

Auberge du Lac Taureau tames the wilderness

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Freelance

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Imagine wilderness tamed with fine cuisine, desirable decor and gentle outdoor adventures.

Auberge du Lac Taureau is an exceptional example of a resort that combines a remote, rustic setting and the comforts and conveniences of a good hotel.

The inn is the brainchild of a cooperative of nearly 50 coowners, all residents of the community of Saint Michel des Saints. One of Auberge du Lac Taureau's mandates is to build tourism in a region that traditionally has been dependant solely on forestry. Built 12 years ago and recently expanded, the hotel is a striking lodge, a sturdy structure of red pine and white spruce built in rugged, mountainous country on the shore of Lac Taureau and adjacent to the Parc regional du Lac Taureau, a carefully protected space where development can be controlled.

Gaze out from almost every vantage point at Lac Taureau and the view is a beautiful, serene winter landscape - white-tipped forests framing a vast, frozen lake. You can almost reach out and touch the tall, slender spruce trees that sway in the brisk wind. Other than the comings and goings of families and friends at play, life at Taureau is peaceful and isolated.

About 75 per cent of Taureau's wintertime clients are Europeans who visit to experience the relatively untouched open spaces and sample adventure sports they can't find at home, such as dogsledding, ice-fishing and snowmobiling. Most Montrealers don't have huskies, snowshoe trails or trout ponds in their backyards either, so Lac Taureau is an ideal spot to try outdoor escapades in an easygoing way. You can catch your own trout or go ice-skating right outside the front door, on the hotel's pond. The hotel is surrounded by tracks made by rabbits, foxes and other wildlife that provide tantalizing evidence of their presence, but only the most dedicated tracker will catch sight of the animals.

"We are at the heart of nature preserves, and our environment is very picturesque," said Mario Gouin, the general manager and one of the owners of the Auberge. "If you are skiing or snowmobiling, you are in heavy, snow-covered forests only two hours from Montreal. We are easy to get to, but we are deep in the country."

Gouin would know about the snow. He skis all of Lac Taureau's Nordic trails, about 20 or 30 kilometres, almost every day. Most visitors spend at least a half-day in the bracing fresh air and then warm up fireside with a lunch of bison burgers or duck pizza. Clients also come to Taureau for less-strenuous indoor pursuits such as a relaxed swim in the pool, a soak

in the hot tub or a massage in the spa.

Lac Taureau recently underwent a substantial overhaul and expansion, and has emerged with an appealing mix of contemporary decor in a country lodge.

All of its 100 rooms and 50 suites or condos are now either newly built or fully renovated, with new and older wings connected by a labyrinth of glass corridors and elevators.

All guests get complimentary toiletries, Internet access, cable television and private thermostats. The beds are pure white with oversized grey pillows, a contrast to the warmth of burnished wood floors and trim.

There are many sizes and configurations of rooms, but the simplest is a generous space with two queen beds, and the most elaborate is a two-bedroom, two-storey apartment big enough for four adults and four children.

Even dinner is a bit of an adventure and another place where Taureau gives its guests lots of choices. The menu features breast of goose, roast bison, rack of venison and confit of duck or rabbit.

Auberge du Lac Taureau wants to remember the region's roots; the area once had a significant First Nations population. One of the resort's most fascinating activities is a visit to a replica of a traditional First Nations village, complete with a tasting of bannock, a First Nations bread, cooked over a bonfire. If you miss out, there's a gift shop that sells native-themed clothes, moccasins and crafts, some made locally.

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IF YOU GO

Saint Michel des Saints is a 2 1/2-hour drive from Montreal on Route 131 north of Joliette.

Auberge du Lac Taureau: 450-833-1919, 877-822-2623, www.auberge.lactaureau.com, Saint Michel des Saints.

Prices: One night's lodging in hotel rooms, with breakfast, dinner and access to facilities, starts at \$119 per person, double occupancy, during the week. Rates are available without meals for condo clients who want to self-cater. All guests have access to cross-country ski trails, skating rink (skate and snowshoe rentals are extra) and indoor pool, sauna and whirlpool. A sample spa deal: The His and Hers package includes one night's stay, breakfast, dinner and two spa treatments for each, from \$295, per person, double occupancy

Children 17 and under stay for free. Meals are free for kids 3 and under. Meals are half-price for those 4 to 11. Daycare is available. Guests 60

and older pay 15 per cent less, Sundays to Thursdays.

Winter extras: spa services, dogsledding, snowmobiling, hiking or First Nations excursion with a trapper-guide, ice-fishing, hydra-ski gliding.

In summer, guests have access to the lake, a sand beach, small craft, tennis, and hiking or biking trails. Extras include float plane rides, mountain bike rentals, ATV tours, bear observation. Off-site, there is golf.

Tourism for Lanaudiere region: 800-363-2788, www.lanaudiere.ca.

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