

Quebec getaways

Get out of town to experience some of the province's best attractions this summer

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 21, 2013



The Isle de Bacchus vineyard flourishes on pastoral Île d'Orléans, which is 90 per cent agricultural.

Photograph by: Camarind Photo

It's easy to be seduced by the allure of dining in France, hiking in the Rockies or paddling the Amazon, but the experiences chez nous are among the most thrilling anywhere. Quebec produces enviable cheese, chocolate, foie gras, wine and beer. We've got mountains and forests, rivers and lakes, and the Orford Express and the Train du Charlevoix rolling through those splendid landscapes. And we dine so well, from the folksy méchoui at the Festival du Cochon in St-Perpétue to our handful of Relais & Châteaux. If you like the sea — and seafood — can you possibly do better than Gaspé or Îles-de-la-Madeleine? Here are some of Quebec's most accessible and affordable summer highlights. Sorry, Montreal. We're heading out of town. Bonne Fête nationale and bonne route.

SLEEP

I'm in awe of the majestic, 405-room Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu, which overlooks the St-Lawrence River and the Charlevoix mountains. It has 27 holes of picturesque golf, a full spa and an outstanding indoor-outdoor pool system. A battery of charging stations for electric vehicles is new. Divine delicacy:

General manager Jean-Jacques Etcheberrigaray owns a duck farm, so expect the finest foie gras in Le Manoir's gastronomic dining room, Le Charlevoix.

SIP

Choosing the best beer in Quebec is beyond my scope, perhaps anyone's, so I'm voting for an exceptional beer encounter. The lively Les Brasseurs du Temps in Gatineau embraces a micro-brewery, a brasserie and a first-rate mini-museum exploring the history of brewing. The menu features bison sausage, filet mignon and lamb stew, delicately and deliciously flavoured with beer. Carb alert: The double-decadent chocolate cake is made with stout.

ADVENTURE

Sea-kayaking has both thrills and chills. Mer et Monde Écotours organizes whale-watching excursions in the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park, where the water temperature dips to 4 C, the waves and currents are capricious and the occasional 50-ton whale splashes by. Kayakers start with a lesson on whale habits, safety measures and paddling techniques. Close encounters: Whales have been spotted as close as two metres.

DINE

La Traite restaurant near Quebec City blends First Nations inspiration and ingredients from farms, lakes, forests and hunts. Chef Martin Gagné uses rare herbs, roots and edible flowers to spice dishes such as wapiti with hand-foraged mushrooms, rabbit confit with apple cider, pheasant with haskap berries, lobster and scallops in sorrel soup and trout perfumed with essence of black spruce. Lodging news: The stylish, contemporary Hôtel Premières Nations is opening a new Long House.

SPA

BALNEA spa + thermal reserve, one of more than 40 Nordic spas in Quebec, is bliss in Bromont-sur-le-Lac. BALNEA — it uses capital letters to stand out — is a striking getaway with a splendid hillside setting tucked into a forest and overlooking a tiny lake. In addition to steam rooms, saunas and bubbling baths, BALNEA adds paddle-boarding yoga and air mattresses that float among lily pads. Among the 55 spa treatments are the new ayurvedic series and the Abenaki Native Ritual.

MARVEL

The Aquarium du Québec in Quebec City presents a rare chance to see polar bears, walruses and seals — without paddling to their natural habitat.

The aquarium is home to 10,000 marine animals — fish both large and small, snakes, turtles, frogs, invertebrates such as octopus or jellyfish and the big sea mammals, all living in super-sized tanks or watery outdoor environments. The aquarium is a sprawling park with picnic areas and water games for the children — a blessing in sweltering weather.

RIDE

Jacques Cartier was seduced by the beauty of Île d'Orléans and you will be, too. You can drive or cycle through along the St. Lawrence River and through historic villages. Île d'Orléans is 90 per cent agricultural so there are many farm stands selling products made from berries, apples, grapes and vegetables. The ultimate summer lunch is a lobster "guedille" at Panache Mobile, a gourmet truck stop run by Auberge Saint-Antoine, a Relais & Châteaux. It's nestled in the Ste-Pétronille vineyard with a spectacular view of Montmorency Falls.

PARTY

The Festival International du Blues de Tremblant will rock the Laurentians with 150 shows July 5-14, starring headliners like James Cotton, Buckwheat Zydeco and Jonas & the Massive Attraction. And Les Rythmes de Tremblant will present free concerts every weekend, June 29-Aug. 25

Summer in the city is like a candy store of entertainment. Heavyweights Céline Dion (July 27) and Paul McCartney (July 23) will light up the Plains of Abraham. On the rainbow beat, don't you love the Fête Arc-en-ciel in Quebec City on Labour "Gay" Weekend?

A mere two weeks after Montreal Pride Aug. 12-18, Arc-en-ciel will continue the shindig with outdoor shows, parties in bars and a community fair, mostly in the Old Port and along rue Saint-Jean. You don't have to be gay. The scene is LGTBQ, with "A" standing for "allies."

IF YOU GO

For complete information on Quebec Tourism: 877-bon-jour/877-266-5687, www.bonjourquebec.com; Quebec City region, 877-783-1608, www.quebecregion.com

Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu: 866-540-4464, www.fairmont.com/richelieu-charlevoix; La Malbaie, Charlevoix; starting at \$179 in June and \$139 in Oct.

La Traite, Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations: 866-551-9222, www.hotelpremieresnations.ca, Wendake, near Quebec City; breakfast, lunch & dinner daily and Sunday brunch.

Les Brasseurs du Temps: 819 205 4999, www.brasseursdutemps.com; Gatineau. \$3.95-\$6.30 for a 12-ounce draft; open daily.

Mer et Monde Écotours: 866-637-6663, www.meretmonde.ca; Tadoussac & Bergeronnes; sea kayaking, \$62 half-day adults, \$46 for 15 and under; min. age seven.

BALNEA spa + thermal reserve: 866-734-2110, www.balnea.ca; Bromont-sur-le-Lac; thermal baths, \$60; massages, \$85 and up.

Aquarium du Québec: 866-659-5264, www.aquariumduquebec.com; 1675 ave. des Hôtels, Quebec City; open daily; adults, \$17, children 3-17, \$8.50.

Île d'Orléans Tourism: 866-941-9411, tourisme.iledorleans.com; Panache Mobile: 888-692-2211, www.saint-antoine.com; lobster "guedille," \$19.

Fête Arc-en-ciel: pride festival, Aug. 30- Sept. 2; 418-809-3383, www.glbttquebec.org, Quebec City; events are free.

Festival International du Blues de Tremblant: July 5-14, 819-681-3000, # 46643, www.tremblantblues.com; Mont Tremblant; events are free.

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Previous

Next



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