



A skier celebrates at Mont Sutton, known for the wooded trails that represent 45 per cent of its skiable terrain. *BERNARD BRAULT/MONT SUTTON*

## A smoother ride for SKI HILLS

It's another strange season for snow sports, but with everyone accustomed to pandemic protocols there shouldn't be a repeat of last year's scramble

**ROCHELLE LASH**

For Quebec's 1.4 million skiers and snowboarders, the winter of 2020-21 was something of a miracle.

The province's 75 mountain operators scrambled to adopt pandemic protocols, and intrepid snow-sports fans responded with gusto, coping with masking, distancing and booting up at their cars. Turbulent times, but a triumph, all things considered.

As the work world imploded, Monday-to-Friday visits inched up by three per cent.

And when snow sports proved to be an irresistible escape from COVID captivity, the sale of season passes increased by 30 per cent, to 61 per cent of the market.

Fresh air had become a hot commodity.

The winter of 2021-22 will be even more buoyant, and it's time to get stoked. If Mother Nature co-operates, some ski areas will open at the end of November. Everything is selling like hotcakes — lift tickets, equipment and snow school slots.

"It will be smoother for everyone this season," said Jean-Michel Ryan, CEO of Mont Sutton and chair of the Association des stations de ski du Québec (ASSQ).

"Our restaurants, bars and snow schools will be active, the vaccine is having a positive impact and we now have experience with COVID



Tremblant's Activity Centre organizes a variety of off-slope adventures. *TREMBLANT*

measures," he said.

"Last year was so challenging, we did not even know if we could open. This year, our season pass sale started earlier than usual and it's brisk."

### PANDEMIC PROTOCOL

Still, there will be rules. Skiers and riders 13 and older will need vaccine passports to access lifts

and lodges, and season passes can be validated in advance at individual areas. Face coverings will be required indoors and in gondolas, and are recommended on chairlifts and during lessons.

"The passport is an operational challenge," said Yves Juneau, director of the ASSQ. "But the upside is we'll have all mountain services and lifts will run at full capaci-

ty." For updates, see the ASSQ at [mysnow.ski](http://mysnow.ski) or individual ski area websites.

"That we are succeeding during COVID-19 is astonishing," said Juneau. "It is a testament to Quebecers' love for winter sports, with remarkable accomplishments by the mountains and strong support by both federal and provincial governments."

### THE NEWS

Montrealers are blessed with about 30 downhill areas, large and small, within a 50- to 90-minute drive, if highways are traffic-free. Major investments across the board this year include enhanced snowmaking and grooming, and loads of user-friendly new features.

Après-ski will soar at Tremblant, where the village has a new look after many restaurants and boutiques were renovated or relocated. In lodging, the upscale slope-side condo-hotel Ermitage du Lac has been updated.

Tremblant was rated among the world's best ski villages by Condé Nast Traveler in 2020 and has been chosen the No. 1 ski resort in eastern North America 20 times by Ski magazine readers. The resort has steadily implemented environmentally friendly procedures, and recently was awarded a Level 3 (out of four) eco-certificate by the Conseil des industries durables for its extensive recycling, composting, carpooling, protecting natural ecosystems and optimizing hotel operations.

At Sommet St-Sauveur, you can now re-up your RFID ticket at a GoPasse self-service kiosk. The private members' chalet has been rebuilt with an upgraded locker room, repair shop and demo centre, and has added a heated outdoor terrace. And at Versant Avila, beginners can navigate the reconfigured terrain with elevations, curves and obstacles to improve balance, turning and speed control and to lay the groundwork for moguls.

After nearly a half-century of stewardship by the Robinson family, the Laurentian area of Mont Blanc has been sold to Groupe Forman of Quebec. For now, CEO Steve Fortier plans to maintain the family-friendly experience and accessible prices, and will expand summertime attractions.

In Lanaudière, Ski Montcalm near Rawdon is launching a free-style training centre for boys and girls six and older, with specialized terrain, coaches, a clubhouse and video analysis.

SEE SKI ON B2



Atop Mont-Orford, Eve Lussier-Roy removes her uphill ski skins, which prevent skis from sliding backwards on the ascent. *ALEXANDRA RACINE/MONT-ORFORD*



Tremblant is Eastern Canada's largest snow-sports mountain and biggest year-round resort area. It was rated among the world's best ski villages by Condé Nast Traveler in 2020. TREMBLANT

# SUPER SEASON IN THE MAKING

## SKI FROM BI

In the Eastern Townships, Mont-Orford is installing a new quad lift with a boarding carpet on the Alfred-Desrochers face — a welcome replacement for the vintage 1965 chair. And the snow-school slope now has rolling terrain and banks for a more elevated challenge.

Dynamic Bromont never stops growing. A snazzy new family-oriented lodge, Chalet Soleil, is opening at the learning area — an ambitious project following the gorgeous 2019 addition of the mountaintop Chalet du Sommet. Bistro-Bar La Débarque in the main base lodge has been renovated.

