

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

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Ski? Pah! **Hannah Summers** heads to Quebec in Canada and finds plenty of other ways to get her thrills (and chills) ▲



Lara Croft would be appalled. My axe dangles from my limp wrist, my legs quiver from the strain and I cling on to the cliff face in a way I can only describe as stuck.

Isn't ice climbing supposed to make me look hardcore? Matthieu, my rugged guide, shoots up the icy, near-vertical, 83-metre-high cliff face in seconds. But then he is wearing a bandana. Perhaps that's what's missing.

I'm hanging out in Montmorency Falls Park just outside the city of Quebec, Canada. In this part of the world, winter sports don't have to be limited to bombing it down a slope on two skinny planks; instead you can get your thrills with a range of other crazy outdoorsy pursuits. Of course, I could satisfy my long-craved snow fix by going

skiing, but that would mean going through the tedious process of actually, er, learning to ski. And I don't really fancy that.

Instead I'm going to just dangle on this rope, my body pressed against a marble-hard wall of ice. Matthieu, who also chops down trees for a living, is belaying me below (that's keeping the line taut to stop me falling to my death), while shouting encouraging words up to me. My boyfriend, Adam, feels compelled to get involved, too. Together they holler things like "Kick your crampons into the wall front on, not at an angle," "Move your axe higher," and "Hurry up." I make it to the top, taking in views of the snow-covered ground beneath the frozen Montmorency waterfall – which is 30 metres higher than Niagara – and abseil back down at speed. Ironically I'm pretty decent at that part.

Of all the cities you'd reel off as being a hotbed for winter adventure activities, Quebec probably wouldn't be the first that comes to mind. It's rustic, romantic and sophisticated all in one. The narrow cobbled alleys, city walls and the turrets and spikes of the towering Château Frontenac mingle to create a vibe that's like strolling back 400 years in time. It's gloriously pretty, whether you're seeing it while taking on the city's oldest attraction, the 1884 Toboggan run (whizzing down a slope at 70km/h on an old-school piece of wood? Yes please.) or when you're gazing at the majestic skyline from St. Lawrence River, which glides its way alongside the city.

It's all very endearing, but I'm not here for picturesque panoramas. My next humiliation beckons, and it requires some serious tuition. Benjamin and Marie-Janick may look like a welder and a student, and that's because they are. But on the side these French-speaking, bandana-wearing Quebecois teach, and participate professionally in, one of the newest winter pursuits going – ice canoeing.

"I've tried canoeing in Windsor. Pretty tame, isn't it?" I say to Benjamin as he gaffer tapes some ice hockey shinpads around my legs. He nods eagerly in agreement, then hands me some vicious-looking shoes with spikes, and a 'paddle', which is nothing short of a giant oar with five razor-sharp blades embedded at the end. Oh *merde*.

My trauma – and I think it's fair to call it that – takes place on the St. Lawrence river, which looks very pretty the majority of the time, but in midwinter transforms into a mass of huge spiky slabs of ice and fast-flowing patches of freezing water. Cool. Very cool. It's twenty degrees below today, in fact. If I don't freeze to death, drown or trip and impale a shard of ice in my chest, I'm sure to face a lifetime jail sentence for accidentally embedding the blades of my oar into my boyfriend's skull.

What follows is a three-hour long combination of exhilarating hell and fun. Lots of fun, but mostly hell. Five of us are spread out in the canoe – a 10-metre, 295lb mass of carbon fibre – and then we have to row it. Backwards. As we approach the plateaus of ice, Benjamin shouts out the words "Get ready for scootering," by which point we all launch ourselves off our benches, shuffle our way along

CITY LIMITS: [from top] The Quebec skyline and St. Lawrence river in mid winter; ice canoeing – the region's latest extreme sport



THE RIVER'S A FREEZING MASS OF WATER AND SLABS OF ICE

Photograph by Getty / Yves Marcoux; Alamy

the 2cm-thick rim of the rapidly moving canoe to face the other way, and then dangle one leg over the side towards the water. We then scoot – a pushing, sprinting motion – the canoe over the blocks of ice.

Back in the 17th century, ice canoeing was used as a way to transport people across the St Lawrence River when they needed a doctor. It's evolved a little since then...

I swear. A lot.

Horrendous words I never knew existed pour from my mouth. My ears are assaulted with deafening noise, like hearing a car being crushed and scrapped. My face is

smacked with icy shards and vicious wind, while my hands cramp at the shock of this faux canoeing. Adam is submerged to his waist in the icy river, and in nothing short of a miracle, I only go as far as my thighs. The pressure to not fall in the water, or over on the ice, is intense. And don't get me started on the pace – I'll just start swearing again.

Making my apologies to the group – there have been a few near misses with those blades – I skulk off to the city to recover. I don't have long. A 30-minute drive north of town soon sees us arrive in the tranquil forest and powder-coated slopes of the Stoneham region, where my next ride awaits. At first I hear them, and then, unavoidably, I smell them: tramping my way through the white stuff, I round the corner to come face to face with huskies – hundreds of them – all razzed up and desperate to get out on the sledding trail.

Another guide, another bandana. This time it sweeps back Claude's hippie-ish, shoulder-length hair. He greets with a gentle smile, twinkly eyes and a handful of snacks – for the dogs – and starts explaining the

BEDROOMS COME WITH AN ANTARCTICA- WORTHY SLEEPING BAG



AXE-ELLENT ADVENTURE: Head to Quebec's Montmorency Falls Park and try your hand at climbing with crampons and an ice axe

basic husky-sledding rules to us. Lean left, lean right, say things like "Whoa, whoa, whoa..." to slow them down. I'm wedged into a throne-like wooden sledge while Adam takes on the steering responsibilities by standing at the rear.

