

QUÉBEC, C'EST COOL

For romantic European charm as thick as the snowfall, hop the border to North America's only intact walled city.

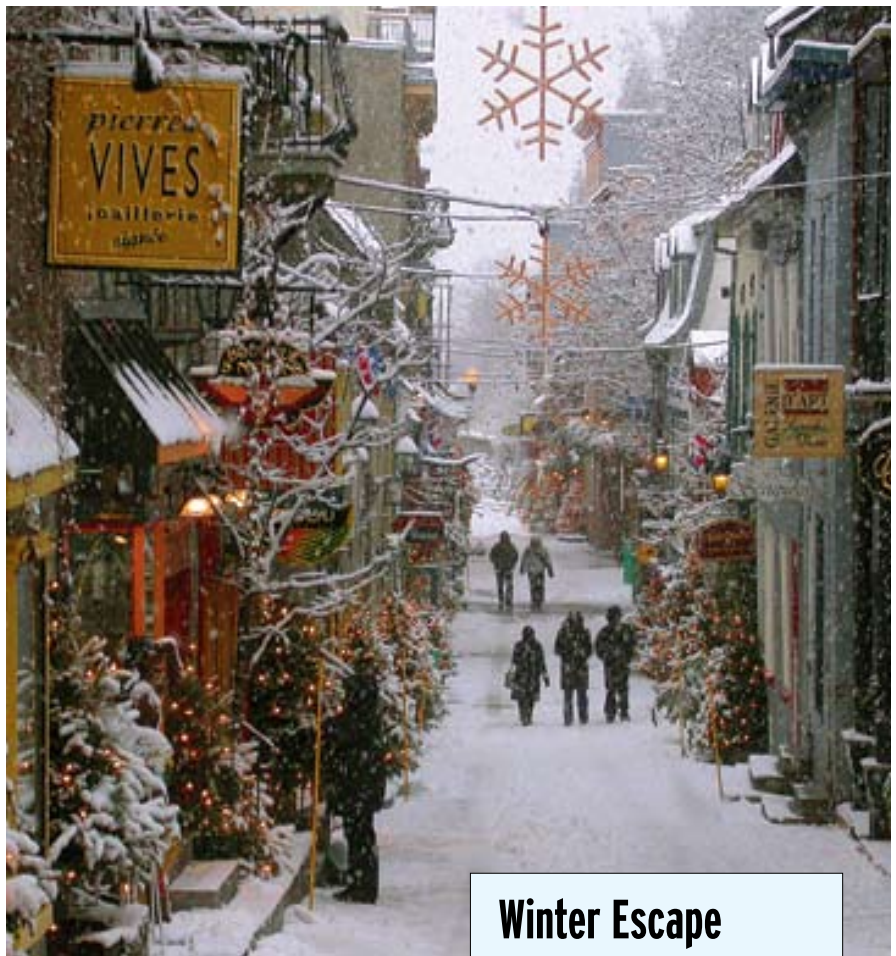
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Photograph by **GAETAN CHEVALIER**

Winter in Europe: The idea alone can freeze sun seekers, not to mention wallet watchers, in their tracks. But for those who crave the icy crunch beneath their feet, Quebec City (population 622,000) offers as much francophone fun as you can have without a transatlantic flight, sexy accents included.

Founded in 1608 by Samuel de Champlain as the cradle of French civilization in North America—massive 400th anniversary celebrations recently wrapped—the old town (**Vieux-Québec**) is the prime attraction, sitting nobly on Cape Diamant over the ice-clogged St. Lawrence River. With horse-drawn carriages clomping down twisting cobbled streets, rough-hewn stone buildings warmly lighted, and icicles dangling from ornately molded copper roofs, it's easy to forget you're in 21st-century Canada. For a taste of 19th-century opulence, take a guided tour or check into the five-star **Fairmont Le Château Frontenac**, whose gables and turrets dominate the skyline and are the de facto focal point for the city.

Outside the city walls off Rue Saint-Jean, bar and cabaret complex **Le Drague** is the focal point for the city's gay scene—and really the only hint you're actually in the gayborhood. Despite the rich Catholic roots of the population, in Quebec *le gay* is A-OK! (Read: fully integrated.) Peruse the patés at grocer **J.A. Moisan** (dating from 1871, it's the oldest in North America) and pop into **Choco-Musée Érico** for chocolate samples and history on the naughty chocolate bean. Don't worry: Thanks to dramatic geography and a surplus of snow—over 18 record-breaking feet last year—there are plenty of sporty ways to work it off, three saunas notwithstanding (ahem).

Channel your inner child on **Les Glissades de la Terrasse**, an iced toboggan slide, adjacent to the Frontenac, that whooshes up to 60 mph; or, after visiting the **Musée des Beaux-Arts**, rent cross-country skis to make tracks through the **Plains**



Walking in a winter wonderland: Noël in Vieux-Québec

of **Abraham**—Quebec City's much hillier version of Central Park, where the Musée is. A mere 25 miles away, **Mont-Sainte-Anne** offers Alpine skiing, dogsledding and snowmobiling, while **Parc de la Chute-Montmorency** is a haven for ice climbers.

For some anthropology with your snowshoeing, cozy up for a night with beaver fur pillows and Hudson Bay's blankets at the new **Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations**, minutes outside of downtown on the Huron-Wendat reservation. The artifact-laden museum weaves history and nature into group snow stomps, while restaurant **La Traite** feeds your hunger with dishes inspired by the First Nations aboriginal peoples.

Back in the city, ride the **Old Québec Funicular** for a bird's-eye view of the city, with Auberge Place d'Armes hotel and the quaint **Quartier Petit-Champlain** district below. During holiday season, nativity scenes, carolers and elaborate decorations abound. The year-round **Marché du Vieux-Port** (near the train station) expands its offerings with artisan crafts and locavore-approved seasonal foodstuffs. Across the road on Rue Saint-Paul, don't miss **De Retour's** expertly curated and reasonable vintage ornaments and mid-century modern furniture. Out co-owners Pierre and Patrice also fabricate *très* fab eco-friendly PVC Christmas trees—the perfect gift for that design-savvy sun lover back home. □

Winter Escape

Snowfall starts in November (white Christmas, guaranteed) and average temps remain below freezing into April, so winter is anything but a passing fancy. January 30–February 15, 2009, marks the 55th annual Carnaval de Québec (Carnaval.qc.ca) with crazy ice canoe and sleigh races, parades, the hot wine drink known as Caribou, and an enchanting ice palace where Bonhomme the giant snowman mascot "lives."

WHERE TO STAY:

Loews Le Concorde Hotel
(418-647-2222; LoewsHotels.com;
from \$119)

Love or hate the 1970s architecture, you can't beat its spacious, pet-friendly rooms or its tony bar-and-restaurant-packed Grand-Allée location in the Parliament Hill district. Its rotating restaurant L'Astral pairs hearty French cuisine with even more delicious vistas.

Le Château du Fauborg
(418-524-2902;
LeChateauDuFaubourg.com;
from \$99) A riot in Napoleonic chic (it's gay-owned, naturally), the former residence of Imperial Tobacco scions is now a five-room B&B, front and gay-center on Rue Saint-Jean.