Mont Sutton is one of many areas adding RFID (radio-frequency-activated lift access), which can be bought online. So you can skip the ticket wicket, but there will be pickup boxes for first-time use.

Picturesque Destination Owl's Head is prized for its views of Lake Memphremagog.

This winter, all eyes will be on the three new snow parks, set up for all levels, with some jumps and obstacles seeming to soar over the water.

The Adaptive Sports Foundation (ASF), led by former Alouette Steve Charbonneau, will start its alpine ski courses in January at Owl's Head.

Further afield, ASF runs private lessons and group events at several areas throughout Quebec and is launching new Nordic ski and skating programs using customized luges. Volunteers are welcome ([sportsadaptes.ca](http://sportsadaptes.ca)).

Perhaps Quebec's biggest resort news is that Club Med will open Dec. 3 at Le Massif de Charlevoix with an all-inclusive formula.

It is Canada's first Club Med, but is not Quebec's first all-inclusive. A half-dozen Laurentian resorts pioneered vacation weeks in the early 1900s, encompassing skiing, meals, kids' excursions, après-sports cocktail parties and even packages from New York. In summer, guests enjoyed tennis, golf and lake activities.

Gray Rocks in St-Jovite was the first (1906-2009), followed by the folksy Chalet Cochand in Ste-Marguerite (1915-1967) and Greenberg's (later called Hotel Vermont and La Marquise, approximately 1912-1960s). La Sapinière in Val-David (1936-2013) and Far Hills Inn in Val-Morin (from 1940) blended gourmet cuisine and interconnected cross-country terrain.

## THE DEALS

The ASSQ paves the way for savings with its Ski Passe-Partout, a discounted ticket to all areas except Le Massif. More than 40 mountains, as well as the ASSQ, offer the Never Ever learn-to-ski-



Mont-Orford's learning area features a double-track "magic carpet" protected by a canopy. MONT-ORFORD



Bromont is one of the largest night-skiing centres in North America. BROMONT, MONTAGNE D'EXPERIENCES

or-snowboard deal, which includes lift access, rentals and group lessons for all ages.

It's well worth shopping around for weekday specials and price breaks for seniors, juniors and students. Season passes are great value, even this month, but the lowest prices appear online as early as April, sometimes with increases in mid-October.

If you love to pair travel and snow sports, Alterra's Ikon Pass is valid at Tremblant, Sugarbush in Vermont, Revelstoke Mountain Resort in B.C., Zermatt in Switzerland and more than 30 other world-class areas. The Ikon Base Pass is \$1,099 unlimited at Tremblant (for age 23 and up), with some restrictions elsewhere. The Ikon Session Four-Day Pass is \$619 (valid most areas) and the full Ikon

Pass, for all global areas, without restrictions, is \$1,429.

Here at home, Mont Blanc's Ideal Pass offers 70 ski days for \$419 (about \$6 a day), if you have the time to ski or ride that often.

The Eastern Townships' L'Est Go ticket allows you to save as much as 30 or 40 per cent at Mont-Orford, Mont Sutton, Owl's Head and Bromont, with no blackout dates, so you can hit the slopes on weekends and holidays.

Bromont's Apex Card is a money-saver, too. If you buy four or more day visits, the price comes to about \$57 a day for adults, instead of as much as \$89.

Mont Sutton's Unlimited Pass for all seasons is a great buy. The 4 x 4 for adults 18 to 35 is \$723 per person when buying four; the 2 x 2 for students (age 18 to 25) comes

to \$334 per person. Certain season passes are even more of a steal: a ped day pass is \$106; Monday or Friday passes are \$183 each.

Most areas are offering a "guaranteed season," so if you do not use your purchased pass by a certain date or if operations are interrupted, you'll likely get a refund or a rollover to next year.

## OFF-TRAIL

More people than ever are tackling exhilarating hors-piste wilderness adventures such as snowshoeing, cross-country or backcountry skiing or riding (with splitboards) and alpine touring (uphill trekking combined with downhill skiing).

These "heel-up" sports — so called because of how the boots fit onto the bindings — are a throw-



A snowboarder takes a break at Mont Sutton. "Last year was so challenging, we did not even know if we could open," says Mont Sutton CEO Jean-Michel Ryan. "This year, our season pass sale started earlier than usual and it's brisk." MATHIEU DUPUIS/ASSQ

“That we are succeeding during COVID-19 is astonishing. It is a testament to Quebecers' love for winter sports.”

back to the days before mechanical tows. And why not flash back to the past? The equipment is lighter than that of downhill, the cardio workouts are powerful and it's a lot less expensive.

For example, an alpine touring ticket costs \$10 to \$15 a day at several areas, including Mont Tremblant (it's free for Tonik Pass holders); at Sutton (there's a new alpine trail on the steeper terrain around Chairlift V, and rentals are available); and Mont-Orford, which has an impressive 22 uphill trails.

Access to Mont-St-Anne's exceptional cross-country trail system is pegged at \$28 to \$38 for a half or full day. It's one of the largest networks in North America and is home base for father-and-son Olympians Pierre and Alex Harvey.