

Come Into the Cold: Playing in the snow during Winter Carnival, sleeping at the Ice Hotel, eating beavertails and other wintery delights in Quebec
By Suzanne Wright

Quebec's Winter Carnival, which began in 1955 as a way to jumpstart a stagnant economy, runs for 17 days in January and February every year. It is the world's largest winter celebration, with more than a million visitors, and the world's largest carnival celebration, after Rio and New Orleans. The difference is this carnival is a wholesome, affordable, family-friendly celebration.

A giant snowman named Bonhomme is the king of the carnival and his likeness appears everywhere: restaurants, stores and street corners, his round midsection sashed with a red striped cloth. These "arrow sashes," which vary in design annually, are popular souvenirs. North America's only walled city shimmers in all her snow-blanketed historic and cultural glory. Although 98% of the region's residents are French-speaking, English is also widely spoken, and the locals are gracious and sweet-natured, as my pal Susan and I learned.

The Nordic-inspired events are myriad, held at various sites scattered around the upper town. Bundled in multiple layers, we visited Bonhomme's Palace during the day to view ice sculptures created by artisans from around the world, though some were, sadly, melting, due to unseasonably high temperatures (for Canada, that is). At night, there's a dance party *avec* parkas. We sampled beavertails, a fried dough confection topped with cinnamon or chocolate—or, decadently—both. We took in an old-fashioned soapbox derby on city streets lined with well-wishers. We tried snow tubing in big yellow inflatable rings, careening down a steep hill, huge smiles plastered on our faces. We sampled caribou, a powerful mixture of brandy, vodka, sherry and port, guaranteed to warm the body and carried by some festival-goers in a plastic red cane for stealthy sipping. We went ice fishing with a bunch of rosy-cheeked kids, evoking scenes of *Grumpy Old Men* while waiting for the trout to take the bait. As snow whirled, we listened to adults and kids warble on traditional trumpets during the night parade. There's also an arctic canoe race on the St. Lawrence River, where competitors battled ice floes, currents and freezing temperatures.

One night, we splurged on dinner at La Crémaillère, one of the city's best restaurants, to sample the chef's gastronomic accomplishments. In an elegantly furnished old house in the heart of the old city, we feasted on dishes that blend classic French with contemporary Italian touches, such as paparadelle with escargot and spinach, salmon stuffed with sauerkraut and three chocolate mousses. Another night, we visited a traditional sugar shack, Érablière le Chemin du Roy. We stomped our feet as a musician dressed like a lumberjack played the harmonica and wooden spoons, reminding us of Celtic and bluegrass music and ate hearty food: pork rings, pea soup, maple-smoked ham and meat pie. We made toothsome maple taffy by pouring maple syrup into wooden troughs packed with fresh snow and twisting it onto Popsicle sticks. Finally, we capped our magical evening with a sleigh ride through the sugar maple stand under a luminous moon.

Another night, we made like Eskimos at the Ice Hotel, located less than an hour from Quebec and modeled after the original in Sweden. Rising out of a blindingly expanse of white, the buildings appeared as blue-white, gently rounded pyramids with a set of simple wooden doors. It takes CAN \$2.5 million and a month's time to construct a facility that stays in place for less than 90 days. How do they do it? A no-melt mixture of four parts water and one part snow is blown between wooden molds, which are removed after they freeze solid. The curing process can take up to three days; it yields four-foot thick walls and two-foot thick ceilings.

The interiors are surprisingly elaborate for an impermanent structure. The grand hallway features fiber-optic lighting that continuously changes colors; there are two bars, one sponsored by Absolut which serves your drinks—literally—on the rocks, in blocks of ice; an ornately carved chapel hosts more than 30 weddings annually; and galleries feature exhibits of photography under ice. There are also 34 themed rooms, including the Egyptian and Great Wall of China suites. Visitors who are not staying the night plunk down \$14 and visit the property in a steady stream from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

If you are a collector of novelty experiences, a stay at the Ice Hotel will top your list and impress friends and colleagues at the next cocktail hour. Upon check-in, we were each given a key to a plywood locker to store our suitcase, and a towel and robe; there's a communal locker area and shower facilities in an area removed from the actual ice structures. We were also given a coupon for a three-course meal at the adjoining Duchesnay resort. (The room rate includes a back-up room at the resort in case you can't make it through the night though we were told only 5% actually use it.)

A staffer explained how to prepare for bedtime by undressing right inside your sleeping bag (rated to -40 Celsius) and keeping your clothing inside with you; otherwise they will freeze. After dinner, we showered, sat and read inside by the fireplace before sprinting past the sauna and hot tub to our suite at 9:45 p.m. It's -8 degrees in the room; -15 outside. It's a bit awkward disrobing in the sleeping bag which sits atop a fur which is atop a wooden plank that tops the solid block of ice that is my bed. I keep a hat snuggled over my head, but my breath is visible, my nostrils daggered by the cold. I sleep fitfully, as does Susan, who usually sleeps like the dead. Thoughts keep running through my head: How long have I been sleeping? Am I cold? Would I know if I was numb? Do I need to pee? Where is the chamber pot? (The last answer is, there isn't one. You have to get dressed and go outside to pee. I presume some rooms suffer from "yellow snow" syndrome.)

The next morning, having braved the brisk night, we quickly dressed and went dog-sledding. Never have I heard such a riotous sound, as the handsome, blue-eyed huskies, tethered to the sleds, clamber to run, pitching forward with expectation. Snuggled into the wooden sled under a soggy blanket, sticky snow falling overhead, we finally take off, Susan and I yelping as loudly as the dogs.

