



LE MASSIF DE CHARLEVOIX

POWDER PLAY

The skiing is fine around Québec's Charlevoix region

By Gina DeCaprio Vercesi

The *Mona Lisa* smiled down at us from the wall above the bed, and our 10-year-old's eyes grew wide. "You have to cover her up or I won't be able to sleep," she said.

My husband, Jon, and I, along with our three daughters, Stella, Bianca, and Nola, had just arrived at the quirky Auberge La Grande Maison, a bright red Victorian inn and spa in Baie-Saint-Paul, Québec. We'd come to the Charlevoix region to play in the snow with the girls during their school break, venturing past our traditional New England ski haunts to explore wintry Canadian woods on skis and sleds.

Eccentric decor aside, winter sports enthusiasts looking for a mountain experience that differs from the prefab homogeneity of today's popular megaresorts will find untrammled Charlevoix an enchanting alternative. Everything here radiates a warm, French-Canadian charm, from cozy brasseries tucked into quaint towns to the forested cross-country trails at Les Sources Joyeuses and the powder-filled slopes at the refreshingly old-school ski resort, Le Mont Grand-Fonds.

Charlevoix owes its terrain to a rogue meteor that careened into the Earth 400 million years ago. The 60,000-mph impact formed the 33-mile-wide Charlevoix crater, and, like the splash that results from a stone hitting the water, mountains popped up around it. A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 1988, the region hosts some of the Northeast's most magical winter adventures.

Ours began at Le Massif de Charlevoix, where almost all of the mountain's 52 trails offer spectacular views of the ice floe-studded St. Lawrence River, creating the vertiginous, yet intoxicating, sensation of skiing into the water. The upside-down resort—skiers park up top at the summit lodge and ski down to catch the gondola at the base—boasts a 2,526-foot vertical drop (the highest east of the Rockies) and an average annual snowfall of 212 inches.

We spent the day cruising terrain served by the Massif Express gondola; long, buttery, blue-square trails with lots of spots for Jon, Stella, and Bianca to duck into the trees while Nola and I traversed the slopes more slowly. Our favorite, La Petite-Rivière, resembled a chute dropping us into the St. Lawrence River for a polar plunge.

As much as we loved schussing down Le Massif's scenic runs, the mountain had another adventure in store, one that put us on snow in a new, old-fashioned way.

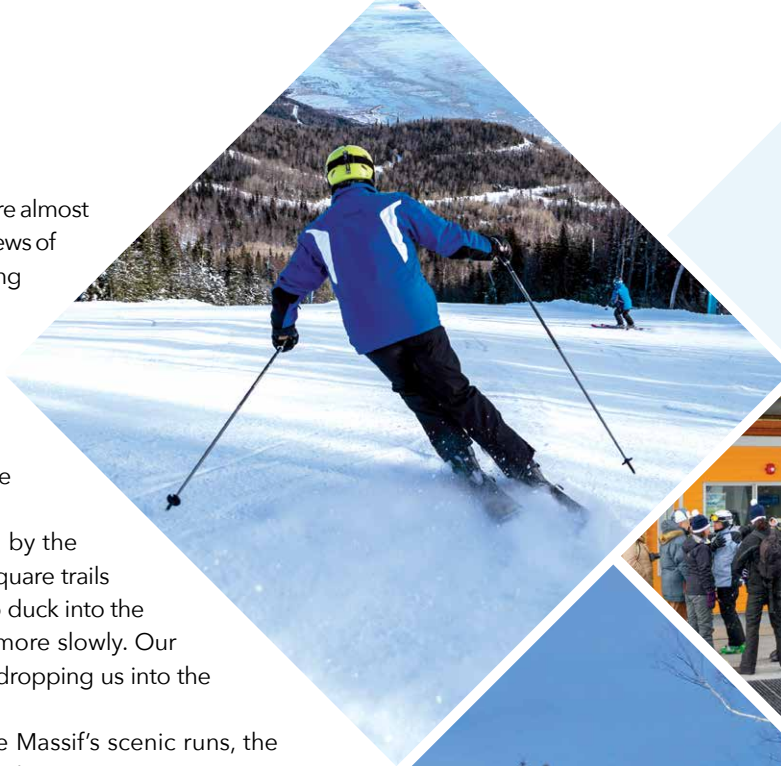
"Lean left to go right and lean right to go left," said our guide, rocking from side to side on the wooden sled to demonstrate. Behind him, a phalanx of miniature toboggans with colorful, woven seats and curved runners waited in a neat line. Choosing our sleds, we climbed into an enormous cabin-cat and chugged upward through the backcountry to the resort's rodeling trail-head atop Mont Liguori.

Popular in the Alps, rodeling, a.k.a. sledding, involves zooming down groomed trails on a surprisingly aerodynamic little sleigh. Le Massif's *piste de luge* winds for 4.7-miles through a pristine, snow-filled setting that offers the only experience of its kind in North America. Along the way, riders can generate speeds of up to 30 mph.

