

## Embracing the cold in Quebec City

Thousands gather to celebrate winter at annual carnival

By Melody Wren

**QUEBEC CITY** — A delicate snow is falling, a ferris wheel is spinning, visitors are zip lining above the Plains of Abraham and teams of competitors have begun carving enormous blocks of snow into intricate sculptures. The opening celebrations of the 57<sup>th</sup> edition of the Québec Winter Carnival are underway and thousands are on hand to be part of the event.

"As long as it's winter, let's enjoy it," says Patrick Lemaire, public relations manager for the annual event, which seems to get the entire city into a festive mood and sees throngs of people celebrating on the streets.

Wherever you look during this annual event, there are postcard views. Crowds line the Rue Saint-Louis to see dogsled races. Ice sculptures stand at the entrances of many restaurants, cafes and hotels. Christmas decorations still abound and fur hats, fur coats and fashionable but warm boots are de rigueur for the locals.

On the Plains of Abraham, a field high above the St. Lawrence River and just west of the downtown core, you'll find one of three main carnival sites. It's a place where you are encouraged to exercise your way out of the winter blues. Snowshoeing, ice and snow slides, sleigh rides, snow rafting, zip lining and skating are all on offer. There's also giant table soccer game.

You can go on a snowshoe trek accompanied by "Amedee Four-nier," an official of the city's original snowshoe club, formed in 1883. Playing the part of Amedee and dressed in period costume is Luc Nicole-Labrie, an employee of the National Battlefield Commission in Quebec City.

He explains the history and evolution of his snowshoes, a kind that have been made for more than 120 years members of the Wendake First Nations community in their village just outside the city. They make traditional snowshoes of ash, but also a modern aluminum snowshoes.

Your ticket to join any of more than 300 carnival events and activities is a tiny plastic effigy of Bonhomme, the symbol of the event. These are sold for \$12 at hundreds of local stores. The Ice Palace that is the "home" of carnival mascot Bonhomme was built in one month by an 83-year-old Quebec City resident who has been doing it now for 53 years. It's made with 6,000 blocks of processed ice.

Many revellers carry large red plastic canes that are filled with "Caribou," a combination of coarse red wine, brandy, and spices that's sold at a bar made of ice, what else.



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Two competitors from Germany participate in the 2011 Quebec Winter Carnival international snow sculpture competition earlier this month.

"Everyone in Québec has a horror story about Caribou," quips Kevin Quinn, owner of La Nouvelle France Resto Bar.

Outdoor food stalls sell snacks: poutine, beavertails and huge European-style hotdogs.

Tents with indoor fires and seating offer delicious paninis and cheese platters featuring local cheeses.

One of the guides with the Québec Board of Tourism advises that the best place to get poutine in Québec City is Chez Ashton, a chain launched in 1969 that now has 75 locations throughout the city.

Go into Old Québec to find restaurants with traditional Québécois fare. Many have menus heavy on a game theme, serving pheasant, bison, venison, and wapiti (elk).

The carnival events draw an estimated 750,000 visitors over two weeks. This year's event opened Jan. 28 and wraps up Feb. 13. A team of 1,500 volunteers works to insure the many programs are run efficiently. At the helm is general manager Jean Pellepler, who was a volunteer himself for 10 years.

It's no surprise that the Québec City region was recently named the best cultural and exploration destination in a poll of travellers who consulted the TripAdvisor website.

And I learned myself that as long as you are dressed properly and adopt the right attitude, you can have a lot of fun outdoors in the winter cold.

Melody Wren is a Guelph travel writer. Her visit to Quebec City was sponsored by the Québec Board of Tourism and Carnaval de Québec.



JACQUES BOISSINOT, THE CANADIAN PRESS

Musher Olivier Pellerin, of St-Elie-de-Caxton, Que., races his team of dogs during a sled race at the 2011 Quebec Winter Carnival.

### If you go . . .

#### Quebec Winter Carnival

• **Information:** 1-866-422-7628 or online at [www.carnaval.qc.ca](http://www.carnaval.qc.ca) This year's carnival wraps up on Sunday, Feb. 13.

#### Other sights

• **Montmorency Falls:** It's 30 metres higher than Niagara Falls, but not as wide. A cable car takes you to the top, where you can walk across an enormous suspension bridge to the other side (I said no thank you), toboggan down the hill or continue to climb steeper hills.

• **Wendake Reserve:** Located 20 minutes by car outside of Quebec City, the reserve is definitely worth a visit. Walk about the village of 3,000 to see a selection of stores, a school, a church. If you are looking for traditional handmade moccasins for snowshoeing, this is the place to go. The Hotel - Musée Premières Nations was built to resemble a Long House and includes a museum, a restaurant and a hotel.

• **Le Manoir du Lac Delage:** The town of Lac Delage is a mere 20-minute drive from Quebec City and the resort located here ([www.lacdelage.com](http://www.lacdelage.com)) is an idyllic place for snowshoeing.

• **Nordic Spa:** Le Nordique Spa & Detente ([www.lenordique.com](http://www.lenordique.com)) is on the banks of the Jacques Cartier River and the place to unwind after spending time at the carnival.

