

Chills and thrills at Quebec City's Winter Carnival

Rediscover cold-climate fun with dogsleds, ice sculptures and even a frosty ice hotel

by Mel Borins

EVER SINCE I WROTE MY book, *Go Away Just for the Health of It*, I am often asked what the ideal length of time is for a vacation. I always answer that any time is better than no time, and the longer the better. Sometimes even a weekend getaway can chase away the blues. Although in the winter months I try to head south to some sunshine, last winter I spent a weekend in Quebec City during Winter Carnival—and what a fun time it was.

If you have to live in an extended cold climate, then it helps to transform the winter blahs into a celebration. Since my children have all grown up, I find I no longer play much in the winter. Gone are the days of skiing, ice hockey, tobogganing, building snowmen and snowball fights. Winter gets pretty grim by February. Having some fun and being playful in the snow is the whole premise of the Quebec Carnival.

Vieux-Québec

The fun starts on the first weekend in February with an opening celebration. My wife, Bonnie, and I witnessed singing, dancers, fireworks and all kinds of entertainment on an open-air stage. The next day we attended the dogsled race that starts within the walls of the Vieux-Québec just in front of the Chateau Frontenac. The dogsled teams, composed of four dogs pulling a rider, raced through the old city. Thousands of screaming people lining the streets cheered them on. Afterward, it was nice to stroll through the old city and visit the art galleries, quaint restaurants, small shops, churches and narrow small streets. There were shopping opportunities everywhere.

We visited the incredible Ice Palace, a large structure built out of 7,000 large blocks of ice. It is used as meeting place during the day, and by night live music and dancing take over. On the grounds of the compound there is a gigantic ice carving competition among students from Quebec City. There were some very imaginative and

intricate designs, and the winner of this competition gets entered into the Canadian finals.

Nearby is the Plains of Abraham, where the English beat the French in the famous battle of 1759 and took control of Lower Canada. The huge area was transformed into a big playground. My wife was brave enough to ride the zip line. I was fearless enough to scream

my way down the steep, scary hill on a large rubber raft. We played human foosball and then gathered in a huge heated

refreshment tent where we guzzled the famous alcoholic beverage Caribou. There were also games and rides for the

children, “beaver tail” pastries to eat, clown shows and entertainment.

If you get saturated with



Bonhomme presides over a cheerful crowd at a dogsled race in Vieux-Québec during Winter Carnival.

Photos by Mel Borins



Dogsledding proved an unexpected highlight of Dr. Mel Borins's trip to Quebec City. The beautiful Ice Hotel also presented a unique experience.

the old city and want to have a unique experience, then go about an hour outside of Quebec City to Duchesnay to see the Ice Hotel. The Ice Hotel is built each winter by taking blocks of ice and putting them together in amazing designs. It covers 3,000 m² and is composed of 500 tons of ice and 15,000 tons of snow. There is an indoor slide, an ice bar

discotheque, an outside sauna and hot tub, a beautiful chapel where people can get married, and wonderful ice carvings and art throughout. You can even stay overnight in the 36 one-of-a-kind decorated rooms. Tours happen during the day and at 8:00 p.m. people are allowed into their rooms to sleep. You get a bed with a mattress built on an ice platform and a

mummy-shaped sleeping bag that wraps around you to keep in your body heat. It is amazing how quiet and soundproof it is inside the rooms. The Ice Hotel is open from January to March 29 and is well worth a tour. Nearby there is a full array of winter activities including dogsledding, cross-country skiing, ice fishing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling.

Dogsledding

I never in my life imagined I would go on a dogsled ride. I have always felt sorry for the dogs and imagined it was a mean thing to make dogs pull humans on heavy sleds. My attitude changed after this incredible experience.

When we neared the place where the dogs were kept we heard a cacophony of dogs barking. Dogs are trained from the time they are seven months old and it was obvious that they were thrilled about going out on a trip—jumping and yelping and getting excited when they were harnessed.

My exhilarating ride while standing on the back of the dogsled as we careened over

the country trails through the snow-carpeted woods was one of the most memorable joys of the weekend.

In January and February, temperatures average -5°C to -10°C, with lows of -15°C to -20°C. To fully enjoy the outdoor activities bring warm clothes such as a winter coat, hat, gloves, scarf, woollen socks and a good pair of winter boots that will keep your feet dry and warm. It is best to dress in layers and, if you have any, bring thermal underwear. Do not use cotton as your base layer. It is best to start layering with a breathable material. Thermal gear and fleece are best. Remember, there is no such thing as bad weather—just bad clothes.

The people of Quebec were extremely friendly and courteous, and we did not have an unpleasant moment during the full time we were there. Reserve early because hotel rooms do get booked up.

Mel Borins is a family physician and author of the books "Go Away Just for the Health of It" and "Photos and Songs of a Pronoic Physician." Visit www.melborins.com.



The Ice Palace serves as a meeting place during the day but is taken over with music and dancing at night.

if you go

General information

- Quebec City Tourism; www.quebecregion.com; 1-877-783-1608

Accommodations

- Hilton sur Vieux-Québec, 1100 Boul. René Lévesque Est.; www.hiltonquebec.com; (418) 647-2411 or 1-800-447-2411
- Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, 1 rue des Carrieres; (418) 692-3861; e-mail: chateaufrontenac@fairmont.com
- Ice Hotel Quebec-Canada Inc. Located at the Station touristique Duchesnay in Sainte-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier; www.icehotel-canada.com; (418) 875-4522 or toll-free 1-877-505-0423; information@icehotel-canada.com

Dining

- The two restaurants at the Fairmont Le Château

Frontenac: Le Champlain (418) 266-3905; or Le Café de la Terrasse (418) 691-3763

- Au Parmesan, 38 rue Saint-Louis; <http://parmesan.restoquebec.com>; (418) 692-0341; good Italian food
- Versa Restaurant-Bar, 432 rue du Parvis; www.versarestaurant.com; (418) 523-9995; eclectic, modern
- Le Lapin Sauté, 52 rue de Petit Champlain; www.lapinsaute.com; (418) 692 5325; country-style home cooking, great atmosphere

Dogsledding

- Aventure Inukshuk, located at the Station touristique Duchesnay, 143 route Duchesnay, Sainte-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier; www.aventureinukshuk.qc.ca; (418) 875-0770; info@aventureinukshuk.qc.ca