

Celebrating snow at Quebec City's Carnaval

Join this capital's annual celebration of winter



By Katharine Fletcher

Mon pays, c'est l'hiver! – My country, it is winter!

We Canadians know this claim all too well because winter represents months of snow and bitter cold. So why not embrace the season by enjoying activities specifically created by northern peoples to cope with snow?

Quebec City does this remarkably well. Because average annual snowfalls are 3.5 metres, residents have cleverly embraced outdoorsy activities. They make it all look like so much fun that we visitors just have to join them!

And there's no better time to play than during Carnaval. This year's annual winter festival takes place from January 29th to February 14th.

Traditions abound, starting with Bonhomme, Carnaval's mascot. The rotund snowman sports a scarlet tuque, while a "ceinture fléchée" sash emphasizes his ample girth.

This cummerbund recalls voyageurs' colourful arrow-patterned belts. During Carnaval, duck inside the Fairmont Château Frontenac where, in its sumptuous foyer, artisans demonstrate how to fingerweave these sashes.

In fact, Quebec City's signature "castle on the cliff" is the centre of several Carnaval events, including a dogsled race where thirty or so teams start their thrilling inner-city run just beyond its main doors. During La Grande Virée, mushers yell encouragement as their dogs speed along Saint-Louis and Grande Allée streets, then on to the Plains of Abraham – and back!

Tamer dogs, some sporting bandanas and boots, stand with their owners lining the snowy route, observing straining teams run by.

Another classic, not-to-miss event is a two-step affair: the annual canoe race. On the night preceding this traditional (read: crazy) paddle across the St. Lawrence and back, teams of paddlers haul their canoes through the city's streets. It's a bizarre spectacle, where dry-suit-clad figures dash past dragging their canoes, then leap into them to glide over the finish line.

Little kids bundled into backpacks appear stunned at crazy adults yet again doing oddball things... while us older spectators loudly cheer.

Next day, I joined thousands on a brutally windswept viewpoint while the same canoeists paddled and dragged their craft through the St. Lawrence River. And I mean dragged: moving ice-floes impede this tidal stretch of river. Binoculars help you catch the expressions of competitors while they leap onto an ice floe, haul their canoes across it, then jump back and paddle like heck.

Crazy? You bet!

No Carnaval visit is complete without visiting the Plains of Abraham (Place Desjardins). Residents adore their inner-city park and no wonder: ordinarily, crosscountry skiers, families with toboggans, and even snowshoers enjoy exercising, right downtown.

But at Carnaval, the Plains become transformed into a jam-packed gameland which isn't solely for kids.

Sleighrides give you a great chance to cuddle with your partner while steaming horses negotiate the snow-draped park. With each step their bells jingle, adding another merry sound to Carnaval.

And there are more amazing races to see here.

Last year I watched as horses galloped by on a tight-looking course. Behind them, at the end of long reins, skiers hurtled along a course, flying over a series of mogullike jumps. Thwack! After landing with a smack, skiers lurched forward while their horses kept galloping. Crowds' roars cheered them on.

That's a common sound. Happy screams emanate from people swooshing down hillsides in inflatable snow rafts. Meanwhile, overhead, shouts filter down from zip-liners.

Others can scale the ice tower, winning great views of the Park's jam-packed activities from the 10-metre observation deck. Then, swoosh down its ice slide and head to your next event.

Come nightfall, watch ice carving competitions where international teams create sculptures from gigantic mounds of densely packed snow. Who knows what you'll find? Some years there are doves of peace, other times Inuit carvings... All are fantastical as they emerge from sculptors' knives.

A favourite activity of mine is the toboggan slide behind the Château Frontenac. First you clamber up the slide on hardpacked, slippery snow. Once seated, the attendant gives you a push (if you want) and off flies your sled onto the Dufferin Terrace below. Your screams accompany agreeably scary banging noises as your toboggan descends its chute.

Fortunately, it stops on the gravel spread precisely for that purpose on the boardwalk.

Afterwards, sip a Quebec microbrewery beer or glass of wine at the Château's Terrasse Bar overlooking the slide, Terrace, and mighty St. Lawrence. Celebrate winter? Quebec City's Carnaval cannot be beat!

Checklist before you go

Dress very warmly: wear warm, no-nonsense boots, tuques and mittens.

Websites: carnaval.qc.ca; bonjourquebec.com.

Katharine and Eric Fletcher are currently working on the fifth edition of their book, [Quebec Off the Beaten Path](#), a guide to the province.

This article originally appeared in the January 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.