

SÉPAQ HORIZON CHALETs STEEPED IN NATURE

Don't worry about
forfeiting all your
creature comforts



ROCHELLE LASH
Hotel Intel

Pandemic protocol: Please follow government guidelines for regional travel and curfew.

The Quebec network of parks and conservation areas, known as SéPAQ, tames Quebec's wilderness arguably better than any — and its isolated lodging, steeped in nature, is almost pandemic-proof.

The Société des établissements de plein air du Québec is a government corporation that manages vast and beautiful conservation areas with the latest in chalets, camping and glamping, as well facilities for all sorts of outdoor adventures.

A SéPAQ park getaway almost is an essential service.

"Our destinations are focused on the outdoors and that is what people are seeking during the pandemic," said Simon Boivin, director of public affairs for SéPAQ.

"To be immersed in a near-wilderness, but with comforts, is a therapeutic escape. People are craving contact with nature, fresh air and the freedom of the great outdoors."

Lodging: SéPAQ is known for several types of lodging, from campsites to well-appointed chalets.

In recent years, SéPAQ introduced Étoile, a glamping hybrid of a cabin and tent that has three beds, a mini-fridge and, under an outdoor canopy, a propane or electric stove. This is adventure-lite. You are roughing it, but only a little.

Also available are the rustic-but-contemporary EXP and ECHO cabins at several destinations, including Parc national du Mont-Tremblant; Parc national du Mont-Mégantic, in the far reaches of the Eastern Townships; and Parc national de la Jacques-Cartier, north of Quebec City.

EXP and ECHO are compact and cleverly designed to use every centimetre of space. Hidden in the woods, these two styles of accommodations have basic kitchens, loos and showers. Guests need to bring towels and sleeping bags, although they can rent bedding. These getaways, with all-indoor living, are basic but comfortable.



The new Horizon chalets take wilderness well-being to a new level and are meant for all types of vacationers, including fishermen and sportsmen, as well as families who need conveniences. PHOTOS: SÉPAQ



The Horizon chalets are comfy and spacious.

Moving upscale, SéPAQ's new Horizon chalets are being introduced in 2021. They take wilderness well-being to a new level. Guests enjoy expansive spaces and high ceilings, better-equipped kitchens and bathrooms, large living rooms

and warm country décor of wood-panelled walls and pine furniture. One handy feature is a separate mud room at the entrance for outdoor clothing and fishing or sports gear.

Two of the wildlife reserves with Horizon chalets are the

Réserve faunique de Portneuf, near Quebec City, and the Réserve faunique du St-Maurice, near Shawinigan.

"The Horizon is planned for all 13 SéPAQ wildlife reserves, while other parks will specialize in the EXP and ECHO cabins," Boivin said. "The Horizon is meant for all types of vacationers, including fishermen and sportsmen on forest outings, as well as families who need conveniences."

Activities: Portneuf and Mauricie are known for fishing, especially brook trout. Portneuf features lakefronts with rowboats, canoes and pedalos. Hiking trails range from an easygoing route to the Chutes de la Marmite waterfall, up to the steeps of Cap Caché.

Mauricie is known for its pure rugged landscapes of heavy for-

IF YOU GO

Portneuf is 211 kilometres northeast of Montreal and 58 kilometres west of Quebec City. The Matawin Registration Centre of the Réserve faunique du St-Maurice is 270 kilometres northeast of Montreal and 90 km north of Trois-Rivières.

Société des établissements de plein air du Québec (SéPAQ): 800-665-6527, sepaq.com. SéPAQ operates 45 destinations (40 with lodging). They include 23 national parks, such as Parc national d'Oka and Parc national du Mont-Orford; 13 wildlife reserves; plus the resort-style Station touristique Duchesnay near Quebec City and Auberge de montagne des Chic-Chocs in Gaspésie. SéPAQ's tourist attractions include the Aquarium du Québec.

Horizon price: Chalets start at approximately \$186 per night, per chalet, for four to six adults in a two-bedroom unit (three bedrooms also are available). Weekends and high season of July-August are higher. Firewood and some facilities/equipment are included. Fishing and hunting packages are extra (some with gear), but are included for visitors 17 and under. Some equipment is free for all guests, and some for 17 and under. It's bring your-own-bedding or rent sheets.

Parks: Wildlife reserves (where Horizon cabins are situated) have no access fee, although many other SéPAQ parks charge for both overnight and day visitors who are 18 and over. Fees apply for some activities, as well as fishing licences. In winter, many SéPAQ parks have trails (no extra fees) for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking and fat biking; plus skating rinks and sledding hills.

ests and pristine lakes. Fishing is the No. 1 draw, but guests also can forage for wild blueberries and raspberries, hike on 65 kilometres of trails, mountain bike, or take to the water on canoes, paddleboards and kayaks.

