



Hitting the extreme ice trails of Quebec

November 29 2019 / [Mark Bailey](#)

From ice-climbing frozen waterfalls to snow-biking powdery trails, Mark Bailey discovers gelid thrills delivered with French-Canadian flair



Ice climbing La Cigarette Bleu in Gaspésie, Quebec | Image: Gaspésie/TQ/Tim Banfield

[Where to find](#)

Mark Bailey was a guest of Quebec Original ([quebecoriginal.com](#); [quebec-cite.com](#)) and Destination Canada ([destinationcanada.com](#)). Air Canada ([aircanada.com](#)) flies from Heathrow to Quebec City via Montreal from £587 return. **Au Chalet en Bois Rond**, [auchaletenboisrond.com](#), from about £320 for two nights. **Auberge Saint-Antoine**, [saint-antoine.com](#), from about £235 for two nights. Contact the **Shannahan centre** ([vallebrasdunord.com](#)) for fat-biking; **Aventurex** ([aventurex.net](#)) for ice-climbing; and **Projet Vertical** ([projetvertical.com](#)) for via ferrata.

When winter spreads its icy talons across the gabled roofs and cobblestone streets of Quebec City – the elegant francophone capital of [Canada](#)'s largest province – temperatures can plummet to -18°C, snow smothers the nearby Laurentian and Appalachian mountains, and the St Lawrence River is choked with blue-hued chunks of ice. But instead of hibernating, many Quebecois pursue wild outdoor [adventures](#) that toast the muscles and chill the blood. Quebec has more recently become a beckoning blip on the radar of savvy winter adventurers enticed by its blend of rugged North American terrain and French-Canadian luxury. It's accessible at within 10 hours from [London](#), and because Quebec City is encircled by forests, canyons and monolithic peaks, all within a 45-minute drive, it's ideal for a short but attention-grabbing winter escape. I'm going armed with an intense itinerary that includes high-speed snowmobiling through pine forests, "fat-[biking](#)" over powdery trails, ice-[climbing](#) a frozen waterfall and navigating a daunting winter via ferrata – all in a three-day weekend.

Friday 13:00

It's a bleak end of week in London, but I am escaping the gloom from Heathrow for the seven-hour, 25-minute flight to Montreal, where I'll hop on the 53-minute connection to Quebec City. With the seasonal five-hour time difference, I'll be in snow-quilted Quebec by 6pm local time. Quebec City has endured over 320cm of snow recently, with temperatures plunging to -30°C, but the forecast promises a tropical -4°C to -12°C this weekend.

Friday 18:00

My connection on a Bombardier Dash 8 propeller plane offers tantalising views of a desolate snowscape. When I land in Quebec City, my driver is waiting: it's a 45-minute journey to **Au Chalet en Bois Rond**, a

collection of luxury log cabins in pristine woodland near the village of Sainte-Christine d'Auvergne. We pass houses besieged by teetering piles of snow and snowmobiles queue alongside [cars](#) at petrol stations.

Friday 21:00

By nightfall I'm ensconced by the roaring fire in my log cabin, admiring the colossal snowdrifts outside, the gloom of London an ocean away.



Mark hits the trails on a Rocky Mountain Blizzard fat-bike fitted with 4.8in tyres | Image: Gilles Morneau

Saturday 09:00

I've tried many cures for jet-lag, but can report that nothing comes close to stepping into the frigid -10°C air of a Canadian winter and piloting a Ski-Doo Expedition Sport 600 through a maze of pine trees. There are 1,864km of snowmobile trails in the Portneuf, Quebec and Charlevoix region, which is why my guide, Mylène Robitaille, happily travels everywhere by snowmobile over winter.

I slice along the trails, which weave maniacally through forests of black spruce, jack pine, balsam fir and larch. My snowmobile seems to float above the ground, although I know the toothed traction belt is biting into the snow below. I follow Mylène's pink jacket and dancing ponytail into open meadows where we hit speeds of 50kph, but it feels infinitely faster when the ground is shifting beneath you. To spend the morning tearing through the monochrome terrain I had observed from the plane is exhilarating.

Crashes are so routine here that the nearby **Hôtel de Glace** – an ice [hotel](#) made from 30,000 tonnes of snow and 500 tonnes of ice – serves a dedicated Accident de Ski-Doo cocktail made from gin, spruce beer, melon liqueur and blood-red grenadine, topped with pine needles. Predictably enough, at one hairpin bend I enjoy my own slow-motion encounter with a pine tree, but we carry on past platinum-coloured rivers until the foothills of the Laurentians loom pale and graceful on the horizon. I'm appalled when another snowmobile driver roars past and raises two fingers, until Mylène explains it's standard etiquette to signal how many drivers are following (in this case, two) to warn you of traffic along the narrow trails.

