

Exploring Quebec's Cantons de l'Est



Chateau Montebello
'A unique resort'

Our RV trip to Quebec Part 2

By Dale Dunlop

At one time, the region of Quebec closest to the American border was known as the Eastern Townships, and the population was overwhelmingly Anglophone. That all began to change just over a century ago when the English speakers started leaving for the perceived greener pastures of western Canada and the U.S.A. In turn, their places were taken by Francophones, who were more than happy to settle in this scenic and fertile place. The identities have changed, but the names remain the same – Sherbrooke, Granby, Compton. Dale and I have just spent the last few days exploring the upper Ottawa River valley area, which is still surprisingly English speaking. We will spend the rest of our trip in an area that is just the opposite, but first we have one last stop along the Ottawa River, in the resort town of Montebello.

Montebello is home to the world's largest building constructed entirely of logs – the Chateau Montebello. It is a year-round resort operated by Fairmount, and is of such enormous size and unique design, that it's a tourist attraction all by itself. We drive the RV through the gates, find a place to park, and stroll around the exterior, and then inside this massive structure. The grounds are immaculately groomed with flowers everywhere, and there is a vegetable garden with some of

the best-looking tomatoes I've ever seen. An elderly Italian guest is so impressed with them that she asks us to take her picture with the tomatoes. Inside the chateau is equally as stunning, with an enormous fireplace that goes up three stories to the ceiling. Despite the fact we are not guests, nobody bothers us as I expect they are used to people just coming to gawk.

Before leaving Montebello, we stop at Delice Champetre for two burgers and out-of-this-world good French fries. We then buy some locally made cheese at Fromagerie Montebello, and finally chocolate truffles at Chocomotive where they are made on site in the old train station. Our visit to Montebello has been a treat for all of our senses.

Time to leave the Outaouais region for good, and on to Yamaska National Park in the Eastern Townships. Getting to the townships involves passing through the outskirts of Montreal, which is easier said than done, and we don't arrive at our destination until mid-afternoon. On the way, I point out to Dale the numerous monadnocks that rise abruptly from the even plain of the St. Lawrence valley. These are unique looking mountains that make for excellent ski hills and other outdoor activities.

After being assigned our campsite for the next two

nights, we return to the visitor centre at Yamaska, which is on the shores of a man-made reservoir created by damming the North Yamaska River near the city of Granby. There is a 19.4 kilometre bike trail that circumnavigates the lake, and we are going to ride it today. The centre rents excellent Norco hybrid bikes with comfortable seats, and soon we are off in a clockwise direction around the lake on Le Grand-Tour de Yamaska.

The trip takes us just under two hours, with frequent stops. Most of it is under a canopied trail with crusher dust that makes for easy riding. There are no substantial elevation changes and no discernable wind. In other words, perfect cycling conditions. Near the end of the ride, the trail crosses the dam that creates the Yamaska reservoir. Not far after that, we are back at the visitor centre where a lot of people are enjoying the rays on this very hot September afternoon. I head back to the RV while Dale enjoys a swim. When he gets back, we crack open a bottle of wine and the two slabs of cheese we bought earlier today, and celebrate the sunset with a wine and cheese tasting.

After a great night's sleep amidst the Appalachian forest, it's time for us to try something neither of us has done before - taking a chairlift up and biking down a ski

hill. But first, we need a hearty breakfast, and I'm told there is no place better than Le Café de la Brulerie in nearby Granby, which has a wonderful setting on the banks of the Yamaska River. It has been designated as a Café de Village, which is a newly established system in the Eastern Townships for letting tourists know where they will find top quality local food prepared in a healthy and sustainable way. It certainly takes the guesswork out of picking a restaurant in an unfamiliar town.

We are seated outside on a patio by the river, which couldn't be more pleasant as we are served some really good coffee (the name means a place where coffee is ground), followed by eggs benny to die for. Mine comes with asparagus, while Dale opts to try one with the very famous Brome Lake duckling that is raised nearby.