Chaos ensues. It starts when the dogs don't listen to our instructions, although I suspect that's our problem rather than theirs. Bert stops for a wee, Ralph eats some branch, Walter looks like he's humping some snow. When we finally get them going, the steering is harder than you think. Lean too far and you'll topple the sled (it happens), and if you don't 'apply the brakes' (lean back) with enough force on a hill you'll come careering off the trail and faceplant into the snow. Of course, that happens, too.

Thankfully a rest is on the way. While you won't find yourself short of hotel options in Quebec, you'd be foolish to put yourself through this brutal winter weather without an evening in an arty freezer. The region's ice hotel, or **Hotel de Glace**, is purpose-built each year, and is home to a maze of ice-carved sculptures and themed

bedrooms designed by a local artists. Walls and 'ornaments' are made up of anything from vaguely menacing polar bears to intricately carved schools of fish.

Quebec's ice hotel is one of the most impressive in the world – there's an ice bar with cocktails, an ice church for weddings, and trails surrounding it for show shoeing, too.

comes with a heavy curtain 'door', an Antarctica-worthy sleeping bag and an unforgivingly hard block of ice, which functions as a double bed. Tempur Cloud Deluxe mattress this is not.

More safety instructions follow. Spending a night at minus degrees is a slick and serious operation, one that requires the removal of clothes (no damp socks, please), a soak in a hot tub (increase that body temp and swill around in some warm water with two plump strangers from Portland) and a step-by-step run-through of how to

OK, the word 'hotel' is a tad far-fetched. If you're seeking minibars, pillow menus and rain showers you'll be bitterly disappointed. Instead, each candlelit boudoir



BORN TO RUN: (from left) Husky sledding is one of the best winter adventures in the area; or if you're a big kid you can try some slides

cover your entire face with your sleeping bag, but handily not suffocate. Adam and I spread our bags next to each other – ah, the romance – and lie like lethargic caterpillars until the heady combination of below-freezing temps and utter exhaustion lulls us into a deep sleep.

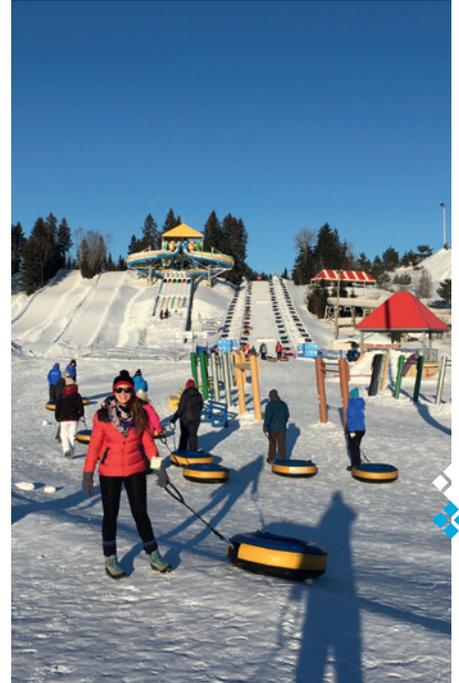
EVEREST IS A NEAR-VERTICAL DROP, AND THE FASTEST ACCELERATING SLIDE IN AMERICA

It works a dream, and eight hours later we're revived enough to face our next thrill. After a short, winding drive we reach the snow-covered mountains of Valcartier village. At this point I'd like to tell you that another bandana-clad Canadian guide takes me by the hand and I recklessly dive in to another extreme sport. But that would be a lie. Instead, I discover something I can truly excel at – snow rafting. **Valcartier**, you see, isn't some quaint, maple-tree-lined Quebecois village, but a 615-acre winter playground crammed with dozens of steep snow slopes that adults come to slide down in inflatable doughnuts.

Before you ride-haters snort dismissively, let me wing you some details. There's the Tornado – an eight-person raft that whips you over the crest of a hill and sends powder steaming into your face; Avalanche, in which you hold on to several other doughnuts and cruise down the mountain in one big beaming group; and my favourite, Everest, a near-vertical drop (and the fastest accelerating slide in America), which plummets to the ground faster than you've had the chance to scream "Why the hell are we doing this?"

We try them all. Over and over again, until the sun starts to set and a dusty

Valcartier village, 20 minutes outside of Quebec City, claims to be America's biggest winter playground, with kilometres of slides for adults (and kids, obviously) to try.



peach colour lights up the crisp, white snow-covered fields and forests. It's a bizarrely hypnotic scene – one that's best admired with your bum stuck in the hole of a pumped-up ring of rubber. My wind-whipped face is red and raw, my hands numb and claw-like. I shoot off down the slope for one last scream and land face-first in a soft mound of power. Who needs skiing? I'm more than happy hitting the slopes this way instead. **C**

TRAVEL INFO

For information on Quebec see Tourisme Quebec at quebecoriginal.com; for more information on visiting Canada see explore-canada.co.uk; for information on Quebec City head to quebecregion.com. Air Canada operates daily services to Montréal with onward connections to Quebec City from £509 return, aircanada.com. For more on Hotel de Glace see hoteldeglac-canada.com; book ice climbing via aventurex.net; ice canoeing via quebecicecanoeing.com and husky sledding via traineaux-chiens.com.