Saturday 14:00

After a lunch of salmon tartare and blond ales at **Roquemont**, a gourmet [restaurant](#) and microbrewery at Saint-Raymond, I join my cycling guide Gilles Morneau in the **Vallée Bras-du-Nord**, where 100km of groomed trails weave through secluded maple-tree forests. The snow levels are extreme so I've hired a Rocky Mountain Blizzard fat-bike fitted with chunky 4.8in tyres.

Departing the isolated **Shannahan** sector hut, we cross a suspension bridge above the frozen Bras-du-Nord river before hitting the trails. It's remarkably tough but rewarding going – on sharp bends my wheels dance sideways, and on steep climbs I have to load my weight over the back tyre to prevent it slipping, but still the bike doggedly blasts through the snow. At intervals I have to duck abruptly to dodge the thick tubes hanging overhead, which collect the sugary sap from the maple trees: Quebec produces 70 per cent of the world's maple syrup supplies. Our expedition ends at the Delaney waterfall, which the winter air has solidified into a glistening curtain of solid ice.

Sunday 13:00

An interlude in Quebec City, where I check into the boutique **Auberge Saint-Antoine**, a cosy haven featuring flickering fireplaces and museum-worthy artefacts – discovered on site by archaeologists during the hotel's construction – in each suite.

Sunday 14:30

After a 30-minute taxi ride to the snow-framed **Montmorency Falls** – at 84m, it's higher than Niagara Falls – I shake the gnarled hand of my ice-climbing instructor, François-Guy Thivierge. It's reassuring to know that the man fixing crampons to my boots has scaled the highest mountains on the earth's seven continents.

The main waterfall is too potent to freeze completely, so I'll be ice-climbing a sparkling chute nearby. With my feet transformed into bristling hedgehogs, François-Guy advises me to deploy one hack of my ice axe for every two stabs with my feet. Kicking and hacking, I start inching up the frozen waterfall. It's physically gruelling and psychologically terrifying – at 15m, the ice morphs from pearly white to translucent crystal and I feel as though every swing of my axe will shatter the wall into infinite shards, like a broken chandelier. I am clinging to a glazed vertical wall of ice, but my crampons hold me up. After two final, exhausting kicks, I breathe deeply and soak up the vast winter panorama from my 30m-tall frozen citadel.

Sunday 17:15

The climb has left me with acutely aching biceps and bruised, throbbing shins, so I relax in the outdoor thermal infinity pools of **Strøm Spa Nordique**, on the snow-swamped banks of the St Lawrence River; with the adventures so close to Quebec City, it's easy to add on a few such restorative dashes of luxury. I hop between soothing pools, enduring stabs of cold every time I emerge into the gelid air, and watch the amber lights of boats on the icy river through clouds of steam as the winter day melts into an electric-pink sunset.



A convoy of Ski-Doo Expedition Sport 600s | Image: Tourisme Quebec/Mathieu Dupuis

Sunday 20:00

Following a dinner of venison striploin with braised endives, sea buckthorn jam and Taliah cheese at Auberge Saint-Antoine's chic **Chez Muffy restaurant**, I fall instantly, deeply asleep in front my room's glowing fireplace.

Monday 08:50

There's time for one last adventure before flying back. After a 45-minute drive to the vertiginous **Canyon Sainte-Anne**, I meet my climbing guides Sébastien Fortier and Dario Gravel Leduc to take on the daunting winter via ferrata. The location – a riot of dramatic crags covered in thick duvets of snow – is stunning. Soon after clipping my carabiner onto the chain of iron rails that weaves across the cliffs, I'm clambering over chiselled steps, shuffling along narrow sleepers and tiptoeing over wire bridges. Every synapse is blinking on red alert; with very slippery holds and exposure of over 60m in places, each footstep delivers a surge of exhilaration cut with fear. It's an electrifying way to kickstart the week, considering that normally I feel virtuous if I climb the stairs at work on a Monday morning.

Monday 16:55

I sit back on Air Canada's 16.55 to Montreal, then take the overnight flight to Heathrow, which lands me nicely in London at 6:30 am. I am back at my desk by start of work on Tuesday – with bruises on my legs, cheeks frost-burnt as red as the maple leaf on the Canadian flag, and an enviable catalogue of answers to the question: "So what did you do this weekend?"

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