

Country Roads: Resort offers reasons to go outside

The woodsy Station Touristique Duchesnay has all kinds of activities, and an eco sensibility

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 5, 2013



Station Touristique Duchesnay combines nature and outdoor sports with a good hotel.

Photograph by: Station Touristique Duchesnay

You have heard of green travel destinations. Well, Station Touristique Duchesnay is fundamentally green, very white in winter, plus it has splashes of yellow and red.

Duchesnay is an outdoorsy resort in the Quebec City region, a vast playground for vacationers who love sports and spa life in a casual, woodsy environment. I think of it as adventure-lite. You can sample rugged activities in the bracing winter air and then cosy up in front of a fireplace, soak in a hot tub and have a fine dinner.

It's peaceful, remote and self-contained, but if you like the great outdoors, you'll never be bored. Guests have access to a dozen sports and guided tours of 89 square kilometres of splendid near-wilderness about 20 to 30 times the size of Mount Royal Park in Montreal.

Duchesnay is a village of several log pavilions scattered along a hillside with varied accommodations in three venues. It had been a forestry school and the 1930s student housing has been attractively updated to become the Pavilions, a series of 40 compact, cheery hotel rooms. They're perfect for

pals who want to ski like mad. The cosy lakeside chalets, once the teachers' lodging, have two to five bedrooms apiece and full kitchens, so they are great budget-conscious options for families who want to "cook in." Both are three-star. That means comfort, cleanliness, private bathrooms and simple country decor with lots of wood trim and vintage photos as art.

The Auberge, Duchesnay's four-star option, is the central reception and gathering area that embraces a lobby lounge, a convivial dining room, a gift shop and the indoor pool and sauna. It's an attractive mountain lodge with contemporary lines warmed by wood trim, leather furniture and a towering stone fireplace. The 48 guest rooms and suites have white-draped beds, earth-toned decor and inspiring views of a quintessentially Quebec landscape: frozen Lac St. Joseph, and snow-covered woods and mountains.

But back to the colours. When Duchesnay was opened in the 1990s by the Société des établissements de plein air du Québec (Sépaq), a government tourism venture, the resort was a pioneer in "green" hôtellerie because of its extensive eco-conscious operating systems, such as heat conservation and recycling of water, batteries, tires and refuse. It also supplies biodegradable toiletries by Natur Algo of Quebec and recently added outlets for hybrid cars.

It also is certainly white. I visited, courtesy of Sépaq, a few weeks ago and the landscape was blanketed in snow, which made for a very romantic setting, mounds of fun for kids and terrific sports conditions.

When you arrive, your room key comes with meal tickets and activity bracelets. Colours are important here, too. A yellow bracelet covers the indoor pool and outdoor hot tub, a skating rink and snowshoe and cross-country trails, but a more valuable green bracelet opens all doors, adding guided tours and some equipment. The Club Med-style calendar of organized programs might include geocaching, archery or an evening hike by torchlight, plus special spring break projects, March 2-10, like kids' nature walks and cupcake workshops.

I opted to try the new hok, a hybrid from Altai Skis. Measuring about 10 by 125 centimetres, hoks are a blend of cross-country ski and snowshoe. They're made for skiing through back country, but they have synthetic "skins" on the bases to add traction for climbing. My intrepid ski pal, Rae Turley, our guide, Marlène Walsh, and I breathlessly bushwhacked up hills and through woods of maples, hemlocks and beeches. It looked a lot tougher to come back down, so Rae and I mostly sidestepped, dodging trees.

Marlène knows her nature lore. We examined the fresh tracks of deer, foxes and rabbits, and learned that the yellow birch is Quebec's official tree. I felt we had graduated from adventure-lite to serious stuff because of the weather — an invigorating -31 C, a dry cold and not windy, but a challenge, nonetheless.

Later, we celebrated at dinner with a glass of Cuvée de Sépaq, a private import from France, and French fare — mussels, beef tartare and a leek potage to start, followed by duck confit and braised lamb.

In summer, Lac St. Joseph and Duchesnay's red activity bracelet come into play. Duchesnay has a beach, lake swimming, canoes, kayaks and pedalos.

Its newest adventure-lite is the "all-terrain" Segway, a stand-up scooter that has been adapted for trail riding with extra-large wheels. A green bracelet adds free bicycles. Go for it. Duchesnay is at the mid-point along the scenic kilometre cycling path, the Vélompiste Jacques-Cartier/Portneuf, a former railway track.

I've run out of space to tell you about the Tyst Tradgard nordic spa. It's on property, but not owned by Duchesnay. Did I try it? Hell, no. I was brave enough to ski in -31 C, but not quite crazy enough to dip into steaming hot baths and dash over to an icy waterfall in a swimsuit. I'll wait until it's a balmy -10 C.

IF YOU GO:

Duchesnay is two-hour, 45-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 40 east to Exit 295 and Route 367 north.

Station Touristique Duchesnay: 866-683-2711, 877- 511-5885, 418-875-2122,
www.sepaq.com/duchesnay; 140 Montée de l'Auberge, Sainte-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier.

Price: Plaisir Nature Package: One night with buffet breakfast, dinner and green activity bracelet, \$102-140 p.p., double occ., in Pavilion rooms or \$124-154 p.p. in the Auberge. Suites cost more. Children's prices vary according to age; kids 0-5 stay and eat for free. Prices decrease after March 31 and increase July 9. Fourteen lakeside chalets are available. Extras: ice-fishing, snow-mobiling, dog-sledding, bear observation (summer).

Tyst Trädgård Nordic Spa: 418-875-1645, www.tysttradgard.com; Sainte-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier, from \$25 for an hour of hydrotherapy. Packages available with massages, body treatments, facials and dinner.

Quebec City region tourism: 877-783-1608, 418-641-6290, www.quebecregion.com

rochelle@rochellelash.com

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