

Skiing in Quebec: The hills are alive

Get your passes now for the best deals

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 8, 2013 3:12 PM



Mont Ste-Anne has the highest vertical night skiing in Canada.

Photograph by: Mont-Sainte-Anne

Let the parties begin. Two of Quebec's pivotal snow-sports areas are marking significant anniversaries during the 2013-2014 season.

Mont Tremblant is celebrating 75 years since it inaugurated the first chairlift in Canada, on Feb. 12, 1939. And Stoneham is turning 50: Quebec City's spirited suburban mountain will host its 10th FIS Snowboard World Cup in January, the last international competition before the Winter Olympics and a rare chance to see thrilling slope-style, the extreme acrobatic highlight of ESPN's X Games.

"I am very proud of Mont Tremblant's anniversary year," said Olympian Peter Duncan, who grew up at the mountain, trained on its rugged steeps and competed at the 1964 and 1968 Games. "It means we have consistency, continuity and staying power."

Duncan's grandfather, a blacksmith, arrived in St-Jovite from Scotland in the late 1800s. Later, when the mountain's development started, Duncan's father, Charles, was Mont Tremblant's first employee. "Charlie" was the operations manager who helped to carve the mountain's first trails, including the Duncan, and installed the first chairlift in Canada in 1939. Tremblant's founder, rakish American Joe Ryan, named the game-changing contraption the Flying Mile Chair, after his favourite race horse.

The '40s and '50s were a wild time for a glamorous sport, with rollicking après-ski and a lot of legends. Father Charles-Hector Deslauriers said mass at Mont Tremblant chapel with ski boots peeking out from under his robes. And French countesses worked as chambermaids at local ski lodges just to enjoy Quebec's unpretentious joie de vivre. When the Ryan family sold in the '60s, the party fizzled, and Mont Tremblant missed the era of sweeping ski modernization during the '70s and '80s.

Intrawest took over in the 1990s and turned a flagging ski hill into a sophisticated 21st-century resort with real cuisine, a casino and condos. The par-taay will resume when the season opens Nov. 21 with festivities, VIPs and, depending on weather, some of the 95 trails, 14 high-tech lifts and 1,000 snow guns.

With a dash of European glamour, a splash of Wonderland family appeal and a heap of Quebec savoir-faire, Mont Tremblant has been named "one of the world's top 25 ski villages" by National Geographic Magazine.

Tremblant isn't cheap — you need fat stacks, some would say — but there are lots of ways to save. You can opt into a Latitude Card, which comes to \$49.99 per person, per day, for two to seven days of non-consecutive snow time, plus 15-per-cent discounts on additional visits. The T-66 card, available at \$299 until Dec. 10, has 66 days of slope time and other perks. For overnights, search www.tremblant.ca and go to Last Minute Offers for specials on unsold hotel rooms and condos at Les Suites Tremblant. As well, there are super sales for visits bought before Dec. 3, and savings of 20 to 40 per cent if you stay two, three or four nights.

Price breaks on lift tickets abound throughout Quebec. The best buy is the Ski Passe-Partout, which costs \$39.99 and is on sale now. It offers up to 40-per-cent discounts with a maximum of five visits to any of the more than 70 Alpine areas that are members of the Association des Stations de Ski du Québec. Available at Sports Experts, Intersport and S3 Board stores, the Passe-Partout is such a hot gift that it sells out well before Christmas. And using the budget-conscious Accèski Famille card, available at www.mysnowstore.com, one parent and one snow bunny under 16 can ski or ride together for \$40 at most major areas except Mont St-Sauveur and Mont Tremblant.

Mont St-Sauveur's own flexible season passes are valid at its six affiliated downhill areas in the Laurentians and Gatineau: \$199 for nights or \$399 for a pass valid Monday to Friday (days and nights) and Saturday and Sunday nights. At Ski Mont Gabriel, the day-and-night season pass costs \$199 if three people buy at the same time, and skiers would pay an additional \$39 a day to hit Mont St-Sauveur's trails in early and late season.

EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

Ski Bromont really, really wants us to ski and ride, and is focusing on snow-making and trail grooming to maximize the experience. The M2J Pass (valid Tuesdays to Thursdays and available only online) costs a remarkably low \$111 for a season of day or night snow sports, and that price dips to \$90 if four people buy in before Dec. 17. Night season passes cost \$160 (or \$127 before Dec. 17 if four

people buy), and those include the festive Nuits Blanches when the lifts close at 2 a.m. Day skiers get breaks, too: if four people buy online, tickets on Tuesdays through Thursdays will cost \$30.

Mont Sutton is an irresistible deal, simply because it has some of the finest skiing and riding in Quebec. Its flank of steep mogul runs and its glades trails, nearly 45 per cent of the mountain, are unparalleled. Plus, there are bargains galore.

