, the view is distracting.

The \$12 table d'hote in the cafeteria is always gourmet -- think tenderloin in maple syrup or trout and shrimp flan with orange hollandaise instead of a cheeseburger.

Olympic mogul skier Jean-Luc Brassard -- Le Massif's ambassador -- is often around to shake hands or ski with you. And the new sledding (rodelling) excursion down a closed-to-skiers section of the mountain is exhilarating fun for kids aged 10

and over.

Le Massif has just launched its Hotel La Ferme for near-slopeside accommodation. Gauthier is planning Cirque de Soleil-type shows to grace the theatre at this rustically elegant, eco-conscious hotel. There's also a plethora of chalets for rent nearby. See lemassif.com.

MORE INFO

For ski resort descriptions and lodging information in the Quebec City region, see quebecregion.com.

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