

Mauricie inn's setting is pure, and the price is right

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE AUGUST 13, 2012



Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac is a rustic 11-room inn in a beautiful woodsy setting near Shawinigan. It has hearty home-cooked food and the feeling of Old Quebec.

Photograph by: Stéphane Daoust, Tourisme Mauricie

Give or take a few modern conveniences, Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac invites its guests to sample the life of Old Quebec.

This inn is a sturdy, 11-room chalet on the outskirts of a village near Shawinigan, surrounded by towering evergreens and overlooking Lac Bellemare. It offers fine French-Quebec cuisine and simple accommodations, not a lofty experience, but the setting is pure, and the price is right.

Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac also is one of a kind, a labour of love that was entirely built by hand by Jean-Marcel Lacourse, who runs it with his wife, Louise Trottier. Lacourse is a former tree-cutter who pounced on a hidden treasure nearly 20 years ago when logging operations were stopped on the St. Maurice River. He snapped up the aged timber of the river docks and decked his house in the old,

weathered spruce and fir, plus cedar and pine that he bought commercially.

After four years of sawing, trimming and hammering, Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac emerged with a wonderful living-room fireplace, varnished and stained panelled walls and tiny, private bathrooms in each guest room. Not stopping there, Lacourse set about creating all of the bedroom furniture – queen platform beds, square bedside tables – and accessories like rectangle blocks for doorknobs.

When the basics were done, Trottier took over, decorating curtains and beds with cute, creative fabrics from a local artisans' co-operative, Atelier Libellule. Each room has an animal theme, using the handmade, printed textiles festooned with frolicking wolves, pelicans, turtles and leopards.

Practical and cosy, just the way a country inn should be, Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac has been named the best in its category of one-to-three-star establishments by Tourisme Québec.

The newest installation is a small spa area – a sauna and a hot tub – and massages are available by someone from the area.

Another professional comes in to prepare dinner. It's home cooking, but it's pretty ambitious, with two choices every night. Starters include a fondant of warm goat cheese, a salad with apples and cheddar, terrines, sausages and smoked trout, which is a specialty of nearby St. Alexis des Monts. Main courses might be quail with cranberry sauce, coq au vin, rabbit with mustard sauce, duck with an orange glaze, cassoulet, or beef bourguignon, and desserts are classics like opera cake or crème caramel.

One of the big selling points at Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac is that it is a 10-minute drive from La Mauricie National Park, a vast and splendid conservation area with trails and lakes for sports in all seasons. This wooded region at the foothills of the Laurentians is steeped in snow even when Montreal's streets are dry, so you probably can still count on winter activities. The park is heaven for cross-country skiers. The 80-kilometre network of trails, both classic and ski-skating, has a heated cabin approximately every five kilometres, so if you pack a lunch and extra layers of clothing, you can take off for hours.

Auberge St- Mathieu du Lac packages visits with almost anything outdoorsy. Besides cross-country skiing, the local specialties are snowshoeing and snowmobiling, but the most intriguing is dogsledding, which is organized by Les Expéditions des 100 Lacs.

The outfitter is tucked in the woods about five kilometres north of the village of St. Élie de Caxton. This is the hometown of Fred Pellerin, Quebec folksinger, raconteur and writer, who immortalized the tiny community through his lovable and eccentric characters, Ésimésac Gélinas, Belle Lurette and more, all said to be inspired by his grandparents and other villagers.

Expéditions' owner, Fred Manseau, manages about 100 Alaskans and huskies, robust Nordic dogs who live outside year 'round – and bark and howl like crazy when they think they are going to work.

“The dogs are ready to run all the time. It's not an obligation, they love it,” Fred Manseau said. “As

soon as we put their harnesses on, they go wild with energy.

“They’re mostly friendly, but they are working dogs,” Manseau said. “If you approach slowly and gently to pat them, they are very affectionate and eager to say hello.”

The sleds are two-person contraptions, with the passenger seated in front and the driver in back. The average visitor glides through the forests and across snow-covered fields and lakes at about 10 kilometres an hour, which seems super fast on a dogsled because you are low to the ground and totally unprotected. A professional musher with a competition-level team of dogs can hit speeds of up to 40 kilometres an hour. Still, it is an intense, exhilarating experience, and a cold one.

It’s time for another taste of Old Quebec. Back at Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac, the fireplace is going strong and Trottier has prepared the house cocktail, Le Sortilège, which is whiskey laced with maple syrup.

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IF YOU GO

St. Mathieu du Parc and the St. Gérard des Laurentides sector of La Mauricie National Park are a two-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 40 east, Route 55 north and Exit 217 to Route 351 south.

Auberge St-Mathieu du Lac: 819-532-3397, auberge-st-mathieu-du-lac.com; 2081 Chemin Principal, St. Mathieu du Parc.

Rooms cost \$170 for two or \$117 for singles, including breakfast and dinner. Children’s rates available for ages 5-12. Sauna-hot tub, \$10. Massage, \$65.

Summer Packages, including the inn’s breakfast, dinner, on-site canoeing/kayaking and lake swimming: National Park Outdoor Package, with access to park and box lunch, from \$99 p.p., double occ., per night. Other packages, all double occ., include bear observation (\$115 p.p.); golf around Shawinigan (from \$130 p.p.); kayaking in the park, with guide, equipment and box lunch (\$284 p.p.); or tree-to-tree adventure, (from \$192 p.p.).

La Mauricie National Park: 888-773-8888, 819-538-3232; Parks Canada website, pc.gc.ca or parkscanada.ca. Without a package, there are fees (under \$10) for access.

Information, Mauricie region: 800-567-7603, tourismemauricie.org.

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