

Mountaineer Yourself to Nirvana on the Historic Les Routes Blanches in Quebec

By Peggy Newland

The afternoon light hits the spruce at angles that bring on hues of maroon and deep purple as we glide down a powder-heavy path on the hushed Gillespie Trail in Northern Quebec. Brian and I are backcountry Nordic skiing for three days on the historic village trails of Les Routes Blanches. This day's journey crossed frozen lakes and brought us through forested single track, and it has been breathtaking. We started this morning in Prevost and, after a "snow shuttle" to Val David, we've skied almost 7 miles and have climbed 1131 feet in elevation. My Norwegian blood is humming. Especially because I know, on the second day of this trip, we will be exploring the heritage trails created by Norwegian, Herman Smith-Johannsen, also known as Jackrabbit.

"Soup?" Our guide, Jean-Francois Girard, asks as we come to a hidden ski hut with views down to dotted lakes and over rolling hills. There are packed sandwiches and brownies as well, but we save them for energizing ourselves on the uphill sections near the rustic regional parklands between Val David and Val Morin. A welcome stop before continuing down through pockets of leafless hardwood and maple.

"In the 1920's, the Gillespie Brothers would ski to school, often race and win tournaments, and ski home for chores before doing it all over again," Jean-Francois tells us as we continue down through a grove of white pine. My legs burn just thinking of the brothers' daily adventure as we trudge up an edged trail.

This is true village-to-village skiing, guided to the "off paths" that veer up and around piste-after-piste. With cozy lodging in Quebec-style inns, three courses of elegant French cuisine each night, this adventure with Les Routes Blanches offers comfortable landing spots after full days hoofing over multi-use, groomed and mostly ungroomed Nordic and cross-country backcountry. Many of the trails have been cut and formed centuries ago, connecting snowed-in villages during the long winters, often near the train line of the time. My skis are not the usual cross-country type used in New Hampshire. I call them my "mountain mamas." With their metal edges for angled turns on vertical runs and their wider girth for holding the snow, I'm getting more stability on the twists.

We ski the last part of that day's trails through patches of red cedar, and the inn sits square in front of us... up a steep hill covered in untracked powder. We follow Jean-Francois as he "breaks trail" and soon, we are sitting by a fireplace, pilsners in hand, celebrating the completion of almost 9 miles and over 1100 feet of elevation. Dinner that night stays by fireside, and we fill ourselves with local cheeses and charcuterie, spreads, and olives before digging into sauteed greens with chicken and rice. Dessert is, of course, chocolate covered.

Our room is surrounded by forest, our bed has feather pillows, a thick quilt, and we are asleep in seconds after dinner.

The next morning, after a full breakfast and plenty of coffee, we head out. Zipping down and over Belair Lake, we are the only ones slicing a trail across the frozen expanse. Jean-Francois tells us of his interest in "the old trails" and how he partnered with SO-PAIR, a nonprofit whose mission is the conservation and preservation of the historic ski trails of this area. We have almost 13 miles to cover today so we



Au Clos Rolland

Photo by Peggy Newland

keep the stories going: of parents on wooden skis, a ski school established by a Swiss immigrant, Emile Cochand, the "legacy" Maple Leaf Trail, built in 1933, that runs 100 km across Quebec, how birds often follow skiers up and over the trails. I spot a chickadee as it flies between branches and hear its feebee call, urging me onward over multiple lakes to a welcome soup and sandwich picnic in the windbreak of a pine grove.

After lunch, we follow the historic routes of Eddy Fortier, whiz on the Whizzard, and most excitedly, discover Johannsen East, or the Jackrabbit. The Jackrabbit is a twisting rollercoaster of fun, between powder in the trees to turns through tight lanes of spruce. Hermann Johannsen, this speedy jackrabbit of a Norwegian, recruited locals and volunteers in the 1930's who helped him map and clear over 1600 km of trails connecting St.-Sauveur, St.-Adele, Val-Morin and Labelle. One of his favorite sayings was, "Get outside!" He lived to the ripe old age of 111 so maybe Hermann discovered the secret to life is in the woods.

Following the frozen Doncaster River on the descent, we are rewarded with a warm-up in a mountainside hut before a "joyful" flat glide on the P'tit Train du-Nord cross country track back to Mont-Rolland station. It's a quick five-minute walk to Au Clos Rolland. We have après ski of local cheeses and charcuterie in the fireplaced living room and meet up with a local skier, Chris, who fills us in about the Quebec culture of skiing. It's celebratory, dining in the private dining room and enjoying a three-course gourmet stunner: root vegetable soup with a dollop of maple syrup and house-made croutons followed by a beet salad with sheep's milk feta and caramelized nuts and then pork rib in dijon, white wine, and Gruyere, accompanied by rice and seasonal vegetables. Dessert is a delectable maple delight. Plenty of wine is poured, and laughter fills the room as we talk of the spills and chills along the trails. Our cheeks are rosy in the candlelight.