The next place we are headed has had Dale excited since I told him about it yesterday morning. It is the hill at Ski Bromont, which is quite visible for miles around the Granby area. You might wonder what the big deal is. It's a ski hill that has no snow, right? Correct, but it has a couple of lifts running, and dozens of trails open. For what? To bike down them, of course.

We arrive at the hill just before opening, and I can see that the parking lot is starting to fill up already.



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Mount Bromont
'Rounding a curve'



'Ready, Set...'

Parents are dropping off teenagers with bikes that have huge tires, much bigger than mountain bikes. People are dressed really weirdly. Some have suits of upper body armour and look like they came straight out of a Mad Max movie. I say to Dale, "I thought we were just going mountain biking?" He replies, "It's a bit more exciting than that Dad." Oh.

I have reserved rental bikes, but before we are fitted for those, we get shin and elbow pads not much different than those used in hockey, as well as a helmet. The bikes have heavy-duty suspension and huge tires. They each require a \$500.00 deposit as they are apparently worth almost \$3000.00 each. Dale tells me you can spend up to \$10,000.00 for a bike that is used for one purpose only - going downhill as fast as you can. To his credit, the rental guy, whose English is quite

good, asks if I've ever done this before, and when I say no, he gives me the do's and don'ts. Don't hit the brakes too hard or you'll fly over the handlebars. Don't brake on curves or you'll slide out. Don't fall or you might break your neck. But do have fun. Yeah, sure.

So, here we are ready to go. A son who is looking forward to it, and a father who is too stupid not to realize that, to paraphrase Cormac McCarthy, this is no sport for old men.

The first part is actually a lot of fun. Attendants put our bikes on racks behind the chair lift, and we have a nice ride to the top of Mount Bromont. It's a beautiful day, and we can see for miles and miles. At the top, we have multiple choices.

Contrary to what I initially thought, the bike trail system is completely different from the ski trail system. The bike trails are much narrower, and crisscross the mountain on the way down. We opt for a green trail which the rental guy has told me is the easiest way down. So after letting a number of crazies tear by us, at what are literally breakneck speeds, we are off.

Going downhill on a bike might seem easy, but when the surface is loose gravel and jagged rock, and the track is narrow and constantly curving, it's not. In fact, it's downright scary, at least until I get the hang of the brakes, and Dale gives me a lesson in how to bank high on the curves like a NASCAR driver.

It takes a lot longer to get down these trails than it would on a ski trail, and after essentially snowplowing my way down the equivalent of the bunny hill, I survive the first run. I can't help thinking that you can't learn to ski without falling, and the same thing must apply to this kind of biking. The only problem is that it isn't snow I will be landing on, but rocks, or if I'm lucky, just gravel. Dale is itching to try some of the 'real' trails and I'm not, so we compromise. I'm going to the zoo and he'll stay here.

The Granby Zoo is the best in Quebec, and one of the top ten in North America, so I was not about to pass it up in favour of potentially killing myself at Mount Bromont. It's turned into a blazing hot September day, and it seems like every young family in the area has decided to go to the zoo. I have always been a great zooophile, if there is such a word, and don't share the beliefs of those who think that they are places of imprisonment for creatures that should be left in the wild.

That is borne out by two of the first animals I see. The first is a magnificent white rhino, who almost certainly would be killed in the wild for his two horns. The second is an African elephant who, instead of being slaughtered for his tusks, gets to play with a basketball at the Granby Zoo. I spent a good two hours

here, and still didn't see all the displays, but I certainly did see that it has a great collection of endangered animals, including a wonderful silverback mountain gorilla who was a bit camera shy.

All too soon I have to return to Mount Bromont to pick Dale up at the agreed time. He has had a great afternoon after hooking up with a young Quebec teenager who spoke little English, but was able to take him on a tour of all the best (a.k.a. scariest) trails.

We return to our campsite where Dale has a swim and I just chill out, glad not to have any broken bones.

Next morning, it's time to move on again heading for the town of Compton, deep in the Eastern Townships. The countryside is rolling hills and dairy farms interspersed with the lakes that have long made this area of Quebec a haven for tourists. We pass by the small city of Magog, at the head of huge Lake Memphremagog, and the tourist town of Ayer's Cliff on the shores of Lake Massawippi before passing through Hatley, and reaching the outskirts of Compton.