Breathtaking, beautiful Milan

Italy's most underrated city has much to offer, writes ***Rick Steves***, including stylish shops and ancient art at a massive cathedral.

As we've had to postpone our travels because of the pandemic, I believe a weekly dose of travel dreaming can be good medicine. Here's a reminder of the fun that awaits us in Europe at the other end of this crisis.

They say that for every church in Rome, there's a bank in Milan. Indeed, the economic success of postwar Italy can be attributed, at least in part, to this second city of bankers, publicists and pasta power-lunchers. While overshadowed by Venice, Florence and Rome in the minds of travellers, Milan still has plenty to offer anyone who visits.

The importance of Milan is nothing new. Ancient Romans called this place Mediolanum, or "the central place." By the fourth century AD, it was the capital of the western half of the Roman Empire. After struggling through the early Middle Ages, Milan rose to prominence under the powerful Visconti and Sforza families. By the time the Renaissance hit, Leonardo had moved here and the city was called "the New Athens."

Milan's cathedral, the city's centrepiece, is the third largest

church in Europe. It's massive: 480 feet (146 metres) long and 280 feet (85 metres) wide, forested with 52 sequoia-sized pillars and populated by 2,000 statues. The place can seat 10,000 worshippers. Climbing the tight spiral stairs designed for the labourers who built the church, I emerge onto the rooftop in a forest of stony spires. Crowds pack the rooftop for great views of the city, the square, and, on clear days, the Italian Alps.

But it's the architectural details of the church that grab my attention. Marvelling at countless ornaments carved more than five centuries ago in marble — each flower, each gargoyle, each saint's face different — I realize the public was never intended to see this art. An expensive labour of love, it was meant for God's eyes only.

The cathedral sits on Piazza del Duomo, Milan's main square. It's a classic European scene. Professionals scurry, fashionista kids loiter and young thieves peruse.

The grand glass-domed arcade on the square marks the late-19th-century mall, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. Built around 1870, during the heady days of

Italian unification, it was the first building in town with electric lighting. Its art is joyful propaganda, celebrating the establishment of Italy as an independent country. Its stylish boutiques, restaurants and cafés reflect Milan's status as Italy's fashion capital.

I make the scene under those glassy domes, slowly sipping a glass of the traditional Italian liqueur, Campari, first served in the late 1800s at a bar in this very gallery. Some of Europe's hottest people-watching turns my pricey drink into a good value. While enjoying the parade, I notice some fun-loving commotion around the bull in the floor's zodiac mosaic. For good luck, locals step on the testicles of Taurus. Two girls tell me that it's even better if you twirl.

It's evening, and I see people in formal wear twirling on that poor bull. They're on their way to what is quite possibly the world's most prestigious opera house: La Scala. Like other great opera houses in Europe, La Scala makes sure that impoverished music lovers can get standing-room tickets or nosebleed seats that go on sale the day of



Crowds visit Milan's square and cathedral, which is the third largest church in Europe. Stylish and modern, the fashion capital of Italy is also an architectural delight. CAMERON HEWITT

the performance. And the La Scala Museum has an extensive collection of items that are practically objects of worship for opera devotees: original scores, busts, portraits and death masks of great composers and musicians. Imagine: Verdi's top hat, Rossini's eyeglasses, Toscanini's baton ... even Fettucini's pesto.

The next morning is the highlight of many Milan visits: Leonardo's ill-fated The Last Supper, painted right onto the refectory wall of the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Leonardo was hired to decorate the monks' dining room, and this was an appropriate scene. Suffering from Leonardo's experimental use of oil, the masterpiece began deteriorating within six years of its completion. The church was bombed in the Second World War, but — miraculously, it seems — the wall holding The Last Supper remained standing.

Today, to preserve it as much

as possible, the humidity in the room is carefully regulated — only 30 people are allowed in every 15 minutes. When it's my turn to enter, I look right, and ... there it is. In the big, white-washed room, the colours are faded, but the capture is dreamy. Leonardo commissions the psychological drama as the Lord says, "One of you will betray me," and the apostles huddle in stressed-out groups of three, wondering, "Lord, is it I?"

When my 15 minutes of viewing are up, I emerge into the vibrant, modern city with renewed appreciation for Milan: Italy's most underrated city.

This article was adapted from Rick's new book, For the Love of Europe. Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. You can email Rick at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.