Our bedroom is elegant, with wide windows, a sitting area, and it has a deep-seated tub with bath salts and bubbles. I soak in the steam and think of the twists and turns of the day before a sink-down into sleep.

Our last day on Les Routes Blanches is spent in the backcountry of the Alfred-Kelly Reserve. After a multi-course breakfast of yogurt, souffle, and fresh fruit, we ski over to the empty, powder-heavy Mont-Olympia and "skin" up to the cliffs overlooking the

valleys below. Sitting on curved boulders for lunch, we watch for peregrine falcons in the ravines before we float through maple groves in deep snow. Finishing in Prevost on cross country trails of P'tit Train du Nord, it's an easy choice to pop into the Shawbridge Brewery (right off the trail!) for a final toast, "Go outside!"

Jean-Francois is a gem of a person, and we join for a group hug, before saying, "See you next time."

Because we are also in the land of Nordic spa culture, we stay a couple of extra nights at Hotel Mont Gabriel. A four-season resort with indoor and outdoor pools, hot tubs, and forest-inspired bistro —count me in. Our view from the room overlooks the lights of the quaint ski village, St.-Sauveur. We feel like we are on top of it all.

That night, we have dinner at Le Victor. I choose maple glazed duck with roasted vegetables while Brian goes for an excellent steak, both with seasonal vegetables. Dessert is a delicious chocolate mousse. We check out the fireside lounge but then decide sleep is a better choice.

It's all about the spa on our last day. The famous Strom spa nordique in St.-Sauveur does not disappoint. We hike from sauna, to steam, to hot tub, and then relax in heated loungers in a darkened napping room. Then, it is off to lunch in bathrobes at Nord Restaurant. We nosh on squash soups, share fromage fondant, and enjoy the most colorful salads before returning to "the circuit" of sauna, steam, hot tub and napping. After a full day at the spa, we head down to St. Sauveur and check out the Laurentian Ski Museum to learn more about the Quebecois ski culture and most especially, watch classic films of my favorite Norwegian, Jackrabbit. Dinner that night is pub style burgers and beer in St.-Sauveur at Le Saint-Sau Pub Gourmand.

In the morning, we make our last stop at Au Petit Poucet for brunch. Founded in 1945, this rustically flannel and fireplaced cafe is Quebec with kick. Crepes, lumberjack bread, maple-smoked ham, fresh fruit "bouquets" and plenty of coffee in a convivial atmosphere for those who love to "get outside."

Skiing village-to-village and celebrating the heritage ski trails on "the white routes" deep within the Laurentians is one of those memory keepers; places that you can return to in your mind's eye when you want escape, beauty, classic charm, and authentic culture. Experiencing Les Routes Blanches is a treasure to discover and remember with happiness.

if you go

Espresso Sports. 1000 Rue St. George. St.-Adele, Quebec. www.espressosports.net. Friendly, multilingual staff. Large assortment of gear. They will set you right up!

Au Clos Rolland. 1200 St. Jean Street. St.-Adele, Quebec. www.auclosrolland.com.

Elegant lodging with gourmet breakfasts and dinners. Close to Espresso Sports, P'tit Train du Nord, and all the trails.

Far Hills Resort. 3399 Chemin Far Hills Inn. Val-Morin, Quebec.

www.farhills-resort-hotel.com. Right on Les Routes Blanches and offering design-forward lodge rooms and three courses of dinner. Breakfast can be fireside.

Les Routes Blanches. www.lesroutesblanches.com.

We went on the East Route (45 km/28 miles, three days) with an excellent guide, but there are two additional guided or self-guided routes: West (47 km/29 miles, three days), North (most challenging 34 km/21 miles, two days). Nordic and backcountry exploring, with most packages including lodging, meals, trail access, and luggage transportation.

Ski with heart and the love of adventure.

Hotel Mont Gabriel. 1699 Chemin Mont Gabriel. St.-Adele, Quebec. www.marriott.com. Rooms with mountainside views. Locally sourced cuisine and a huge wine list.

Strom spa nordique St-Sauveur. 930 Boulevard des Laurentides, Piedmont, Quebec.

A perfect relaxation zone along a mountainside river. Don't miss dining in bathrobes.