

Bob Cox: Skiing with a French accent in beautiful Quebec

By Bob Cox, bcskis@aol.com

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QUEBEC, Canada — When the cross-country, cross-border ski trip began three days earlier, the temperatures were preceded by a minus figure and airline travel was disrupted by exceedingly cold weather in the eastern portions of North America.

But weather is by definition fickle, and the temperature had risen enough that precipitation fell overnight in its most liquid form, and the morning started with a gloomy prospect of rain rather than snow.

In the gondola room at Mont Sainte Anne, however, the hosts were smiling and offering visitors free cups of coffee and hot chocolate for the ride up the mountain. The warm and hospitable gesture was followed by the sun emerging within the hour, and a great day of skiing unfolded.

Our group was visiting the 400-year-old walled city of Quebec to sample the ski areas of Le Massif, Stoneham and Mont Sainte Anne. Each one is located less than an hour's drive from the city. Each is unique in its own way, but all are enjoying a banner season. Unlike the west coast, the eastern resorts of Canada and the U.S. are benefitting from a strong snow year.

Any ski trip that involves leaving the state of California and flying over Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho clearly is more than just a ski trip. If you are of the persuasion to seek out new adventures on and off the slopes you'll want to consider a trip like this somewhere in your skiing career.

This is as much about a visit to another culture, to a region where English is a secondary language. Your attempts to remember high school French are appreciated and where the tourism industry welcomes you with a smile. Granted, that was not always the case. A quarter century ago, when there was an active move to make French the only language of the province, those speaking English did not feel so welcome. But now the warmth of the people and the hospitality have resulted in a thriving tourism industry.

This trip, like my other visits to this area, began with a stay at the storied Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City. Renowned as the most photographed hotel in the world, the Frontenac is a destination on its own and worthy of more time than we were able to dedicate on this trip. The architecture is from another area, but the rooms have been upgraded and this is a great base for your visit.

The newest hotel in the region is the Le Ferme in an area called Charlevoix. This is a destination where design and efficiency are prime. It also offers a variety of lodging options from luxury traditional rooms to bunk rooms (hostel style) for individuals doing a ski trip on a budget. This is owned by the company that owns Le Massif, and the hotel and ski area are connected by a ski train. It takes 40 minutes, but the train is a great option to driving, which takes half as much time.

We visited three ski areas, each located an easy drive from the city of Quebec, although each would love you to plant your suitcase and stay at that particular mountain. Many consider a visit to Quebec similar to one to Salt Lake, where staying in the city offers the chance to visit multiple venues. Granted, these are not mountains on the scope of the Rockies, but like the day beginning with the warming cup of coffee or cocoa at the gondola there are pleasant discoveries at all three.

Because these ski stations rise out of communities that grew up along the edge of the St. Lawrence Seaway, elevations are strikingly lower than skiers of the Sierras or Rockies are accustomed to. The peaks of each range from 2,000 to 2,600 feet, but the vertical drops are impressive and challenge enough for most skiers and riders. The overall size of each one is impressive by eastern standards, but the acreage pales in comparison to the giant resorts we ski in the west.

Mont Sainte Anne is perhaps the most recognizable of the three and the most developed. Easterners are used to trail-skiing, and many of those at this ski area include excellent views of the river. The peak is 2,625 feet and the vertical is 2,050, spread over 465 skiable acres.

Le Massif has the longest and steepest runs and arguably the best views on a clear day. Because of the warm and wet weather on our day there, we did not get to appreciate the feeling of nearly skiing down to the St. Lawrence. Le Massif tops out at 2,645 feet with a remarkable 2,526-foot vertical, spread over 401 acres.

Stoneham is the smallest of the three but the closest to the city. Reachable in 20 minutes, this is a great location for those short on time. Stoneham's peak is 2,075 feet with a vertical of 1,380 feet and 326 skiable acres.

Snowmaking keeps all three areas in the game for the full winter, although this year it was as much an insurance policy as a necessity.

This was a skiing trip not so much about skiing in a region where ambiance and leisurely dinners offered up by celebrated chefs are the norm, not the exception. The skiing was excellent and the snow surface was a pleasant surprise. But a trip to Quebec is about skiing and more.

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