You can't do better than the \$5 anniversary ticket on Dec. 17, when Mont Sutton marks its 53rd season. Its accessible ski-and-stay package, available Mondays to Thursdays, starts at \$89 per person, and includes breakfast and a day and a half of skiing. You can lock this in at virtually all of Sutton's inns, including Auberge des Appalaches and Domaine Tomali-Maniatyn, although not during holiday periods. Discounted theme days for skiers and snowboarders (riders) start in January and run for seven weeks, with \$25 lift tickets and \$32 lessons for the 50+ Club (on Tuesdays), Suits & Ties (men, on Wednesdays) and Divas on Skis (women, on Thursdays).

Mont Sutton's snow school has new ventures: daycare deals, snowboard lessons for riders aged two to five, telemark options, and learning packages starting at \$60 with a lesson, equipment rental and lifts for novice trails.

This season, Sutton and neighbouring Owl's Head will again share the Carte Blanche, with discounts to both areas and a fifth visit for free.

Family-friendly Owl's Head, a postcard-pretty mountain with striking views of Lake Memphremagog and the Appalachians, is diversifying with new trails for snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and back-country ski touring. The big hit for riders, novices and competitors will be a new boardercross course. And the new Snowscoot is a cool slide that combines a snowboard with scooter-style steering.

If you log on to Owl's Head's new online store, you can save up to 40 per cent on lift tickets. And as of Jan. 7, until the season's end, you can snare a lift ticket for \$17.40 on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Ski-in, ski-out lodging at Owl's Head Auberge starts at \$90 per person, double occupancy, including breakfast, lift ticket and taxes.

QUEBEC CITY AREA

I am crazy about the feisty steps of Stoneham, which is Mont Ste-Anne's sister mountain, but definitely not its little sister. Marking its 50th anniversary this year, Stoneham is exceptional for its consistent summit-to-base trails and the relatively mild micro-climate created by its protective three-peak bowl. For experts, "Les 40s" add up to a wall of extreme black-diamond runs like La Bomba and La Chute. Stoneham also is prized by freestylers for its Olympic-size halfpipe and Parc XL, a competition-calibre snow park with kicky new step-up jumps. Both Mont Ste-Anne and Stoneham have carved new glades, and both have extensive night skiing.

The two mountains combine terrific ski-and-stay deals with various hotels at both the mountains' bases and in Quebec City, starting at \$99 for Mont Ste-Anne and \$75 for Stoneham. If you pre-pay

the Book Early Package before Dec. 1, a three-night visit with lodging and day-and-night skiing at both mountains starts at \$91 per person, per night, double occupancy.

NORDIC SKIING

Cross-country skiing is so accessible that you can carve your own tracks in the nearest park, and then progress to the trail system on Mount Royal or the Morgan Arboretum in the West Island.

In the country, favourite centres include Ski de Fond Mont Tremblant at Domaine St-Bernard, so pastoral that deer peek out from the trees; Mont Ste-Anne, a paradise for both leisure and competitive skiers with the second largest trail network in North America, after one in California; and Parc national du Mont Orford, nestled in the mountains of the Eastern Townships.

If you're willing to invest in a five-hour drive to La Malbaie in Charlevoix, Mont Grand-Fonds is a special secret. With an exceptional snowfall, it combines a modest downhill area with great family appeal and a superb Nordic system. The cross-country trails have heated huts with wood-burning stoves, clothes lines for drying damp gear and free soup and coffee. The huts are situated every four kilometres along the main ski routes, so you can ski for an entire day and stop frequently to warm up and fuel up.

Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu runs a shuttle to the mountain and has ski-and-stay packages starting at \$289 for a family of four, including your choice of snow sport. Le Parc Régional Mont Grand Fonds: 877-665-0095, montgrandfonds.com.

IF YOU GO

Association des Stations de Ski du Québec: 877-614-2777, 450-765-2012, maneige.com, mysnowstore.com. Some special rates are not available during December holidays and spring break in February and March.

Mont Tremblant Resort: 888-736-2526, tremblant.ca.

Mont St-Sauveur International: 514-871-0101, montsaintsauveur.com, mssi.ca; Mont St-Sauveur, Ski Morin Heights, Mont Avila, Mont Olympia, Ski Mont Gabriel, Edelweiss.

Mont Sutton: 866-538-2545, montsutton.com.

Owl's Head: 800-363-3342, owlshead.com.

Mont Ste-Anne: 888-827-4579, mont-sainte-anne.com. Réservotel: 800-463-1568 for lodging.

Stoneham: 800-463-6888, ski-stoneham.com; World Cup, Jan. 14 to 19.

Ski Bromont: 866-276-6668, skibromont.com.



At Mont Grand Fonds in Charlevoix, the cross-country trails have huts situated every four kilometres.

Photograph by: Picasa/ Tourisme Charlevoix