Though our guide's instructions seemed simple enough, getting the hang of leaning into the outside of the turns felt counterintuitive, and we took turns tumbling into the deep, snowy embankments lining the trail. Once we got into a groove, exhilaration took over, and I laughed as we sailed down the trail beneath a bluebird sky, faster and faster, digging our heels into the snow to slow our progress when the surrounding forest became a blur.

That evening, the five of us soaked our tired selves in La Grande Maison's bubbling thermal pools. Afterward, snug and dry, Nola fell right to sleep, far too spent by the day's adventures to be troubled by a replica of Da Vinci's enigmatic masterpiece.

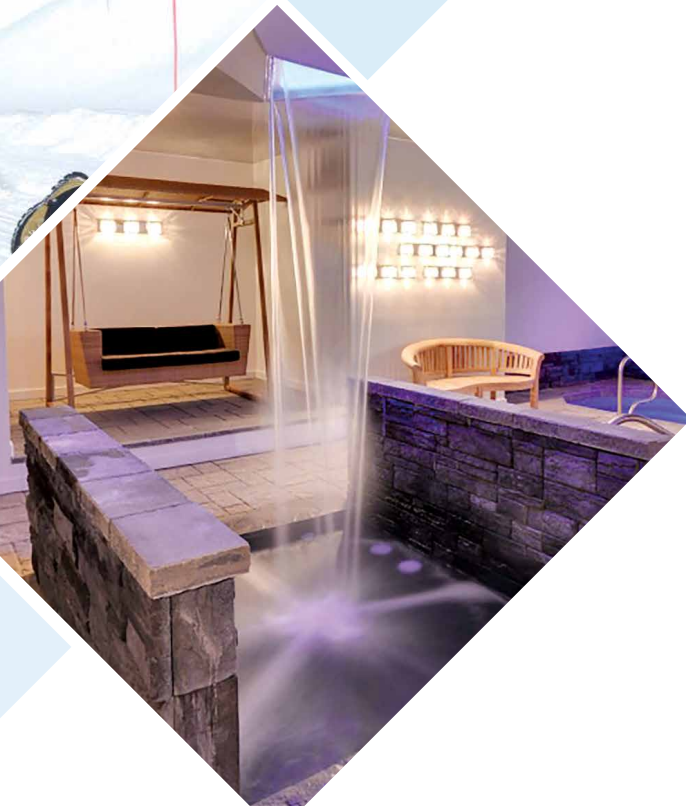
Gina DeCaprio Vercesi previously wrote about Maine oysters in *Northern New England Journey*.



At Le Massif de Charlevoix, the intermediate La Petite-Rivière trail (top left) offers a fine view of the St. Lawrence River. Sledgers on the 4.7-mile *piste de luge* (center) can reach speeds of 30 mph.



After snowshoeing or cross-country skiing at Les Sources Joyeuses (left), thermal pools await at Auberge La Grande Maison.



Stay and Play

Baie-Saint-Paul (BSP) is about 58 miles northeast of Québec City, which is reachable via a 278-mile drive from Augusta, Maine, or one-stop flights to Jean Lesage International Airport (YQB: aeroportdequebec.com/en) from Portland; Manchester, New Hampshire; Burlington, Vermont; or Boston. For more information about the Charlevoix region, visit tourisme-charlevoix.com/en.



SLEEP

Fuel a day on the slopes with café au lait and fluffy crepes in the sunny dining room at **Auberge La Grande Maison**. Après ski, relax in the B&B's thermal spa with a craft brew from nearby MicroBrasserie de Charlevoix or visit BSP's nearby artsy hub. Rates start at \$48. (800) 361-5575; grandemaison.com. Plush duvets and chic, farmhouse decor characterize **Hotel Le Germain Charlevoix and Spa**, which offers a variety of accommodations, from family rooms with bunk beds to lofts with freestanding soaking tubs. Rates start at \$199. (844) 240-4700; tinyurl.com/lhcharlevoix. In La Malbaie (29 miles northeast of BSP), the **Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu** has 405 bluff-top rooms and a full Nordic spa. Rates start at \$150. (866) 540-4464; tinyurl.com/richcharl.

SKI

Ranging from easy greens to steep double blacks, 52 trails wind throughout the 406 acres of skiable terrain at **Le Massif de Charlevoix**, 16 miles south of BSP. Don't miss the resort's downhill sledding run. (877) 536-2774; lemassif.com/en. Just outside of La Malbaie, **Le Mont Grand-Fonds** offers 20 trails and a mellow, retro atmosphere. One lift and two T-bars serve some surprisingly challenging terrain that has abundant natural snow. (877) 665-0095; montgrandfonds.com. Take a break from downhill sliding at **Les Sources Joyeuses**, where 32 miles of snowy cross-country and snowshoeing paths meander through a woodland setting. The resort also has a tubing hill and a skating rink. (418) 665-4858; lessourcesjoyeuses.com.

FROM TOP: LE MASSIF DE CHARLEVOIX; HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (2); AUBERGE LA GRANDE MAISON; LES SOURCES JOYEUSES; FAR RIGHT: HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

