

Site offers a taste of traditional Iroquois lifestyle

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 23, 2012



The Longhouse Sleepover starts with a tour of the little village and its intriguing one-room museum that show how a community of Iroquois lived before European settlers arrived.

“Prices include taxes and mosquitoes,” said Pascal Perron, the director of the Tsiionhiakwatha/Droulers Archaeological Site in the Châteauguay Valley near Huntingdon. “And you can learn how to make fire.”

Well, who could resist that offer? Packing a sleeping bag and bug spray, I headed off in search of a 600-year-old Iroquois cultural experience.

The Tsiionhiakwatha/Droulers site is a fun educational getaway where people – mostly families and youth groups – spend the night in a replica of a First Nations longhouse. It’s a fascinating, rustic trip with hands-on workshops and down-home meals, all built around Iroquois lore and lifestyle.

“If people want an authentic Iroquois experience they come here,” said Perron. “If they want a hotel, they go to our colleagues who run the Hôtel des Premières Nations outside of Quebec City. But we’re more ‘real.’ ”

OK, let’s get real. Guests coming for the Longhouse Sleepover are assigned one “room” for a small family or a couple – a room being an open sleeping space on a wooden palette about five square metres in size. Perron assured me that with a camping mattress, sleeping bag and mosquito netting I would be as comfortable as an Indian princess on a bed of spruce branches and bearskins.

A longhouse is for communal living, so figure on between 10 and 40 people sleeping in one longhouse. And pets are welcome, although Perron will relocate anyone who has allergies to another longhouse.

“The women and girls share three indoor bathrooms,” said Perron, “and the men and the boys go to the ‘Iroquois bathroom’ outside the property. That means in the bush.

“And it’s camping, so no showers, but most guests stay only one night.”

The Longhouse Sleepover starts with a tour of the little village and its intriguing one-room museum that shed light on how a community of Iroquois lived before European settlers arrived. This particular patch of land near the La Guerre River, a tributary of the St. Lawrence, was a village circa 1450, according to artifacts dated by Université de Montréal archaeologists. Jacques Cartier recorded meeting these First Nations people around 1535, yet they seem to have vanished from the area before the 1600s, when Samuel de Champlain arrived and reported meeting Algonquins, a different nation.

The approximately 500 residents of the original Iroquois village fished, hunted and cultivated corn, squash and beans, the hardy “three sisters,” all ingredients for the nourishing soup called Onontara. (The Algonquins call it sagamité.) When the land lost its fertility after about 15 years, the Iroquois villagers would relocate about 20 kilometres away, and start again.

The Iroquois constitute a confederacy of nations: Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Tuscarora. The double-barrelled name Tsiionhiakwatha/Droulers comes from a Mohawk word meaning “where we pick berries” and the name of the family on whose land artifacts were originally discovered during the 1970s.

The tiny museum of the Tsiionhiakwatha/Droulers archaeological site showcases arrowheads, axes, tools crafted of bone, fishing hooks, pottery, needles for tattoos and sewing, pipes and jewellery, such as pendants made of bears’ teeth. Quebec’s heritage ministry estimates that the 400,000 artifacts unearthed here so far represent about five per cent of the treasures waiting to be discovered.

The ancient crafts come alive during the workshops. Depending on the weather and whether there are children, artisans might demonstrate and teach flint-knapping (making tools out of rocks), campfire building or pottery making, or animators might get everyone into bow and arrow game or a lacrosse match.

After a full afternoon, dinner is served al fresco – on picnic tables covered by a canopy. The menu features a dressed-up version of what the Iroquois might have feasted on centuries ago: soup, corn bread, smoked sturgeon, sausages made of venison or moose, and, for dessert, seasonal strawberries, blueberries or apples.

As night falls, the campfires are lit and everyone huddles around for a storytelling evening. Michel Cadieux, a Métis historian and anthropologist, dresses as a shaman in impressive traditional beaded clothing and spins tales and legends with a little drama and a lot of comedy. This is how First Nations customs have been passed along for centuries, and that’s the most entertaining way for visitors to learn the traditions, too.

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IF YOU GO

St. Anicet is a 90-minute drive from Montreal. Take the Mercier Bridge and Route 138 west to Huntingdon and Ridge Road for 11 kilometres.

Tsiionhiakwatha/Droulers archaeological site: 866-690-3030, 450-264-3030, sitedroulers.ca; 1800 Leahy Road, St. Anicet. Closed Mondays. Cheques or cash accepted. Open May 1-Oct. 31. Pet-friendly. Free for Akwesasne Mohawk community. Children 4 and under are free.

Longhouse Sleepover: \$100 for adults, \$50 for children 5-12, incl. breakfast, dinner, taxes, tour and workshops.

Tsiionhiakwatha/Droulers also organizes single-day Weekend Rendezvous on Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; \$6 for adults, \$5 for students, seniors and children 5-12; \$15 for a family of four. Workshops by Mohawk and Abenaki craftsmen focus on creating corn-husk dolls, tools, bead work and fur bags. Dates include: Iroquois food sampling, June 24-25; Mohawk basket-making, June 30-July 1; pottery with Natasha Smoke of Akwesasne, July 7-8; Ojibway dream-catchers with Crystal Henry of Akwesasne, July 14-15; a talk on "water as the source of life" by Chief Top Leaf from Kahnawake, July 21-22.

Michel Cadieux: archeofact.ca

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