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WRAPPED UP IN QUEBEC

Maple, Turtles, Huskies, Muskies and Bacon

Steve Gillick

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20 MAR 2017: Confession time. First I was exfoliated, and then slathered in maple butter, before being wrapped like a mummy in a plastic sheet and blanket. After my scalp was massaged, the lights were dimmed as I was told to 'chill out' for a while. Following my eventual unwrapping

and a shower, I was covered in moisturizing cream, and then I floated out of the room. Was it a dream? A fantasy? No actually this was the Maple Butter Wrap treatment at the spa at Manoir Lac William in the Centre du Quebec region, about 90 minutes south west of Quebec City.



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It was only the third Spa treatment I'd ever had and I will admit it left me with the sweetest sensation, literally. Later that evening, when Lydia our server, recommended the Maple Syrup-based desserts on the menu, there was some hesitation, as everyone in the group had enjoyed the same treatment and really, all we had to do was sniff our arms to get our fix of maple flavour!

But tapping into the Maple spirit was only one of the highlights of a recent trip to the province. After landing in Quebec City, we travelled about 75 minutes east, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, to the Chaudière-Appalaches Region. Well-known to Quebeckers, the area remains 'still to-be-explored' by many outside the province. Our mission was to experience winter

activities along with gastronomy, culture and conversation, all of which, we soon discovered, were intrinsic to the welcoming spirit of the region.

Just outside of Auberge des Glasis, a snow-draped, picturesque Inn of traditional rural Quebecois architecture, the turtle-crossing sign seemed a bit out of place. Nancy Lemieux, one of the two former journalists who own the Inn, explained that overtly, the sign referred to the Turtle River, whose waters were raging with melting snow, next to the Auberge. But the sign also referred to a lifestyle philosophy: “It’s important that we live the life of turtles and adopt the ‘Turtle Rhythm’. This means taking our time to appreciate the beauty of our surroundings and to do things right as far as our lives - and our guests - are concerned”.

And the homey feeling of the Auberge began with, what else, the distribution of little houses to which the room keys were attached, with each bearing the name of the guest’s room. I was assigned to ‘amourette’, which refers to a feeling of romantic attraction.

And it was the romance of snowshoeing to which I was attracted for my afternoon activity, inspired by a rack of traditional wooden, rawhide-laced snow shoes just outside the main entrance of the Auberge. Having never snowshoed before, I took up the challenge.

The snow was wet and quite deep, so snow shoes were the perfect (if not the only) way of getting around. The Auberge has a looped trail that follows Turtle River, and then leads off into the forest where Birch bark trees, Butternut, Oak and

Evergreens seem to envelop you in a kind of outdoor tranquility tank. You hear the rushing water and the wind in the trees, inhale the fresh air and the scent of the forest, and feel a calmness overtake your mind. It's that Turtle Rhythm creeping up on you!

A second looped trail takes you uphill to the 'summit' where spectacular views of the Laurentian Mountains were perfectly framed by the trees, and accented by the billowing clouds overhead.

In the evening, we were treated to the cuisine of Chef Olivier Raffestin who has worked at the Auberge for the past ten years. He explained that food was not only a way for people to experience a region but in Chaudière-Appalaches in particular, it was a way to connect with the soul, tradition and culture of the area. As he spoke, Nancy's children, uncle and friends sang gentle folk tunes and strummed guitars, while the audience of mostly locals, serenely sang along.

Freezing rain overnight altered our plans. Instead of exploring Isle aux Grues, where we were to have spent the day walking the nature paths and sampling the cheeses of the region, we drove about an hour west to Appalache Lodge. Due to the weather, dog-sledding was not available, so we did the next best thing: Cani-Raquette. We donned show shoes (this time, the modern aluminum version), wrapped harnesses around our waists, and then waited as Hugues Parisien, the keeper of the Huskies, selected a dog for each of us and attached their harness to ours.

Now snow shoeing in thick, wet snow can be a challenge. Even more so when the boots I chose

turned out to be too big for me. And more so again, when a very frisky, athletic and impatient Husky is raring to join his colleagues at the front of the line while the snowshoer (me) is huffing and puffing at the back of the line. My dog would pull and strain on the harness as I was dragged through the snow at a faster-than-human-being pace, but obviously not fast enough, and then he would stop, turn and stare at me impatiently with those cold, pale blue, wolf-like eyes. But scare tactics didn't work and when we parted company an hour later, I didn't even get a lick of appreciation.

That evening, at Le Bistreau d'érable in St. Lucie de Beaugard, the warmth and hospitality of the restaurant, built as a modern Sugar Shack, removed any lingering feelings of Husky Dog guilt. Noémie Régnier, the co-owner, greeted us with French wines and plate after plate of delicious traditional regional foods: Sourdough bread, Pea and ham soup, Apple and Beet salad, tourtière (meat pie), ham, omelettes, beans, cole slaw, potatoes and crepes with maple syrup. Afterward we went outside in the snow to enjoy a maple pull –and just as the smell of our own maple scented skin had started to fade!

Noémie gave us a tour of the syrup production facility, explaining that 10 years ago when she wanted a change from her life in Montreal she decided to work with trees instead of people. Fate stepped in. She met her husband and now they produce 120 barrels of maple syrup each year from 25,000 trees.

Back at the Manoir Du Lac William, during a talk about the fish in the lake, Lydia excitedly recalled the Musky that was seen by the lake 'doing the bacon'. When questioned further she

demonstrated the fluttering, sputtering, flip-flopping and jumping of bacon in a frying pan and explained that the 58 pound fish (now mounted on one of the Manoir walls) had been doing just that! While Musky did not appear on the menu that night, the food at the Manoir was exceptional, thanks to Chef Luc Taschereau, from the smoked duck to the sea chowder, to the trout and the savoury local cheeses for dessert.

Both Chaudière-Appalaches and Centre du Quebec are regions where winter (and summer) visitors will connect with the land, the food and the people, as they enhance the value and enjoyment of their stay in the Quebec City area. Like the addictive taste of Maple Syrup, these areas will leave your clients wanting more.

Quebec

The entrance to Auberge de Glacis with the Turtle Rhythm Sign



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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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