

Family-friendly Stoneham offers terrific skiing

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 17, 2012



Stoneham has fashioned vacations for ski buddies looking for fun, families on a budget and couples seeking romance.

Photograph by: Stoneham Mountain Resort, Stoneham Mountain Resort

Stoneham Mountain Resort, Mont Ste. Anne's "little sister," makes its own mark with a serviceable, compact slopeside village and terrific skiing and riding at one of Quebec's most dynamic downhill areas.

Less than a half-hour's drive north of Quebec City, Stoneham has something for all comers. With accommodations for a total of 400 visitors in the 59-room Hôtel Stoneham and 27 condominiums, the area has fashioned various vacation scenarios: for ski buddies who just want to have fun, families on a budget or couples seeking a soupçon of romance with their snow sports.

Here's one formula: Let's say two pals are out for lots of snow time and nightlife. They can book into Hôtel Stoneham, a comfortable lodge at the base of the mountain where half of the rooms, the ones with the views of the mountain, were overhauled this season with plush featherbeds, attractive country furniture and flat-screen televisions. Après-ski at Stoneham is almost as important as skiing, so our two singles chill out over beer and burgers at the Quatre Foyers bar. With nearly half of Stoneham's 40 or so trails lit for night skiing, making it one of the largest after-dark areas in Canada, keeners often head back out after supper, stay on the slopes until the 9:30 p.m. closing, then recuperate back at the bar. Friday nights rock with singer Kathleen Bujold and the energetic band Bestov, whose anglo-franco

repertoire spans hits of the '50s to today.

Stoneham has made its name as a kid-friendly family area, so in the most likely vacation scenario, a family of four packs into a one-bedroom apartment or even a studio with a queen bed for the adults and a Murphy bed for the kids. The price tag and comfort level depend mostly on how many squeeze in. The lodging is steps from the Magic Carpet lift – no car necessary – so the children can set out on their own. And the condos have compact kitchens, so if you bring your own groceries to “cook in” or fuel up on cafeteria lunches, this is arguably the most economical way to go. Stoneham’s Family Sundays include a pass for novices in the gentle ski zone, plus equipment and a ski or snowboard lesson for everyone. The skating rink is free for all, complete with equipment.

Even at a few-frills destination like Stoneham, there is a chance for romance. A couple can snuggle up in front of the fireplace in a studio apartment high on the mountain. The night skiing lights twinkle through the trees and give off a magical ambience. This private getaway calls for a massage by the roving therapists of Senso-Masso, who will do one-on-one or couples’ rubdowns. The studios have kitchens, but perhaps this is an occasion for dinner at Le Feu Follet, the restaurant in the skiers’ lodge. The new menu is a big step above the usual après-ski fare: grilled scallops with wasabi, sausages with traditional French choucroute, lamb chops and filet mignon.

On-mountain, Stoneham is a serious downhill area, exceptional for its summit-to-base trails and its three-peak bowl which creates a warmish micro-climate. Stoneham doesn’t have quite the vertical drop or the breadth of its big sister, but it does have “Les 40s” – one entire mountain face of extreme black-diamond runs like Le Monstre and Zipper. Stoneham also is prized for its riding and free-styling on an Olympic-size halfpipe, and its Parc XL, a competition-calibre snowpark. The mountain will hold its annual Snowboard Jamboree of races, parties and fashion jams Feb. 20-26, all built around a World Cup that has attracted such champions as Olympic medallists Dominique Maltais of Charlevoix and Jasey-Jay Anderson of the Laurentians.

Stoneham offers more, but not on site. The Multi Options Package features a choice of: dogsledding, a visit to the nearby Ice Hotel, lift-serviced snow tubing at the huge playground of Village Vacances Valcartier, or the hot and cold baths of Le Nordique Spa, where massages are a good buy at \$59.

One of the beauties of Stoneham or Mont Ste. Anne is that you can pair a visit with enchanting Quebec City. A shuttle runs to Stoneham from Old Quebec and the city’s Ste. Foy sector, and the reservation service, Reservotel, links 20 establishments including such downtown lodgings as the four-star Hôtel Clarendon or the Hilton Québec, and the landmark five-star Fairmont Le Château Frontenac. Le Château’s Ultimate Ski Package, from \$369 for two, includes a deluxe room in Old Quebec, an indoor pool, fabulous views of the St. Lawrence River, a gargantuan buffet breakfast and a lift ticket to Mont Ste. Anne or Stoneham. Rounding out the family options are babysitting and a toboggan run outside on historic Dufferin Terrace. Le Château also welcomes dogs. (fairmont.com/frontenac, 800-441-1414, 866-540-4460, 418- 692-3861).

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If you go

Stoneham is a three-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 20 or 40 east to Quebec City and Route 73 north.

Stoneham Mountain Resort: Stoneham/Tewkesbury; 800-463-6888, 418-848-2411, ski-stoneham.com; 326 skiable acres; 420-metre vertical drop; night skiing and three terrain parks. Most tickets are valid at Mont Ste. Anne: 888- 827-4579, mont-sainte-anne.com; 526 skiable acres; 625-metre vertical drop; night skiing and three terrain parks.

Hôtel Stoneham: rooms start at \$89 per night for two, Sun.-Thurs., incl. use of trails for snowshoeing and hot tub; or \$181 for two with lift tickets. On Fri.-Sat., it's \$99 per night for two for the room only, or \$188 with lift tickets. Prices are approx. 10 to 20 per cent higher Feb. 19-March 10. Daycare is available. Family Sundays start at \$144 for two adults and up to three children, ages 7 to 17, without lodging. Ask about a deal until Feb. 23 that offers a third night and a third day of skiing for free, on certain packages.

Two-night Highlander Package starts at \$53 p.p., for two adults and two children in a hotel room or studio, incl. lifts for two days. One-to-four-bedroom condos are available.

Reservotel: 800-463-1568, mont-sainte-anne.com/1/Hebergement.

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