

LOVIN' THE LAURENTIANS

Les Routes Blanches beckon with Quebec charm and a hybrid XC, alpine adventure



One of Les Routes Blanches guides, Camille, takes in the scenery in the Laurentian backcountry near Shawbridge.

By Iseult Devlin

IF YOU ARE IN SEARCH of a new backcountry experience in the East, consider exploring the Laurentian Mountains, close to Montreal. This winter, there is a new multi-day guiding service offering three different nordic adventures on Les Route Blanches, a 100-year-old cross-country ski trail system.

"It's a great fit for people who have the stamina of a nordic skier and also do some downhill skiing," said Will Hotopf, guide and marketing manager for Les Routes Blanches, which translates to White Routes in English.

Currently, there are more than 800 kilometers of ski trails to explore, with Les Routes Blanche covering a possible 140 kilometers of those. Explore Quebec's beauty on nordic skis to experience Laurentian cross-country ski culture by staying in the region's quaint inns, upscale hotels, cabins and yurts. The trips offer a village-to-village experience traveling around frozen lakes, trekking across open fields or explor-



Skiers can enjoy views of Mont Tremblant ski area. Right, the adventure continues with a tunnel that goes underneath a road.



The views of the Laurentians on a clear day are spectacular.



ing the forests on cross-country skis.

The mountain range was the birthplace of skiing in North America in the early 1900s thanks to the efforts of Herman “Jackrabbit” Smith-Johannsen, a Norwegian settler who introduced cross-country skiing to Canadians and Americans. Smith-Johannsen was nicknamed Jackrabbit because of his incredible ability to quickly get around the trails, which he was instrumental in developing and maintaining. He never tired of the beauty he helped to create and skied when he was 100 years old on his beloved terrain.

For decades, the Laurentian Mountains were visited by winter adventurers from all over, traveling by rail to Montreal to experience the beauty of Quebec winters. The area quickly became a mecca for skiing and helped usher in the golden age of early 20th-century skiing. In 1933, Smith-Johannsen completed the Maple Leaf trail that interconnected inns and made it possible for skiers to ski from town to town.

Now, there is a community-wide effort to revive the trail system being led by La Société de plein air des Pays-d'en-Haut, a nonprofit group committed to conservation. Land owners, volunteers and local businesses are teaming up to maintain these heritage ski trails in the Laurentians.

The efforts being made by SOPAIR and the community not only help preserve the land and mountain trails — which are often privately owned — but also help outdoor enthusiasts experience those same adventures again.

This winter, Les Routes Blanches is introducing several excursions to bring back the organized village-to-village, cross-country ski adventures to promote the long-term sustainability of the Laurentian trails. Some are geared toward rustic living in heated yurts and log cabins, while others are more luxurious in hotels with restaurants, saunas and other amenities. Luggage is transported to various locations for all guests doing the tours.

Whether you want to do a self-guided tour with detailed route maps or organized guided trips, there are several available from January to March. The Routes Blanches trips include itineraries known as the East, West and North routes. For example, there is an East excursion on Jan. 24-26 that costs \$692 (U.S.) per person and includes meals, guide services, lodging and more. Groups of at least three save 15 percent.

On this trip, the first day starts with a visit to the village of Val-David followed

The North Route excursion takes skiers near Mont Tremblant ski resort.



by an 8-mile ski on the Gillespie Brothers trail in Val-David and Val-Morin. Lunch is on the trail, thanks to a hearty meal prepared by the guide. After lunch, it's a mere 2-mile ski on classical cross-country trails to the village of Val-Morin for dinner and lodging, with a choice of accommodations at Le Couvent Val-Morin or the Far Hills Resort Hotel. The next day, the destination is Sainte-Adèle, a journey of more than 12 miles.

In general, these excursions are geared for experienced backcountry nordic skiers who can navigate downhill terrain as well as flat courses. Treks can range from six to 12 miles daily, and it's recommended to have wider cross-country skis with edges.

Windigo adventure guide services will lead participants on the East route trips, and there are local shops (Espresso Sports and Roc N Ride) where gear is available to rent. For details on this East Route trip and the other Routes Blanches excursions, visit <https://pleinairpdh.com/lesroutesblanches/>. ■

Les Routes Blanches trails are full of variety, whether taking skiers around frozen rivers, across open fields or up and down hills in the woods.