Despite its tiny size, Compton was the hometown of one of Canada's most beloved Prime Ministers, Louis St. Laurent. The house where St. Laurent was raised, and the general store his father ran, are now a National Historic Site. Dale and I are going to drop in for a

visit. He was the Prime Minister when I was born (not that I remember it), and was responsible for some very important Canadian decisions like joining NATO, accepting Newfoundland as the tenth province, and starting the equalization programme that has benefited Quebec and the Atlantic provinces immensely.

After our visit to the St. Laurent home, we make the short trip to Camping de Compton. Even though the place appears to be jam-packed with regular campers here to enjoy what might be the last great week-end of the summer, we are given a very nice spot that overlooks the Coaticook River valley.

In preparing for this trip, I was advised that I shouldn't miss the Foresta Lumina in Coaticook, which takes place only after dark. We have tickets booked for tonight, but first we are going to check out what I am told is a very nice restaurant right next to the entrance of Foresta Lumina.

The restaurant is Coffret de l'Imagination, which is located in an old industrial brick building in the Coaticook Gorge. Thank goodness we have a reservation because it is packed to the gunnels with a lineup outside. Dale and I are given a table for two in a room dominated by brick and wood, and decorated with what I can best describe as imaginative artwork.



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Coaticook Suspension Bridge
"A beautiful spot"

We both have the four-course table d'hôte du terrior, which features local products and is very reasonably priced. Total price for a feast for two with a glass of wine each, plus coffee, was \$88 bucks! That certainly puts us in a good mood heading to the Foresta Lumina.

There is a huge lineup waiting to get into the Foresta Lumina, a combination of families with very young kids, giddy teenagers, and quite a few older couples. I still have no clue what Foresta Lumina is all about, and can't gather much from the surrounding conversations, mostly in French. It appears that they let in groups of about 25 at a time, with a five-minute interval in between, and for whatever reason, it looks like everyone from the Eastern Townships is here in Coaticook tonight.

After waiting about fifteen minutes, we join a group that is let in through a narrow opening, and we begin the journey through Foresta Lumina. It's very difficult to describe the experience in words other than to say that if you take a large slice of Lord of the Rings, especially the elfin Rivendell, add a touch of Stephen King, a dollop of The Walking Dead, and the final scene of Close Encounters of the Third Kind, you might get an idea of why thousands of people are drawn here tonight.

There are a number of highlights I should mention, including the entryway, which did remind me of Rivendell, the dozens of people crossing the suspension bridge in the dark (that's where The Walking Dead reference rings true), and my favourite, the thousands of points of light on the walls of the gorge. I wonder if George H.W. Bush ever came here to actually see a thousand points of light. Driving back to Compton, we decide we must return to see the gorge in daylight.

I almost hate to write this, but it is the final day of the 2015 RV trip. We will visit Coaticook Gorge first, and then return to Montreal. We cross the Coaticook covered bridge, park the RV, and walk into the gorge.



After about a kilometre, we arrive at the same spot that we entered Foresta Lumina last night. It looks a lot different during the day, with about a thousand less people. Still, it's pretty neat with the hanging lamps and seven iron panels telling the stories of the various denizens that inhabit these woods.

The highlight of Coaticook Gorge is undoubtedly the suspension bridge. Guinness recognizes it as the longest pedestrian suspension bridge in the world. Take that Capilano! Last night, there were throngs of people crossing the bridge in the dark. This morning, we have it to ourselves. So that's the Coaticook Gorge, by day and by night - a truly, beautiful spot, and the best part is that if you come here in the day, it's free. Way to go Coaticook.

It is with a real sense of regret that we head back to Montreal, where Dale and I will part ways, as he returns to Calgary, and I to Halifax. We have had six wonderful days of nothing but great hospitality and friendliness. Our lack of French has not been a hindrance, and we have shared just a little bit of the *Quebécois joie de vivre*. We will return to explore more of *La Belle Province*. **RV**