

Checking In: Kéroul widens the road for tourists with special needs

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 27, 2013



Émilie Desgagnés, left, and her sister Anne get ready to bunk down in Gatineau Park, where a yurt has been adapted for tourists who are physically challenged.

Photograph by: KÉRoul

The goal of the Kéroul organization is to maximize travel without limits for people with limits. Equestrian excursions, lake cruises, camping and deluxe vacations are among a world of choices for wheelchair-bound tourists and those with other physical challenges.

Kéroul's inspectors have visited and evaluated more than 5,000 tourism sites throughout Quebec, categorizing them by location, by the type of venue (lodging, attraction, information centre) and by the extent of their adapted facilities. About 230 establishments certified as "fully accessible" are featured on Kéroul's Accessible Road, a pan-Quebec network. These are the best of the best — venues that are equipped to welcome disabled tourists with open arms.

The Accessible Road maps out a variety of options in Montreal, Quebec City and throughout the countryside, from Outaouais in the west to Gaspé in the east, Saguenay and Abitibi in the north, and

south to the Eastern Townships and the U.S. border. You'll find lodging establishments large and small, recreation paths, nature getaways, and arts and sports venues, all with adapted facilities.

About 900,000 Quebecers are coping with some kind of physical challenge, so there is a strong market for K eroul's resources.

"If you are physically challenged and you follow the Accessible Road, you don't have to think about your limitations anymore," said Monique Bouchard, project director for the Accessible Road. "Our best picks have comfort zones that follow international norms, so there will not be any obstacles for people in wheelchairs and there will be information and resources for those with auditory or visual challenges. You can search our website for specific needs.

"Certification by K eroul and inclusion on our Accessible Road also means that a hotel or tourist attraction employs people who have some training with the issue as well as the appropriate physical facilities," said Bouchard.

Among new features is K eroul's Facebook page, where travellers can share their favourite places and chat about destinations that are particularly advantageous or disadvantageous for the disabled.

"Plus, you can download the lists of Accessible Road recommendations to your smartphone from K eroul's website and social links," said Bouchard.

"You simply select the region that you want to visit and click."

It's safe to assume that many major urban hotels and large countryside resorts are equipped with at least some adapted resources. But certain establishments go beyond the basics.

For example, the four-star Hilton Qu bec is a new member of K eroul's Accessible Road and prized for its three fully adapted guest rooms that have wide doorways without thresholds, low-rise closet racks, easy-to-reach lighting controls and bathrooms with roll-in showers, exacting sink heights and grab bars.

"The Hilton has gone that one step farther and also adapted some of its public spaces and restaurants with ramps," said Bouchard. "It also has a great location. If you are in a wheelchair, it is within a block or two of the Quebec Parliament and rue Saint-Jean."

But the Accessible Road is made for adventure and not limited to deluxe elevator buildings. Its 2013 recommended list also features a foray into Gatineau Park, north of Ottawa, where a yurt and other attractions have been completely adapted for travellers with mobility problems.

The Wanakiwin Yurt (the name means "peaceful place") has been equipped with ramps, and nearby are an adapted bathroom and picnic tables that accommodate wheelchairs. The yurt accommodates up to four people and has a refrigerator, a double burner and propane and wood stoves, so people can bring their own food and water and cook in. Water is important: the closest source of drinking water is a half-kilometre from the site, so that trek entails more roughing it than visitors might have

planned for. Visitors can drive directly to the yurt campsite in summer, but not in winter.

Also accessible in Gatineau Park are the visitors' centre, the Pink Lake Lookout (to which the path is partially accessible) and paths such as the Sugarbush Trail, as well as the tea room at the Mackenzie King Estate.

Kéroul's work in the travel industry goes beyond Quebec's borders. Its consultants can suggest travel agents who are trained to plan trips for those with special needs, and it also collaborates with Air Canada, Air Transat, Via Rail and other transport companies for information on adapted facilities.

Isabelle Ducharme, chairperson of the board of Kéroul, works and travels constantly, advocating the expansion of tourism facilities to meet the needs of the physically challenged.

She will be one of the organizers when Kéroul hosts the first edition of the Destinations for All world summit, to be held at the Palais des congrès from Oct. 19 to 22, 2014. Among the leaders of the event will be executives of at least two international bodies: the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the European Network for Accessible Tourism.

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IF YOU GO

Kéroul and the Accessible Road: 514-252-3104; keroul.qc.ca or theaccessibleroad.com. Kéroul's annual membership costs \$20 and includes hotel discounts and the magazine Baladeur.

Hilton Québec: 800-447-2411, 418-647-2411, hiltonquebec.com, 1100 René-Lévesque Blvd. E., Quebec City. Depending on availability, regular and adapted rooms start at approximately \$130, including heated outdoor swimming pool (with stairs) and fitness room.

Gatineau Park Visitor Centre: 866-456-3016, 866-661-3530 (TTY); reservations.gatineaupark.ca; 33 Scott Rd., Old Chelsea. The yurt costs \$150 per night for up to four people.

Transportation: People accompanying a traveller with reduced mobility can ride for free on Via Rail (888-842-7245, or TTY, 800-268-9503), on Montreal's public transit (514-280-8211) or on buses that are members of the Quebec Bus Owners Association (418-522-7131, apaq.qc.ca; reservations are recommended).