

Country Roads: Hotel at the centre of winter sports action in Magog

Lovely outdoor skating and deals on nearby skiing

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 14, 2013



You can go skating outside Étoile-sur-le-Lac's back door, and stop for a snack at the hotel's outdoor lounge.

Photograph by: Rochelle Lash

The Hôtel & Spa Étoile-sur-le-Lac in Magog has winter all wrapped up.

On the shore of Lake Memphremagog and a few kilometres from Mont Orford, Étoile-sur-le-Lac is a perfect hub for families with small children and also outdoorsy visitors who want to sample some of the best of the Eastern Townships' sports venues.

Let's start with the hotel's bonanza of deals for downhill skiing. Stay overnight and you will score a free lift pass at Owl's Head, an offer that is good on Tuesdays or Wednesdays. That's a value of about \$17. And Étoile-sur-le-Lac's guests can ski or ride for \$20 at Mont Orford any time, instead of at the regular adult rate of more than \$50. The hotel also has an advantageous arrangement for its guests to have free access to the superb cross-country ski and snowshoes trails at Parc national du Mont-Orford, which usually charges about \$6 for entrance to the park, plus \$11 to access the trails.

The most charming winter activity is ice skating outside Étoile-sur-le-Lac's back door. Magog has a picturesque path that runs between the hotel and the lake. In summer, it's called La Montagnarde, part of the pan-Quebec cycling path La Route Verte. In winter, the promenade turns into a 2.5-kilometre linear skating rink. It's carefully tended — a Zamboni passes frequently — and it's also free.

Étoile-sur-le-Lac is very much a part of the skating scene, putting out the welcome mat at its inviting

terrace, even in winter. The hotel's summertime outdoor café turns into an outdoor lounge, with all-weather patio chairs and park benches grouped around a fire pit. Pink-cheeked, breathless skaters stop and warm up before gliding on. With the view of Lake Memphremagog and the welcome heat and crackle of burning wood, Étoile-sur-le-Lac just might have the best seat in town. The skating is both family-friendly and romantic. When the hotel's restaurant is open (breakfast daily and after 5 p.m., Tues-Sat.), passersby can fuel up with hot chocolate, coffee, snacks or wine and beer.

Still, it's more inviting inside. After a day in the cold winter air, you can simply hang up your skates, forget about driving back home and check into the hotel.

Étoile-sur-le-Lac is a practical stopover with 50-plus guest rooms as well as five condos. From the front driveway on a quiet section of Magog's main drag, we see a row of European-style vertical townhouses, like something out of Amsterdam, but newer. The interesting design is courtesy of developer Fernand Magnan, who happens to be an architect.

Indoors, l'Étoile is one of the few places that has renovated with traditional décor instead of going for the trendy minimalist look. It's mostly successful. I'm not sure the avocado-coloured corridors work brilliantly, but the rooms are warm and well-equipped, and the patterns, prints and textures are more homey than stark whites and greys, if not quite as fashionable.

One major feature of the lakefront accommodation is the glass-fronted balconies. A corner suite, No. 140, is one of the choice hotel rooms, with a double tub and great views. No. 141 segues into a postcard panorama that includes Mont Orford in the distance. The condos have kitchens, living rooms, two bathrooms and two bedrooms, usually made for a maximum of four guests, although a few units can squeeze six people using a pullout sofa.

(Units B202 and E402 have upgraded decor, but the prices might be slightly higher at certain times.)

Ancrage is l'Étoile's restaurant for breakfast, dinner and Sunday brunch. It has a refined Quebec country look with vintage habitant-style tables and chairs, lots of plants, three fireplaces and floor-to-ceiling window views of the skaters and the lake.

The restaurant has a steady clientele of long-time regulars, so the French-Mediterranean menu features classics like chateaubriand, seafood pasta in tomato cream sauce, Italian sausages with a wine sauce, veal kidneys, beef tartare and chorizo risotto.

Magog is home to one important new attraction — the tourist office. Visible from Highway 10 at Exit 115, the new home of Tourisme Magog has brought nature indoors with a warm, rustic and creative interior design. If you stop by for travel advice and brochures, you can relax in an information centre, which looks like a country chalet with hand-hewn pine chairs, a fireplace, walls of cedar and stone and earthy decor items like First Nations accessories and vintage ski gear. You can also tiptoe along a tiny footbridge over an indoor stream.

IF YOU GO:

Magog is a one-hour, 15-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 10 east to Exit 115.

Hôtel et Spa Etoile-sur-le-Lac: 800- 567-2727, 819-843-6521, www.etoile-sur-le-lac.ca; 1200 rue Principale W., Magog. Closed for dinner Sun. & Mon.

Price: Rooms and suites, \$122-\$195 for two, without meals. With breakfast and dinner, it's \$243-\$303 for two. The third night is free during many periods. Children 11 and under stay for free; 12 and over pay \$20. Prices will be higher after May 10. Two-bedroom condos are available with stays of three days or more. Packages also available with spa treatments and sports at Mont Orford, Owl's Head and Parc national du Mont-Orford.

Mont Orford: 866-673-6731, www.orford.com; lift ticket \$57 (without a package), and half-day tickets are \$47, after noon. A three-day pass costs \$139 for adults, with discounts on subsequent visits.

Owl's Head: 800-363-3342, www.owlshead.com; Mansonville; prices given without tax; lift ticket \$39.14 (without a package), half-day tickets available mornings and afternoons, \$30.44-\$33.93 for adults; Tuesdays & Wednesday special at \$17.40 and Sundays, \$33 afternoon lift ticket, from noon, with a one-hour ski lesson and rentals.

Parc national du Mont-Orford: 819- 843-9855, www.sepaq.com; trail fees apply if not on a package.

Magog-Orford Tourism: 800- 267-2744, www.tourisme-memphremagog.com.

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