

Canadian ski resort provides excitement

Thursday, March 15, 2007

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Most ski mountain views are splendid.

But, at Quebec's Le Massif, it isn't merely the peak view that arrests your eye.

It's how the panorama uniquely transforms as you descend the hill. You'd swear you're skiing straight into the ocean.

But, wait. That's not the ocean. It's the St. Lawrence River -- fully 12 miles wide, packed with huge ice flows and dotted with islands.

The old byword about skiing Quebec is almost a cliché now. You know: it's like skiing in Europe without enduring the length and expense of the plane ride.

Still, the farther east you move into the province, the more true it is. And, Le Massif is Quebec's easternmost large ski area.

It's a place that harbors a strong French sensibility and a deep-rooted local lore, and it's looking to a dynamic future.

When I first heard about Le Massif, its fame was that uphill transport to its five ski trails was supplied by school busses. Four runs comprised a full day.

Now, it holds 43 trails on three peaks accessed by three high-speed lifts, the largest vertical rise in eastern Canada, and some marvelously challenging tree runs.

Yet, when you start your day, as most do, by cruising down La Petite-Riviere, you're racing down a wide, intermediate trail that's immaculately groomed.

And it's not elevation or challenge that takes your breath away, but that feeling that you're headed into the icy water.

Move yourself to the skiers' right, however, and you're rewarded with superb advanced challenges.

When the sign says that Charlevoix is a triple diamond, you'd better believe it.

Groomed? Sure.

Steep? Very.

Icy? Often.

Ski tip of the week

Nothing elicits a connection to the mountain like tree skiing. But glade sliding requires caution. Remove pole straps from your wrists; a pole snagged on underbrush can result in shoulder injury. Wear a helmet and eye protection to guard against branches that'll poke you. Look ahead at least two turns. In deep snow, avoid "tree wells," those depressions in the snow surrounding tree trunks. Never ski the trees alone.

Want something ungroomed? Slip down La 42, which tumbles precipitously toward the river over huge moguls; or try, as I did, the area's latest addition, L'Artimon, a rugged glade as tightly packed with trees and moguls as the proverbial sardine can.

It's not all fright night on Le Mssif's slopes, however.

The blue-rated L'Ancrage and others seemingly run forever, and the glades off La Prairie and L'Archipel are approachable for most adept midlevel skiers.

One more element sets this destination apart. Food.

Management refuses to serve fast/junk food. The closest thing available is gourmet pizza and spaghetti with delicious meat sauce.

The resort has been known to dip deep into its French heritage and serve fare like escargot. Its latest culinary addition is a hilltop crepe house.

I ordered two of these French pancakes; could only finish one. And, also unique among ski resorts -- the food is reasonably priced.

Le Massif is headed by Daniel Gauthier, the man who built Cirque du Soleil from a street performance troupe into a world-class operation. He's managing Le Massif with the same energy and imagination.

Development plans include two hotels, one in nearby Baie Saint-Paul and one at the resort's base; rail access from Baie Saint-Paul and Quebec City' new trails; and, most intriguingly, a 10-kilometer toboggan run.

But the goal isn't to create another mammoth resort like Whistler or Killington.

Here, environmental sensitivity is paramount, and the object has always been to use recreation to appreciate and celebrate the outdoors.

As long as this hill remains adjacent to that river, generating pure awe as you ski toward the water, it'll remain that way.

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