

BREWS, BIKING AND MORE IN PORTNEUF



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Hôtel Roquemont is a practical, sociable country lodge for all seasons.

This roadside inn and micro-brewery is at the heart of the food-happy and sports-rich countryside of the Portneuf region, about 45 minutes west of Quebec City.

It's a former motel that was recently refurbished, bringing it up to three-star status. It is now the No. 1 stop in the town of St-Raymond-de-Portneuf for pub food, microbrews and live music.

Hôtel Roquemont is also a gateway for sporty travellers who are keen on the great outdoors year-round.

It has 41 rooms, all but seven updated with flat-screen TVs, handy coffee machines and mini-refrigerators.

One wing is motel-style, plain and simple, where guests drive up to the door and unload their luggage and sports gear. Snowmobilers can roar right up to the door as well, because Roquemont is adjacent to the Quebec network of trails.

The hotel section is a little spiffier, built four years ago with modern bathrooms and good-sized guest rooms. The modern rustic decor features a woody burgundy and brown colour scheme, birch-tree wallpaper, cute twig lamps and butcher block tables. Some rooms have Murphy beds for families, and the Panache Suite is a special hide-away, with a king bed, a microwave, a double soaking tub and a separate glass shower.

Roquemont also has a new charging station for electric cars.

FOOD AND BREW

Le Roquemont is a country-contemporary brasserie with red leather booths and sturdy tavern chairs, a huge stone fireplace for après-snow sports and pine log walls festooned with vintage snowshoes and fishing gear.

It's a sprawling restaurant, split into a family-friendly area and a bar-lounge that hosts live music Thursdays and Fridays after 7 p.m. Food specials and brews on tap are announced on chalkboards, and pro sports dominate the large-screen TVs.



The new microbrewery at Hôtel Roquemont produces five kinds of beer. *PASCAL COTHET/HÔTEL ROQUEMONT*



The Panache Suite is one of the top rooms at the updated Hôtel Roquemont in St-Raymond-de-Portneuf. *HÔTEL ROQUEMONT*

Le Roquemont is busy-busy, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, because it has an enormous menu for almost everyone: charcuterie, tartares, salads, veggie burgers and kids' stuff, plus creative poutines with boar sausage or smoked salmon and cream cheese. Main courses range from classic pub fare — burgers, spaghetti, smoked meat — to more worldly dishes, such as Thai shrimp, foie gras and duck confit.

Beer is brewed on the spot and figures into Le Roquemont specialties such as onion soup

Augustine, flavoured with “la rousse”; trout with a demi-glace of maple syrup and stout; steak with beer-spiked pepper sauce; and portobello mushrooms sautéed à la bière blond.

Brewmaster Carl Morasse presides over Le Roquemont's pièce de résistance: the spanking new microbrewery. It's a state-of-the-art installation with six shiny stainless steel tanks and a touch-screen computer to regulate the various phases, including fermentation and chilling.

It's all glass-enclosed, so you can gaze at the source of the suds

while five varieties of beer are pumped through hoses to the taps at the bar.

Morasse reports that his top seller is Single Track, an American-style IPA. But after sampling a flight of his products, I voted for the Grande Débâcle, lightly flavoured with citrus and coriander.

THE OUTDOORS

“Besides food and drink, we are point zéro for sports,” said marketing specialist Jean Labranche, who co-owns Hôtel Roquemont with Pascal Cothet, a seasoned innkeeper and restaurateur. “We are at the heart of so many activities, from hunting and fishing to snowmobiling and cycling.”

For cycling, the scenic Vélo-piste Jacques-Cartier Portneuf runs for 68 kilometres along a former railway track through the countryside around St-Raymond-de-Portneuf. Part of La Route Verte No. 6, the versatile Vélo-piste connects with the Corridor des Cheminots, a trail that leads to Quebec City; from there, serious cyclists can branch off to Mont-Ste-Anne or Montmorency Falls.

The Portneuf region also embraces the rugged territory of lakes, forests and the foothills of this eastern stretch of the Lower Laurentians.

The nearby Vallée Bras-du-Nord is a sports paradise in the wilderness, with 80 kilometres

of hiking and snowshoe trails, plus sections for fat-biking in winter and mountain-biking in summer. One special feature is guided backcountry skiing with “skins” for climbing in natural, open mountainous land studded with trees.

Frenette Bicyclettes (frenettebicyclettes.com), next door to Roquemont, rents and sells all styles of bikes for adults and children. Although most of Vallée Bras-du-Nord is around 20 minutes north of Roquemont, you can mountain-bike right out the door. One of Vallée's trails heads into the woods directly from the hotel.

Roquemont is also on Trans-Québec snowmobile trails Nos. 2 and 3. You can rent or buy equipment at Dion Moto (dionmoto.com), one of Quebec's largest outlets for Bombardier machines, and zoom around for the day or travel as far as Quebec City, Lac-St-Jean or La Tuque. The hotel has secure storage for the machines and lots of space for snowmobilers' heavy cold-weather outfits.

Ski Saint-Raymond (skisaintraymond.com) is a modest local downhill area with one special feature: it has only natural snow — nothing man-made. So if it's a white winter, ski purists are in for a treat.

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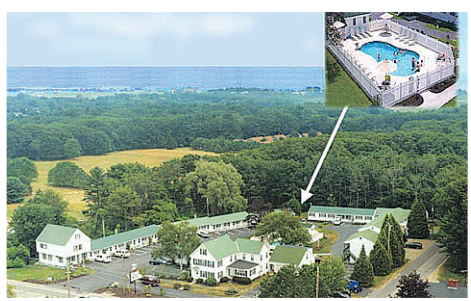


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