

IT'S A JOY TO BE SECLUDED IN VAL-DES-LACS

Idyllic B&B offers 'tranquillity and freedom' - 90 minutes from Montreal



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

If, like poet Robert Frost, you prefer the road less travelled, consider making tracks for La Maison de Charlène.

This distinctive B&B is on the outskirts of Val-des-Lacs, a picturesque, pristine and somewhat remote corner of the woods northeast of Ste-Agathe.

A former hunting lodge, it has an idyllic location, perched on the side of a mountain, surrounded by a private domain of forests and overlooking a small lake.

"We are offering tranquillity and freedom," said Cécile Coquillon, who owns La Maison de Charlène with her husband, Jean-Michel. "Guests can do what they want, when they want."

"We have guests who dip in the lake at 7 a.m. and others who go at 7 p.m."

The Coquillons are from the mountainous Cévennes region in France, north of Montpellier. They vacationed for 25 years throughout Quebec and fell for the wide open spaces and beautiful landscapes.

"We chose this locale because it is totally private — we own the surrounding land and no one can build and spoil our views of untouched nature."

"We're also less than 90 minutes from Trudeau airport, so our guests from abroad can reach us with ease."

The experience: The quiet factor is 10 out of 10. The only noises I heard were crickets, birds and the wind rustling through the trees. A heron, an otter and a family of beavers make their homes at one end of the little lake.

Deer occasionally pass by, and I spotted a marten dashing through the woods while I was on a hike.

La Maison de Charlène is a "four-star" B&B (rated out of five by Quebec Tourism). It is pure comfort. The living room is huge, with deep leather sofas and reclining chairs around a wood-burning stove. The look is sturdy — knotty pine columns, floors and woodwork — with lots of plants and windows opening onto the great outdoors.

Jean-Michel is a veteran renovator — he has built front and back patios, installed rich new flooring and changed all of the house's doors and windows. He cut a two-kilometre trail through the forest so guests can hike, and he will add an outdoor whirlpool by next season.

The five guest rooms, all on the second floor, are named for the Coquillons' grandchildren: Bastien, Charlène, Kessy, Lauriane and Clara. Each has a queen bed, a private bathroom and pretty country decor featuring patchwork quilts, patterned wallpaper and hand-painted lamps. Clara's room is the biggest — a suite with a salon and a bedroom.

Jean-Michel's tour de force is the bathrooms. Some have double sinks and each one has a glass shower with a rain shower and separate jets for the body, face and feet. There are thermostats for both the air temperature and heated floors.

There is lots of lounging space. The living room doubles as a TV salon (there are no TVs in the guest rooms) and the patios are equipped with outdoor sofas. In summer, there is a string of Adirondack chairs along the lakefront.

The food: Cécile prepares breakfast à la française. White damask tablecloth covers the huge oak refectory table — a Jean-Michel design — and each place is set with white and pale blue floral china and five pieces of flatware.

We started with café au lait, juice and a carpaccio of fresh fruit with a citrus coulis.

Then things got serious. Cécile brought out homemade delights



La Maison de Charlène is a secluded B&B northeast of Ste-Agathe. PHOTOS: LA MAISON DE CHARLÈNE



The five guest rooms at La Maison de Charlène all feature attractive country décor and private bathrooms.

such as brioches and croissants with strawberry jam; a tourte filled with ham and cheese from Switzerland; and wafer-thin crepes drizzled with her own maple-butter creation. The next day she followed up with a vegetable-egg tart and a salad of delicate mâche and cherry tomatoes.

For dinner, most guests go out to restaurants in Lac-Supérieur, St-Faustin, St-Jovite or Ste-Agathe, all of which are 20 to 30 minutes away by car.

If you want to avoid the drive at night, La Maison de Charlène is self-catering. That means guests

can bring their own prepared food or cook lightly using the microwave, toaster oven or stovetop, but not the oven.

For last-minute provisions, Val-des-Lacs has a small grocery with an SAQ outlet.

What to do: Even though La Maison de Charlène is isolated, guests have an exceptional choice of activities.

The tiny lake and its tiny beach are the big draws in warm weather. There are trails through the woods for hiking, and the B&B supplies snowshoes in winter. It is a fascinating forest, with wild raspberry bushes and trees such

IF YOU GO

Val-des-Lacs is around a 90-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 15 north and Route 329 east (in the direction of St-Donat).

La Maison de Charlène: 819-321-0688, lamaisondecharlène.com or vacance-quebec.fr; 475 Chemin Sarrasin/Beaupré, Val-des-Lacs.

Price: \$123-\$139 for two, including breakfast, Wi-Fi, lakefront pedalo, TV lounge.

as red maple, white birch and black cherry.

Kanatha-Aki (kanatha-aki.com) is an outdoor adventure centre a few kilometres from the B&B, with zip-lining, horseback riding, dogsledding, courses in wilderness survival, trout fishing and a bison preserve.

Tremblant's North Side (downhill skiing) and Parc national du Mont-Tremblant (activities including cross-country skiing and hiking) are both around a 25-minute drive away. And golf courses operate in St-Faustin, Tremblant and Ste-Agathe.

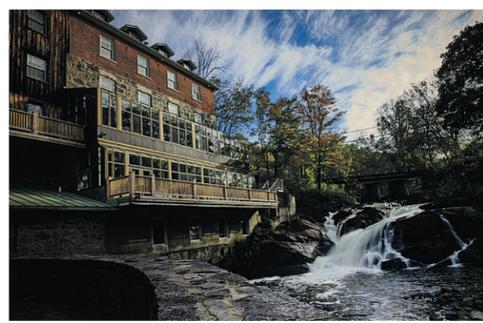
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