#### Dining

Delicious food can be found every corner in Quebec City, but here are a few suggestions:

• **Le Feu Sacre:** 68 1/2 Rue Saint-Louis, Vieux-Quebec (1-418-694-9022 or [www.feusacre.com](http://www.feusacre.com)). Delightful ambience and incredibly yummy fare, including local game.

• **Anciens Canadiens Restaurant:** 34 rue Saint-Louis, Quebec (1-418-692-1627 or [www.auxancienscanadiens.qc.ca](http://www.auxancienscanadiens.qc.ca))

A cosy, low-ceiling restaurant with lace-trimmed windows, gingham table cloths and an extensive menu heavy on a game theme including Bison, pheasant, a three tenderloin dish includes stag, bison and wapiti (elk). Be sure to make reservations.

• **La Nouvelle France Resto Bar:** 8 Rue du Tresor, Quebec (418-692-3125). An ice bar located in a building commissioned by Samuel de Champlain for the first local midwife in the 1640s.

• **Le Veau d'Or:** 801 Rue St-Jean, Quebec (418-525-7371). This charming Italian restaurant has a cosy, old world bistro feel. And the prices are hard to beat.

• **La Fudgerie Boutique:** 16 rue du Cul-de-Sac, Quartier du Petit Champlain, Quebec. The best hot chocolate in the city was kicked up a notch with red chili peppers.

## Medieval Andorra fortress now holds a luxury country inn

By John Borden

What's it like to live in a far-off place most of us see only on a vacation?

Jaume Tapies is president of Relais & Chateaux, a global consortium of historic/luxury lodgings and gourmet restaurants ([www.relaischateaux.com](http://www.relaischateaux.com)). He operates and lives in El Castell de Ciutat in Andorra, a 466-square-kilometre micro-country in the Pyrenees Mountains.

**Q.** You're originally from Andorra?  
**A.** Yes, I was born in my parents' hotel in the town of La Seu d'Urgell. They and my grandfather managed to buy the castle in 1970. After we sold the old hotel, we turned the castle into a beautiful place. I now live there with my family. El Castell de Ciutat means "Castle of the City."

**Q.** Is it really an old castle?  
**A.** Yes. The oldest part was built in 832 AD and was owned by the Count of Urgell. This was just after the Muslims were pushed out from the south of France. It was enlarged at the time when Louis XIV was king of France, by Vauban, the famous French fortification engineer, and renovated for protection. It was a military base until my father bought it.

From the outside, it looks like a fortress. The oldest part is at its top, and is untouchable. It is protected as a historic building, so it won't be changed. We have a concert hall in it.

**Q.** Does it cost a lot to stay there?  
**A.** It's from \$225 US per night. Relais & Chateaux properties are mainly historical and include all types of lodgings — castles, manors, small country inns and even city hotels.



PHILIPPE SCHAFF, MCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

Jaume Tapies owns, operates and lives in the El Castell de Ciutat hotel (Castle of the City) in Andorra, a micro-country between France and Spain in the Pyrenees Mountains.

**Q.** What do you see when you look out the windows?

**A.** We're in the middle of the mountain range — surrounded by them, with peaks of up to 9,000 feet. Below, you see a beautiful valley with rivers and cows. In front of the hotel-castle is a river. . . My family's former hotel is in the town's centre. The town has a population of 12,000.

**Q.** How do people get to Andorra?  
**A.** By car or bus. There are good road connections to Toulouse, France or Barcelona, Spain.

Both are about a two-hour drive. . . The nearest train station is about an hour away, in Puigcerda, Spain.

**Q.** I've read that Andorra attracts wealthy people.

**A.** After the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), we worked to keep Andorra independent and build a real economy. There's no army, so there are no big expenses. Taxes aren't high — enough to run the country. Tourism drives the economy. Andorra gets about 12 million visitors per year.

We have developed enormous mountain

resorts. There's walking and cycling in summer, skiing in winter. Because the taxes are low, people like shopping here. There's a beautiful shopping centre that's open late at night.

**Q.** Do Andorrans speak French with a Spanish accent . . . or Spanish with a French accent?

**A.** We speak Catalan, a completely different language that's over 1,000 years old. You can hear it spoken in southern France, Andorra and in Catalonia, the region around Barcelona. Seven million people speak Catalan, and it has a culture of its own. . .

In terms of language, it's like when a Spaniard speaks to a Frenchman or Italian; there are some words that are similar, but you wouldn't understand it fully for quite a while.

**Q.** The historic saga *The Song of Roland* — about the heroic knight who died saving Charlemagne from an ambush — is set in the Pyrenees. Is the pass of Roncesvalles near Andorra?

**A.** We're about 250 kilometres from Roncesvalles, but there are mountains in between. From Andorra to Roncesvalles takes 30 minutes by air, and there are few things you can do in the Pyrenees that are as nice. You see all these little valleys below you.

By the way, Hannibal passed through our valley when the Carthaginians and their elephants attacked ancient Rome.

**Q.** What's the best time of year to visit?  
**A.** I personally like May, because there's an explosion of green in the mountains, and water running down the slopes from everywhere. It's a beautiful time to come.