

Tranquility In Mont-Tremblant

The beating heart of the Laurentian Mountains offers diverse skiing, irresistible charm and a mountain of great food

By Doug Wallace



I'm at the top of the lookout tower of Sentier des cimes Laurentides, a treetop observatory overlooking the hills of the Laurentian Mountains, about 90 minutes north of Montreal. My view of the countryside is dizzying – as is the giant, suspended net covering the centre of the tower. We're 40 metres up, and I have to hold my breath to walk across it. "I can see the ski hill from here," I blurt out, then dial it back with, "but it looks kind of small."

What I'm actually looking at is the Mont-Blanc ski hill, not Mont-Tremblant, the fabled resort and town that are farther down the road, and our intended target. We arrive there as it is approaching dark, yet can clearly see that this four-season paradise is much bigger – evidently, with more than 300 hectares of 100 ski trails across four mountains. I can't wait.

After unpacking our skates and skiwear at the Fairmont Tremblant, and being kitted out with gear for the next few days, we ease into the après-ski scene. And what a scene: skiers bunch around gas firepits, wrapped in fuzzy blankets with glasses of champagne in hand, celebrating the fact they've had a little exercise. I spy expensive sportswear. There's a glass dome filled with more of the same. We edge to the hotel's new outdoor pool terraces and sink down up to our toques in 38°C water. This is all a precursor, an amuse-bouche before the delicious Choux Gras Brasserie experience that awaits us inside. I get lost for several minutes salivating over the menu, but there's no rush.

Mont-Tremblant is no stranger to hospitality, having had years of practice – and this is one of the main reasons that it feels like home. The first ski lift started sending people up the mountainside in 1939,

and today, it is consistently named one of the top ski resorts in the North American East by all the right magazines. The region's popularity began in the 1960s, and continued to boom through the 1980s. Homes now range from \$200,000 to \$9 million, a mélange of condos, townhouses, cottages, log homes and mansions.

The European-style pedestrian village was built in 1991, with new buildings woven around the old. Taken together, the colourful roofs house almost 2,000 rooms in more than a dozen lodges, along with more than 75 restaurants, plus boutiques and sundry shops, even a casino. When they're not skiing, visitors can go skating and cross-country skiing, fat biking and e-fatbiking, ice climbing and ice fishing. Summer is busy with golf, cycling and hiking, lots of paddling and sailing, music festivals and Ironman competitions (woof!).

The crowd is a mixed bag. We're told that about half hail from Montreal and Ottawa, with the rest a soupçon of Ontarians, Europeans and Americans. Eavesdropping on the gondola rides becomes a sport all its own, and the fashion sense – and lack of it – makes for prime people-watching. I read somewhere that famous visitors include Céline Dion, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Michael Douglas, a Saudi prince and the Bronfman family. I wonder out loud if they know each other and have a WhatsApp group.

Tucking into the terrain – and the gastronomy

I like ski hills that don't take a whole day to figure out. A couple of things give Tremblant an easy edge: the base is focused squarely on the one gondola lift, supported by a multitude of high-speed chair lifts. For those arriving by car, a sub-gondola ferries people and all



Fairmont Tremblant





their stuff from the parking lot to the base of the hill. The other simplicity is that the top of the hill is, well, the only top – and the only way is down. The big bonus here is that you can ski down both the south and north sides of the mountain, which opens you up to a wide variety of terrain. Most of the single black diamond and blue runs are groomed. And while this is not totally a beginner mountain, the green runs are plentiful and the longest of the lot. We get a variety of blues and greens going, easily switching from south to north faces, with the maps and app (and the yellow-clad info people) making it easy to navigate the day.

I'm always eager to get going early, taking advantage of the pristine grooming before the crowds start to carve it up. That way, if I want

to leave lunch until 1 or 2 p.m., I can maybe knock off then. Because when we're not skiing or skating or lolling about in hot tubs, we're eating.

As the big lodge at the top of the mountain is rather chaotic and overpriced, the real value can be found in the village restaurants – most are a fairly easy walk from the gondola. Many have small storefronts that belie the expanse you find inside. These include A Mano Trattoria, where a traditional Italian open kitchen throws together fresh pastas and handmade pizzas, all washed down with a decent wine list. After the cheesecake, one of the dozen grappas by the glass can finish things off.

Raclette- and fondue-lovers head to the chalet-styled La Savoie, which has been offering a Swiss-tinged French food experience for 30 years.



Scandinave Spa Mont-Tremblant



We boil scallops, shrimp and vegetables in a pot of broth that sits on a burner right on the table. A side dish of melted cheese is quickly sopped up with potatoes and bread. I lose count of the sauces we have to choose from or which mouthful they're meant for. We skip the chocolate fondue, but it looks incredible.



The food, of course, fuels the ski furnace, which provides us with an excuse for guilt-free meals. On our last morning, the temps have risen and a thick fog settles in. Hoping that the sun will burn it off, we delay our trip up the hill, settling into seats among the wood panelling at La Maison de la Crêpe. A sausage, cheddar and poached apple crêpe covered with béchamel fortifies in a manner that will definitely preclude lunch.

Later, I am glad to have the sustenance, as the visibility on the hills causes us to brace our way down, going slow, making frequent stops to scrape the ice off our goggles. It's better in the lower slopes, so we stick mainly to those. We're goggle-less at the end of the day, yet still intrepid, our faces now numb to the ice.

Happily, the brain freeze abates down the road in the Nordic baths at ScandinaVe Spa. We follow the traditional thermal cycle: 15 minutes of hot water, a few seconds of cold, and 15 minutes of rest. The rule of absolute silence is awkward to follow at first, but we manage, moving from wood-fired sauna to cold waterfalls to hot pools to steam rooms. Little rest areas with heat lamps and loungers are set up to face the woods. I almost fall asleep staring into a fire pit, my bare ankles wrapped in faux-fur comfort.

The experience is the best punctuation mark – a few days of exercise with plenty of R&R, raclette and recovery. The Norse may have invented skiing, but the Québécois have clearly perfected it.