

# ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



## In the Tracks of Skiing’s Pioneers

The pleasures of century-old ski routes in Quebec—now rebirthed

By Jen Rose Smith

A **SMALL** sign nailed to an evergreen signaled the way: “Les Routes Blanches.” *The White Roads.* A slim arrow pointed toward the dense woods of southern Quebec’s Laurentian Mountains, newly flocked with a downy layer of snow that had fallen overnight. Steering into untracked fluff, our group of four cross-country skiers began a three-day, two-night ski stretching 28 miles through

little-visited portions of mountains that are among the planet’s oldest. Our path, called the East Route, which arced southward from the village of Val-David, is just one of three backcountry trails totaling 87 miles—the Routes Blanches of the sign—that debuted this winter in the Laurentians. The trails embody skiing’s roots as a means not for high doses of downhill adrenaline, but for practical overland winter travel. They knit together fragments of old heritage trails established in the 1920s and

1930s, during one of North America’s first ski booms. Our route promised the old-school skiing of that era, but with no need to rough it. We would stay overnight in trail-side inns with cozy fireplaces, indulgent food and a very French Canadian sense of *savoir vivre*.

“Point-to-point skiing was the original form, and it’s still the purest form. It came before people learned to just ski in circles,” said James Jackson, president of Sopair, an outdoor recreation advocacy organization behind Les Routes Blanches. “We know there is something special here, and we want to preserve it.”

“Go north, find snow,” I’d muttered during the hour-long drive from Montreal to Prévost, where I met guide Will Hotopf and local photographer Jean-François Girard. Nearby, snow guns cranked at the Laurentians’ downhill-ski areas, a line of 12 resorts culminating in the 2,871-foot Mont Tremblant. Instead of running laps on those manicured slopes, we’d make the most of natural conditions and terrain.

Gliding through the woods on the first day, our group cheered the unexpected



**TEAM SPORT** From top: The author (second from left) and her companions cross Leon Lake on Les Routes Blanches’ new East Route; a coffee break in a trailside shelter along the route.

bounty of powder that had fallen around Val-David. Rolling through narrow tree tunnels and up short climbs, we paused for thermos coffee at the wooden shack atop 1,345-foot Mont Saint-Aubin, the first of several trailside shelters we’d pass. I’m a seasoned cross-country skier accustomed to New England’s fiddly and tree-choked terrain, but it took extra focus to avoid rocks and stumps that the early winter snow hadn’t yet covered. Unmarked side trails spidered off into the forest. Often I hewed to the tracks of Girard, the photographer, a former ski patroller who began exploring the Laurentians’ backcountry in 2009, often chasing trails that

modern maps didn’t show. “The trails just disappeared off the edge, so I began searching the old maps to learn where they went,” he said. He’d stumbled on some of the estimated 500 miles of “heritage trails,”

We skied single-file through the woods, then scattered while crossing lakes where snow gusts corkscrewed skyward. Our 8-mile first day’s ski led right to the doorstep of the 1940 resort Hotel Far Hills, wrapped in a tangle of



Au Clos Rolland, one of several inns along the ski route.

### Have Skis, Will Travel: 5 Overnight Ski Routes Around the World

Ranging in difficulty levels, these routes prove the best way to savor winter is to ski right through it

**Silvretta Traverse, Austria** | Alpine passes bracket intermediate terrain on this four-day hut-to-hut trip. The first day’s ski crosses into Switzerland for sausage and sauna at whitewashed, wood-shuttered Heideberger Hut, a refuge with dormitory beds and sweeping views of Fimbatal Valley.

**Catamount Trail, Vermont** | Skiing the entire 300-mile backcountry trail running Vermont’s length requires some chilly camping, but well-spaced country inns mean you can ski portions—like the three-day, 30-mile stretch from Killington to Ripton—with light packs and creature comforts.



Routes in the Italian Dolomites take you past quaint places like the Rifugio Fuciade.

**Queyras Regional Natural Park, France** | Nordic-style trails stitch together snow-globe villages and high-altitude refuges in the Cottian Alps along the France-Italy border. Relatively rustic dorm-style huts, like

the high mountain Refuge Agnel, come with cozy perks like steamy showers.

**Maine Huts & Trails** | Four off-grid ecolodges welcome skiers exploring more than 25 miles of groomed trails

through western Maine wilderness, featuring family-style meals and optional bag shuttles by snowmobile.

**Hut-to-Hut Dolomites, Italy** | Craggy summits backdrop picturesque rifugi in

a playground where going off-piste is the best way to shake powder-hungry European crowds. Local networks of ski buses create nearly endless options for guided or DIY exploration. —J.R.S.

built between 1920 and 1940. Some were designed for overnight trips, like the Maple Leaf Trail, which by the 1930s stretched for 80 miles, linking a collection of inns. By the time Girard had discovered the trails, trees crowded many of their corridors; private land had swallowed others; still others were open, but known only to locals.

“Skiing is the only way to keep these trails alive,” said Girard, who went on to join the regionwide, often-volunteer effort to rebirth the fragmented network for inn-to-inn journeys—scouting, repairing and publicizing heritage trails. The moderately challenging East Route incorporates some surviving segments of the original Maple Leaf Trail. You can ski it as a guided trip (from around \$700 per person) booked through partner guiding company Windigo Adventures, or as a self-guided tour (from around \$40 for passport-protected maps and parking, paying extra for inn-to-inn luggage transfer by van). The 32-mile, intermediate West Route, also unveiled this winter, is self-guided only, while the North Route, focused on expert-only terrain, requires a guided trip.

After eating our first day’s boxed lunch from local deli Le P’tit Magasin, we settled into an easygoing rhythm.

cross-country trails. Minutes after I stepped out of my bindings, I was standing by a roaring wood fire. The next morning we kept an icy wind at our backs while crossing a chain of lakes on the 12-mile segment that leads to Au Clos Rolland, an old-fashioned inn. Heavy-limbed and wind-rudied, we spent the evening sipping Quebecois wine over a three-course dinner the innkeeper prepared.

Go north, find snow? Our third day revealed that the reverse can also be true. An early January thaw had melted the base, and the fresh snow we’d savored had petered out. The 8-mile backcountry ski that would take us to Prévost promised more rocks and ice than fluff.

Over a breakfast of French toast splashed with maple syrup, we considered a less hazardous option: a portion of the 144-mile P’tit Train du Nord, a smooth rail trail in operation for 29 years that’s regularly groomed for skiing in the winter. If we ventured off the East Route and pursued that route instead, we’d have a comparatively easy 7-mile ski to our waiting car.

But what would the hardy, wool-clad ski pioneers who first skied these trails think? With my best Gallic shrug, I sopped up the last drops of syrup, shouldered my light pack and we were off.