

BACKCOUNTRY

Quebec offers it all: from nude beaches to northern lights

DAVID YATES
FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

It was early September a couple of years ago, and a few friends and I were sitting around a campfire beside Taylor Lake in Gatineau Park when it happened. By chance, I looked up to see a spectacular display of northern lights sweeping across the sky.

Conversation came to an stop as we paused to take in the splendour of the moment.

It's one of many highlights that I have collected in several decades of exploring the Quebec bush, from canoeing the whitewater of the Dumoine River, to paddling a kayak among the screeching whales that make their home in the starkly beautiful Mingan Islands on the north side of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Quebec's wilderness — including its many parks and wildlife reserves — should not be missed.

These places and events are ones that I have enjoyed — and I'm only scratching the surface of what's available in the province. (The Route Verte, with more than 4,000 kilometres of bicycle trails, for example, has been judged the No. 1 cycling network in the world by a recent National Geographic publication.)

Dumoine River

One of the treats of this river, which tumbles over the Canadian Shield, is flying by bush plane with your canoe strapped to a pontoon from Des Joachims on the Ottawa River to one of the lakes where you start the journey. There is relaxed flatwater paddling on the lakes formed by the river, and you'll get adrenaline rushes plunging through the rapids. Some of the latter may be a bit too rough — you'll know when hear the roar of the rapids and spot the well-trodden portage paths around them.

For information on flights, go to [airswisha.com](#). Black Feather ([blackfeather.com](#)) organizes trips for individuals, groups and families.

Gatineau Park

This park, one of Quebec's best-kept secrets, is an incredible playground for the people of Ottawa and Gatineau. And it's only 2 1/2 hours from Montreal. With 90 kilometres of bike trails and 200 kilometres of cross-country ski trails, there are activities year-round. The park has a large area for car camping in the summer, but reservations are advised. Call the visitor centre at 1-800-465-1867.

The Lusk caves is a good spot for exploration, especially for children. Climbers practise their techniques on the Eardley Escarpment, which rises high above the Ottawa River. And there's even a nude beach near the prime minister's official country getaway on Lake Harrington. Oh, those naughty functionaries.

Papineau-Labelle Wildlife Reserve

This magnificent park of 1,600 square kilometres, north of Montebello, comprising a huge swath of mountains with 763 lakes, is about two hours from Montreal. It is a paradise for hunting and fishing. Forty cabins are available for rent, all of them on the edge of lakes, as are the seven campgrounds, of which two are accessible by car.

This is the land of the great patriot Louis-Joseph Papineau and cure Antoine Labelle of St. Jerome, who was instrumental in the early development of the



David Yates, Canwest News Service
Sandstone formations on Ile Niapiskau in Mingan Islands.

Laurentians. You can visit the Papineau seigneurie house beside the Chateau Montebello on the Ottawa River.

For information and reservations, go to [sepaq.com](#).

P'tit Train du Nord

This former railroad line has been converted into a cycling path (cross-country ski trail in winter) that runs north through the Laurentians for 200 kilometres from St. Jerome to Mont Laurier. It is a well equipped path with bike shops, bistros and bed-and-breakfast stops for bikers and hikers.

Oka Park

The park on Lake of Two Mountains is the closest campground to Montreal, and it is a busy spot. It is well served by bike paths that become crowded with families on the weekend. The camping areas are close to the lake, with its canoeing, kayaking and swimming. My son and I like the 7.5-kilometre mountain bike trail on the peak. It's a crazy trail with steep climbs and drops.

There is also a hiking path with stations of the cross built during the French regime to convert the local aboriginals who had been pushed off the Island of Montreal. Be prepared for a good climb and take bug repellent.

More information is available at 1-800-665-6527 or [bonjourquebec.com](#).

Riverside Path

This may well be the jewel of the 4,000-kilometre Route Verte cycling network, which was inaugurated last year and received immediate accolades from cycling organizations in Europe, the United States and

the rest of Canada. The path, a short distance from the Lachine Canal bike path (the busiest in Canada), runs alongside the broad and magnificent St. Lawrence River. It snakes past the raging Lachine Rapids within sight of the Montreal skyline to Rene Levesque Park and its collection of statues in Lachine. If you head west, the path will take you to Ste. Anne de Bellevue and along the Soulanges Canal to the Ontario border. If you go north-east, you will cross to Nuns' Island, the South Shore and eventually the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula.

With its recognition by National Geographic, the Route Verte is destined to become one of the world's premier attractions for cyclists.

Mingan Islands

A two-day drive from Montreal along the north side of the St. Lawrence River, this national park is a very special place. We put our kayaks into the Gulf of St. Lawrence at Mingan, and a few minutes later we heard the calls of the whales. The water is teeming with them, and they came within a few feet of our craft.

Wildlife is abundant with the Atlantic puffin being a celebrated resident. There are 35,000 couples nesting on three islands, which may be closed to visitors while the birds are raising their young.

There is good camping on several islands, and if you feel hesitant about heading out into the ocean swells on your own, then you can call on the services of Expeditions Agaguk and its 13 years of experience guiding kayakers.

You can contact the company at 1-866-538-1588 or go to [expedition-agaguk.com](#).

TRAVEL SAVVY

In the know before you go

Guide to parking at Calgary International Airport



YVONNE JEFFERY

Whether you're travelling yourself or playing chauffeur for someone who's winging their way through the skies, your options for parking at Calgary International Airport are expanding. You just need to choose how close to the airport you want to be, what services you want and what you're willing to spend.

With more than 12 million passengers travelling through our airport last year — a million passenger jump from the year before — there's no doubt that the squeeze is on, especially during peak travel times. But the good news is that we now have more spaces available, for both on- and off-airport parking.

"We've just recently opened our weekly discount parking lot, which is about a five-minute walk to the terminal building and very easily accessible by vehicle," says Jody Moseley, manager of corporate communications for the Calgary Airport Authority.

The lot, on the north side of the terminal building, runs a competitive \$84 per week — but it's not the only new option to watch for. The airport authority is working on a "cell-phone" lot — think of it as a holding pattern, where you can hang out until you get a call

from the person you're meeting at the airport, letting you know they're ready for pickup.

At that point, you can swing into the arrivals lanes, where designated pickup areas are marked.

Moseley adds that they're also in the design stage of a parkade that will add another 1,900 parking stalls in 2009.

"We park everyone here," she notes. "There have been times when it's been busy, but there are a lot of options, from premium parking right next to the terminal to options for people staying a longer time."

And, of course, don't forget that your first 30 minutes are free if you're in the airport's main parkade. You can also call ahead to find out which lots are busy or full.

Off-airport parking options have also expanded, with the addition of Park 2 Go, a valet parking service north of Airport Trail.

"People are greeted by our ambassadors, and that's all they have to worry about," says general manager George Garcia. "It's a very fast check-in, and they're whisked away to the airport within nine minutes."

He adds that Park 2 Go is the only off-airport site offering valet service. "If it's in the wintertime, the vehicle is warmed up for them, and if it's in the summertime, it's cooled off," he explains. "People can't say enough about the service levels that we provide."

You can book your space by phone before you even leave for the airport, or online at either company's website or at [westjet.com](#).



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