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REMEMBER TO SAY CHEESE

The wonders of Abitibi
Temiscaminque

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11 AUG 2014: Think about it. You cheerfully suggest that people 'say cheese' before they have their photograph taken - and it works! It immediately elicits smiles that run the gamut. Genuine, cynical, patronizing, impatient, devilish or clowning, in order to show off the "I'm happy" face.



And now picture in your mind, a destination that embodies the ‘say cheese’ ethic with eyes that glint with glee, and warm welcome smiles. You must have just arrived in Quebec’s Abitibi-Témiscamingue region!

On the topic of saying cheese, literally, a visit to La Fromage Au Village in Lorrainville is a wonderful way to set your client’s vacation/staycation/playcation off on the right foot.

Hélène Lessard and her husband Christian Barrette began making artisanal cheeses in 1996. When you enter their shop, Hélène’s face glows as she talks about her products. Her eyes sparkle as she explains how the cheeses are made, and with an exuberant smile that can’t help but make you feel happy, she enthusiastically offers samples of cheese curds, Angelus (a creamy cheese in a delicate rind), Cru de Clocher (a delicious aged cheddar) and La Cendré, which has a fine layer of ash inside the cheese. Hot smoking ash was originally used to keep away mosquitoes during

the cheese making process and then evolved into a unique and tasty addition to the cheese itself.

It turned out that H el ene's positivity was typical not only of the people we met during our five days in the region, but also of the bounties that the region offers to visitors looking for something different.

Our homage to fromage took place on the second day of our trip, but the first day had already established the proper mood for our adventure.

After driving from Toronto to North Bay, we turned right onto Highway 63 toward T emiscamingue (spelled Temiskaming in Ontario). Tamara, a member of the Wolf Lake First Nation greeted us and brought us to the Opemican Park Lodge by Lake Kipawa for a specially prepared lunch of fresh Pickerel and chips. Then with Jonathan the Lodge Manager in the stern of a large motorized canoe, we set off across the Lake for Canal Bay, a tranquil narrow channel between colourful and dramatic rocky cliffs where trees cling by their roots above the gentle lapping waters. After our 400 kilometre drive, this idyllic scene was the rest that we needed.

Later, we met our host from Tourisme Abitibi-T emiscamingue, Anne-Marie Belzile, and headed up Highway 101 to explore La Grand Chute. We followed a forested path toward the roar of the raging torrent. Talk about nature's drama. A platform allows for spectacular photos and videos of the wild waters. We spent that evening at La Bannik in Duhamel-Ouest, a resort that rents fully furnished chalets, each with an outdoor sauna, as well as small cottages, and offers dinner overlooking the lake.

The following days consisted of one highlight after another. Now I've had my fair share of Forts in my lifetime but Fort Témiscamingue is one of the best. Our guide, Angela walked us through the museum with its excellent displays of the history of the fort and the fur trade dating back to 1686. We then toured the property to see life-size statues of French traders, First Nations people and local shopkeepers that told the story of those whose livelihood depended on the Fort. A visit to the mysterious Enchanted Forest held us in awe as Angela related the legend of a girl and her magic flute to explain why the trees appear to be swaying and dancing. You've got to see it to believe it.

At the Verger des Touterelles we wandered through the orchard where red and black currants, elderberries, blackberries, gooseberries, rhubarb and apples are grown to make delicious sweet liqueurs, and after the appropriate number of samples, we continued on to enjoy lunch in Ville Marie, voted by La Presse in 2012 to be the most beautiful village in Quebec.

In the afternoon we drove another ninety minutes to the city of Rouyn-Noranda and with the emphasis on the city's history, resource reclamation and nature preservation, we rode our free city bicycles along the 8 km path that circles Osisko Lake. While we weren't exactly breathless when we finished, we still felt that a reward was in order so we sampled some of the craft beers at Le Trèfle Noir, before indulging in an amazing dinner at Bistro Jazz (named after chef Jézabel Pilote) that included beef and bison tartare and delicately prepared Lamb and Duck. Absolutely delicious.

Our third day took on more adventure as we

explored, hiked and canoed in Parc National d'Aiguebelle. With park rangers leading the way, our first 90-minute hike took us to a lookout high above the 'fractured river', just past the 3.7 billion year old rock, after which we descended on a metal spiral staircase to wander along a river path. The scenery was stunning, as you can imagine. A second uphill walk took us to the old Fire Tower for a spectacular view of the park above the tree tops, and a third walk brought us to the suspension bridge over La Haie Lake, complete with more awesome scenery both from the centre of the swaying bridge and afterward, when we canoed under the bridge. That evening, in the town of Amos, we joined hundreds of locals and tourists at the H2O Festival to enjoy the French Canadian folk and rock tunes of the local group, Les Cowboys Fringants (The Frisky Cowboys).

The highlight of our last day of touring was a visit to Le Refuge Pageau, founded by Michel and Louise Pageau to shelter orphaned, lost and injured animals. Our guide, Marie-Frédérique introduced us to the personal stories of wolves, coyotes, owls and other raptors, moose, deer, skunks, rabbits and an otter. We fed treats to Chewy, the porcupine and then when Marie-Frédérique entered the enclosure of Baluchon the marmot, he started to act like a rambunctious puppy dog, obviously overjoyed to see her. Nearby, some young wolves timidly hid from us as we walked by their pen, but when Nathalie Pageau arrived, they whined and squealed with happiness at the prospect of spending play time with her. The Pageau Family have a remarkable relationship with all the animals, and signs throughout the refuge help visitors to learn how to better cohabitate with nature.

'Staycations' are not always popular with travel consultants who often assume that the commissions are low or non-existent. However, sometimes the goodwill in assisting a loyal client in a situation where they choose to stay closer to home will pay dividends in the years to come when they remember your great suggestions and your eagerness to maintain the client relationship.

And when you are thinking of an active staycation to recommend; something that's perfect for family, adventure, nature, discovery, fun and tons of things to experience, see, taste and photograph, think of what will make your clients smile. Remember to 'say cheese', and suggest Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

Abitibi-Temiscamingue



Hélène Lessard at Fromage Au Village in Lorraineville



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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