

Winter has arrived at Forêt Montmorency

Pastoral getaway keeps snow in reserve to ensure early cross-country ski season



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Snow alert! If you are hoping for an early opening to the cross-country ski season, I have news: You're late.

Forêt Montmorency, an exceptional Nordic skiing domain north of Quebec City, is part of the vast wilderness and conservation area of La réserve faunique des Laurentides.

It's a unique pastoral getaway that combines comfortable, rustic lodging with snow adventures, including a cross-country ski season that has already started.

Managed by Université Laval and part of its faculty of forestry, geography and geomatics (the study of land data), Forêt Montmorency is the world's largest forest research and teaching university, conferring degrees in forestry engineering.

Its specialties include land surveying, biology, conservation, sustainable forestry development and fish and game management.

Exploring the uses of the natural resource of snow is an aspect of the faculty's eco-research.

Snow leads us to ski vacations, with a unique twist.

Forêt Montmorency encompasses a 41-kilometre network of Nordic ski trails for all levels — both skate and classic styles, up and down hills, along lakeshores, and even over a wooden bridge that crosses the Montmorency River.

So far, that's a traditional experience. Here is the unique part: Forêt Montmorency has the longest cross-country ski season in Quebec, and even the entire northeast of North America. Its technical experts have enhanced the natural snowfall using snow cannons to manufacture the white stuff and ensure an early opening.

This year, Forêt Montmorency opened its landmark two-kilometre loop on Oct. 30, attracting hundreds of amateur cross-country skiers and elite athletes who want to train.

Even more unusual is that this early-season snow is not

IF YOU GO

Forêt Montmorency is around a 45-minute drive (103 kilometres) north of Quebec City on Highway 175.

Forêt Montmorency: 418-656-2034, foretmontmorency.ca
Sports: Ski trails \$14-\$15, with discounts for children. Ski rentals and waxing room available. Balsam fir snowshoe excursion Jan. 24, Feb. 7, Feb. 21, March 6 (age eight and older).

Lodging: High-season rates until March 13. Pavillon rates, with three cafeteria meals daily. Wi-Fi, skiing, cellular service: \$92-\$125 p.p., double occupancy; single rates available; discounts for children 13 and under; two-night minimum at certain times; add \$5.40 p.p. for bedding. Large chalets available: Boréal is for up to 18 people, Bouleau for 12, Hameau for eight to 10.

Tourism information: 877-783-1608, quebecregion.com

manufactured in October, although it used to be. With global warming, autumn nights are no longer guaranteed to be cold enough for the successful use of the snow-making machinery. The snow that skiers are enjoying this week was produced last February, piled up and conserved in the forest under a 30-centimetre layer of sawdust. Amazingly, that was enough insulation to preserve the snow throughout the heat of July and August.

"February usually is the coldest period of the year, so we can make a lot of snow," said Hugues Sansregret, operations director of Forêt Montmorency. "And February 2015, in Quebec, was the coldest month in Canada in 144 years."

Forêt Montmorency is in a snow belt, receiving among the highest snowfalls in Quebec ski country — an average of six metres every winter. (The Saguenay region records up to seven metres around Mont-Valin, and Charlevoix's Le Massif receives an average of 6.5 metres.)

Why manufacture a blizzard if you receive so much natural snow?

Sansregret explains: "The molecules of man-made snow are denser than those of natural



The Pavillon at Forêt Montmorency, north of Quebec City, offers basic rooms and cafeteria meals, and is adjacent to Nordic ski trails. PHOTOS: FORÊT MONTMORENCY/UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL



The Hameau is "like a condo in the woods," says Forêt Montmorency operations director Hugues Sansregret.

snow, and the consistency of the product is icier, so we can preserve our cache longer.

"Also, natural snow would melt faster, because it is mixed with soil from the woods or salt from parking lots."

SLEEP AND EAT: For keen outdoorsmen who want to stay a while, Forêt Montmorency has lodging in various sizes, shapes and comfort levels, including three large chalets for groups or families. Quebec Tourism rates these accommodations in the category of outfitters, or pourvoiries (not hotels), which refers to

wilderness-style leisure lodging, or often hunting and fishing camps.

The Hameau is the most deluxe chalet, rated as a five-star pourvoirie. It has four bedrooms, a modern kitchen, wooden floors, panelled walls and a living room with black leather sofas around an iron stove. "Like a condo in the woods," says Sansregret.

The main building is the vintage Pavillon, a three-star outfitter lodge, which doubles as housing for students, employees and visitors. The lodge is functional and plain, with concrete walls, a game room, communal TVs and

a large, inviting stone fireplace in the lounge.

The Pavillon's bathrooms and showers are down the hall and the 58 rooms have either two or three single beds, available with or without bedding. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in the cafeteria, and guests can bring their own wine and beer.

OFF-TRAIL FUN: Forêt Montmorency encourages other wilderness adventures, such as back-country skiing and snowshoeing. One delightful excursion is Taste the Forest, a snowshoe tour and culinary workshop focused on the balsam fir and led by a naturalist.

Montmorency also has created an alpine ski experience, although with no lifts. Skiers use newfangled Quebec-made ski shoes — easily manoeuvred 120-centimetre skis with "skins" on the bottom to make climbing uphill easier.

"We carved downhill glades, so we also are researching how to harvest trees sustainably," said Sansregret. "That is the future of land management — doing more with less. We have to accommodate two functions on the same footprint in this case: recreation and forestry."

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