



The Kanatha-Aki Nature Centre northeast of Ste-Agathe offers rustic lodging and outdoor adventures such as dogsledding, ice fishing, winter survival courses and bison observation in a setting boasting “beautiful sunsets and absolute tranquility.” STÉPHANE DENIS / KANATHA-AKI NATURE CENTRE

CHECKING IN

Get back to nature for a night at Kanatha-Aki



ROCHELLE LASH

If lounging on bison skins in front of a fireplace sounds seductive, Kanatha-Aki Nature Centre in the Laurentians might be your ideal Valentine’s stop.

I say “might” because you won’t have warm covers and flickering flames in a fancy hotel room with central heating.

Nope, at Kanatha-Aki, your overnight stay could be in an authentic teepee in the woods or a cabin on a hilltop.

It’s all about nature.

The centre’s owner, Stéphane Denis, welcomes lovers of the great outdoors to his domain of forests and mountains in Val-des-Lacs, a remote spot a half-hour northeast of Ste-Agathe.

Kanatha-Aki offers woody lodging and adventures such as dogsledding, ice fishing, winter survival courses and bison observation. In summer, there’s zip-lining, horseback riding, fly

fishing and trekking with the sled dogs.

The centre offers truly distinctive programs: trapper/coureur des bois days, which are suitable for youngsters or families and include exploring pioneer and First Nations culture; and wilderness survival courses, which range from tame afternoons for sporty types to extreme three-day challenges in which intrepid bushwhackers helicopter to a remote site and learn skills such as fire-lighting, map-reading, fishing by hand and how to build shelters and hunting traps.

Lodging: Kanatha-Aki has three options for lodging, each suitable for two to six people: the Mountain Refuge, the Teepee and the Trapper’s Log Cabin.

“The accommodations are simple, but luxurious in their own way,” Denis said. “We have priceless features such as beautiful sunsets, absolute tranquility and stars shining brilliantly in a dark sky away from city lights.

“Plus, you might see wildlife like deer, beaver or foxes.”

For a Valentine’s celebration, I recommend Kanatha-Aki’s Romantic Getaway (available year-round) in the Mountain

Refuge. If you can snare a reservation, you can make it a 24-hour escape, starting at around 1 p.m. with a three-hour dogsled excursion through the woods.

Your baggage is taken by snowmobile. Add a massage, and you will reach new Valentine’s Day heights.

“It’s rustic but romantic because of the moonlight on the snow, the gorgeous views and the clear, starry sky,” Denis said. “And you will be all alone.”

The Trapper’s Log Cabin and the Teepee are more basic accommodations, but they are steps away from the Welcome Pavilion, which has indoor bathrooms (Mountain Refuge visitors use an outhouse) and wooden picnic-style tables.

If you are an experienced winter camper and have opted to spend the night in the Teepee, Denis will pass on First Nations lore about how this simple shelter is built to reflect the cycles of the moon and universal elements — sun, earth, air, water and sacred fire.

The bed of pine branches is believed to be medicinal and purifying, and the bison skins are guaranteed to keep you warm. The Teepee can accommodate up

to six, so you can cuddle à deux or settle in with friends or children.

First Nations spirit: When I met Denis, he was burning sage, which he uses daily in rituals to cleanse the soul, rid the mind of negative thoughts, and nourish it with beauty and love.

Denis learned First Nations philosophy from Chief Wallace Black Elk in France. Since then, he has followed aboriginal principles, eventually studying with Algonquin chief Dominique Rankin. (Denis’ neighbour in the Laurentians, Rankin is the prominent medicine man who performed a ceremony with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Canada Day last year.)

Kanatha-Aki translates loosely from Algonquin as “guardian of the boundless earth,” and Denis’ eco-focus is his preserve of wood bison. He has fenced off a vast tract of forest and meadows high on a hilltop for a herd of 18 shaggy giants, who can weigh up to 900 kilograms. Feeding time, around 2 p.m. daily, is the best time to see them out in the open.

Massage: There is a way to enjoy the tranquility and beauty of Kanatha-Aki without lifting a finger. Denis’ life partner, Sophie

IF YOU GO

Val-des-Lacs is around 30 minutes from Ste-Agathe and 30 minutes from Tremblant’s North Side ski area.

Kanatha-Aki Nature Centre: 819-321-1890, kanatha-aki.com; 11 Chemin du Lac de l’Original, Val-des-Lacs.

Price: Trapper’s Log Cabin or Teepee, \$130 for two; \$15 for each additional person. Mountain Refuge Romantic Getaway, \$299 p.p.; includes a three-hour dogsled excursion (a \$200 p.p. value), a bottle of wine, cheese fondue supper, breakfast snack and snowshoes. Sleeping bags and full breakfast on request; fees might apply.

Activities: Some activities have a minimum age of 12, or seven for zip-lining. In summer, horseback riding tours range from one hour to overnight. Winter survival courses range from one to three days, with a two-day heli-trip an option (the next weekend session will be March 24 to 26).

Sophie Williams Massage and Amerindian Traditions: 819-962-5772, massageamerindien.com. Two locations: Val-des-Lacs and Aylmer/Gatineau; 60 minutes, \$95.



The Kanatha-Aki Nature Centre’s lodging options include a teepee in the woods. STÉPHANE DENIS/KANATHA-AKI NATURE CENTRE

Williams, offers therapeutic or relaxation massages and Amerindian lore in a secluded log cabin warmed by a wood stove.

The space is purified with burned sage and decorated with a bison skin and First Nations-inspired objects.

Williams uses oils infused with the essence of medicinal plants, and serves balsam tea.

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