

Checking In: Belgian bliss comes to Lanaudière

Le Cheval Bleu specializes in snowy getaways

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 8, 2013 3:08 PM



Guests at Le Cheval Bleu can rent snow mobiles to explore the vast trail network of the Lanaudière region.

Photograph by: Lanaudière Tourism

The cuisine and beer at Auberge-Restaurant Le Cheval Bleu are Belgian, but the St-Alphonse-Rodriguez inn's snowy environment is pure Quebec.

Le Cheval Bleu is a comfortable three-sun B&B (rated by Quebec Tourism out of a possible five suns) at the heart of snow-sports country in Lanaudière, little more than an hour's drive northeast of Montreal. It's nestled at the foot of a mountain on a rugged domain of forest cut with walking trails. Three horses laze and graze in paddocks. A Great Pyrenees — a huge, friendly white dog — bounds around the snowdrifts.

The owners, Serge Maietti and Monique Smismans, will mark 20 years of innkeeping in 2014. They arrived from their native Belgium, saw their new home and chose the B&B's name right away. They had been keen horseback riders back home — ergo, Le Cheval — and on the day they saw their new blue property, the sky was also blue.

As a B&B, Le Cheval Bleu operates four guest rooms, each with a private bathroom. The rooms are simple and tidy. The two-bedroom family suite called Le Refuge is livened up with wall murals depicting the forest and wildlife. Life is casual in this cosy rustic getaway, in a barnlike building. The

dining room is pine-panelled, with tables covered in flowered, plastic cloths. The salon is a tiny corner of wicker chairs. And there is one television for everyone, although if you bring your own mobile device, you can stream with free Wi-Fi.

“It’s family-friendly and country-style,” said Maietti. “We’re very relaxed and we want people to feel at home.”

After a day in the great outdoors, you’ll be ready for dinner. It will be a meal inspired by the food of Belgium, so expect to bliss out on fabulous Brussels-style fries. They’re not fried in oil like french fries, but the recipe is secret, and the specialty is served with every main course: mussels, boudin noir and boudin blanc (sausages), bison, venison, lamb and duck.

Smismans works the cuisine, but Maietti has an all-important role, too: he presides over a bar that stocks 85 kinds of Belgian beer, and acts as a sommelier.

“I don’t have a favourite; I like them all,” he says. “But it is like wine: it depends what you are eating.

“For example, if you have a rich bavette of bison, you might pair that with a mellow but flavourful Tripele Karmeliet, but if you have mussels with garlic sauce you would probably want a Blanche de Bruxelles, a ‘white’ beer with a lot of yeast.”

Le Cheval Bleu’s property has trails for winter hiking, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, but it also co-ordinates with a lot of snow-sports outfitters, so guests can sample just about everything. Snowmobilers can rent machines and gear from Les Motoneiges Géro in St-Jean-de-Matha; they stock the latest Bombardier models, which have 90-horsepower, four-stroke engines, believed to be less polluting and quieter than earlier vehicles. If you are new to the sport or the region, I recommend heading out with a guide. You’ll explore more territory and you’ll see some scenic, hard-to-reach spots.

The Lanaudière region has been recognized as a top destination by snowmobile magazines throughout North America. More than 2,300 kilometres snake through a near-wilderness of woods and mountains, with loops linking such towns as St-Côme, St-Zénon, St-Donat, St-Gabriel-de-Brandon and St-Michel-des-Saints, as well as routes running adjacent to Parc du Mont Tremblant and inside La Réserve Rouge Matawin.

As a snowmobiling centre, Lanaudière is prized for its clear signage and careful surface grooming, two important safety factors. It also is strong on such trailside facilities as equipment and repair shops, heated shelters and gas stations. Most maps show that trails also link to the adjacent tourism region of Mauricie, which expands the network by another snowy 2,500 kilometres.

Lanaudière has mountains galore, and where there are mountains, there are mountain sports. Station touristique Val St-Côme, a half-hour drive from Le Cheval Bleu, is an exciting winter area with downhill and cross-country skiing, snowmobiling and snowshoeing. It is a family place, with super kids’ programs and special deals, such as \$11 tickets for Sunday night skiing and \$21 for day skiing on

Tuesdays.

Val St-Côme has scenic new glades, a terrain park and lots of skiing for all levels, but its most high-profile feature is its Freestyle Excellence Centre, a training facility for aerial freestyle skiing. Val St-Côme will be the host of the FIS World Cup competitions in jumps and moguls, Jan. 14 and 19, with star skiers Alex Bilodeau, the Olympic gold medallist in moguls at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games, and Mikaël Kingsbury, the current FIS world champion in moguls. This will be an exciting spectator sport, one of the final meets where athletes can garner points for a precious place on the ski team for the Games in Sochi in February.

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IF YOU GO:

St-Alphonse-Rodriguez is a 90-minute drive from downtown Montreal via Highway 15 north to Highway 640 east, Route 25 north to Rawdon and Route 337 to Route 343 north.

Auberge-Restaurant Le Cheval Bleu: 866-883-3080, 450-883-3080, lechevalbleu.com; 414 Route 343, St-Alphonse-Rodriguez. In winter, dinner is served Friday and Saturday. Non-guests should be a minimum group of four. Dinner served nightly June 24-Sept. 5.

Price: rooms cost \$95 for two or \$75 for singles, incl. breakfast and access to trails; in summer there is a swimming pool; package adding dinner, \$152 for two or \$103 for one person. The two-bedroom family suite costs \$170 for four with breakfast, or \$282 adding dinner.

Winter packages available with Station touristique Val St-Côme and Ski Montcalm as well as several activities near Rawdon: La Source Bains Nordiques, a deluxe Nordic spa, and Arbraska, a tree-to-tree adventure.

Station touristique Val St-Côme, skiing, freestyle skiing and snowboarding: 800-363-2766, 450-883-0701, valsaintcome.com; St-Côme.

Lanaudière tourism information: 800-363-2788, lanaudiere.ca.

Snowmobiling: snowmobilecountry.ca.

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Photograph by: Auberge Le Cheval Bleu

