

USUALLY I complain if the mercury hovers anywhere below 20C, so I don't know why I am so enamoured of the idea of staying in Quebec's ice hotel. Hotel de Glace, Canada's only hotel fashioned from ice, sits 40km west of Quebec City and celebrates its 10th anniversary in the next northern winter.

Perhaps it's the awe of sleeping in a building that gets destroyed and rebuilt every winter. Or maybe it's to prove I really can survive the cold.

Whatever the reason, I find myself kitted out in newly bought itchy thermals and a hat that refuses to remain on my head, nursing a frozen nose. It is a nostril-numbing minus 20C outside, so the constant minus 5C of the ice hotel seems quite balmy.

Guests check in at 8pm; before that late arrival time, the hotel doubles as a museum, offering tours to those sensible visitors who want to admire the elaborate igloo without actually sleeping in it.

Expecting little more than thick ice walls and a snowy floor, I am blown away by the work that has gone into designing a hotel with a three-month life span.

From the outside it looks like a row of glass-fronted igloos, while inside carvings punctuate the foyer, ice chandeliers hang like finely crafted icicles and there's even an art gallery, with paintings by local artists encased in thick slabs of ice.

We join the under-10s playing on the ice slide, then the over-18s sampling surprisingly well-priced cocktails — not on but in the rocks — including the n'ice martini, polar bear and frost bite. It's no bad thing that the rooms are off limits until after dinner, because it forces you to explore the hotel and its expansive grounds, where there's a skating rink, snow tubing and forest sleigh rides.

Dinner is served in a neighbouring hotel (a conventional property that won't melt if you spill soup on the floor) and is followed by a 30-minute briefing on topics such as "how to get into your sleeping bag" (a staff member snuggles into a 10cm-thick bag as we watch).

I fret about losing cocktail time but I do learn that one's face should remain exposed to the elements all

Chill out by night

Lucy Cornes checks into a really cool hotel near Quebec City for a once-in-a-lifetime experience



Below freezing: The Hotel De Glace, which is made of ice, is rebuilt every winter



On the rocks: The bar serves cocktails such as the polar bear. Pictures: Lucy Cornes

night. Breathing equals moisture and if the inside of your bag freezes, you'll be in for a very uncomfortable night indeed, even with the arctic bag and pillow provided.

Back in the bar, the evening program is just getting

started. Designed to keep overnight guests' blood pumping, the itinerary kicks off with a scavenger hunt and continues with a sculpting contest. My finished product looks a lot like a block of ice that has been

dropped on the floor rather than the croc's head I was aiming for, but the frantic chiselling has certainly warmed things up.

The drinking is brought to a halt by patrons fully

aware that a midnight visit to the bathroom means crawling out of a sleeping bag, piling on layers and traipsing out to a hut, so we move to the outdoor hot tubs, the final stop before bed. Trying to keep my shoulders under water and my hair dry, I want to relax, but can't help cursing my failure to pack a pair of sandals as I run barefoot from one tub to another in temperatures pushing minus 30C.

Finally, it's time to hit the sack. A few guests retire to suites boasting intricately carved walls but most of us head for one of 30 simpler rooms containing nothing more than a bed and a side table. The furniture is fashioned from ice, though beds are thankfully topped with a thick mattress covered in deer fur.

Suitably layered and snuggled into my assigned sleeping bag, I lie listening to the soft snores of my fiancé and try to sleep. Eventually I decide to ignore the only thing I've learned from our briefing and bury my head deep in the sleeping bag, condensation be damned. I finally drift off to sleep, occasionally awakening to peel off a layer or pull an arm back into the safety of the covers.

I'm up at 6am with most of the guests. Some are celebrating their survival with a dip in the jacuzzi. Others have already disappeared in search of breakfast. But the grounds are blissfully quiet so I creep out to spend a few moments in the crisp air, which makes me very appreciative of the comparative warmth inside.

As I pack my partially frozen possessions, I realise why I wanted to stay here. It wasn't for bragging rights or to prove my survival skills. Hotel de Glace is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, worth every minute of shivering and wondering if you'll make it through the night.

Checklist

Hotel de Glace's rooms start at \$C169 (\$183) a person, including a welcome cocktail, full sleeping equipment and buffet breakfast. The hotel is open from January to March; tours cost \$C16 and are conducted from 10.30am to 4.30pm daily, though visitors are free to wander until 8pm. More: www.icehotel-canada.com.

Skis, sleds and slides

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ice walk through the Maligne Canyon outside Jasper, a leftover from the last ice age. We start taking our guide more seriously when he hands out heavy boots and strap-on cleats. A walk down the canyon takes a couple of hours, past frozen waterfalls and ice curtains. Apart from the safety factor, going with a guide also buys you a blissful bus ride back up.

A couple of days later, near Lake Louise, we get a different take on glaciers thanks to Ralph and Susie Sliger, whose range of tour packages gets you into otherwise inaccessible country. Having spent a week looking up at the mountains, it feels like playing God to look down on them as we helicopter across the Cline Valley. Landing in unspoiled snow, we strap on snowshoes. No matter what size you get, it still feels like walking in big brother's thongs, although with snowshoes you can cross even deep snow without sinking. Pilot Ralph carries champagne in his backpack to toast the moment on top of the world.

Other days, I see the mountains up close and personal, face down, skis up. The children, better skiers than me, say the view from the top is awesome and the runs long and powdery. "I can see British Columbia from here," says one, and at Sunshine, north of Banff, one ski lift does cross the border for a few minutes, which impresses our destination-collecting kids.

Each of our three days of skiing is different. At Marmot Basin, near Jasper, the deep freeze and pre-Christmas rush mean the slopes are relatively quiet. It's a compact resort focused on families and an introduction to the mega-slopes.

All the Alberta park ski fields face the challenge of balancing development with preservation. Sunshine, the only one with a hotel on site, does this by having a base station on the lower slopes and a 20-minute gondola ride to the main action up-mountain. Despite an initial crush, the number of ski lifts and runs means it never feels crowded.

Lake Louise ski field is a bigger, trendier outfit with runs covering both sides of the mountain, a ski-only chalet on the far side, music and ski school.

In the ski world, the Rockies are overshadowed by the famous BC resorts, which claim better snow. But our three ski bunnies, versed in Australian man-made runs and treacherous ice,



Have an ice stay: Fantasyland igloo

have another word for Alberta's snow, which apparently outranks dinosaurs, ice ages and ancient civilisation: "Cool, Mum."

And so it is. Mary-Ellen Hepworth's travel was assisted by Travel Alberta and Fantasyland Hotel.

Checklist

Hotel tariffs in Canada vary widely with the season. Look around for quotes on the dates you want. For Sunshine Mountain Lodge: www.sunshinevillage.com/banff_ski_packages/sunshine_mountain_lodge.php. www.fairmont.com/jasper www.fantasylandhotel.com www.ramada.com www.super8.com

Trail rides at Anchor D Ranch from \$C69 (\$76) for two hours; packages available for up to seven days. More: www.anchor.com.

At West Edmonton Mall, one-day water park or theme park ride pass from \$C36.95 (children \$C29.95). One-day ice palace pass, \$C7.95; sea lion show from \$C5.95. More: www.westedmontonmall.com.

Maligne Canyon three-hour ice walk tour, \$C55 (children \$C25) plus GST. Other tours, including dogsledding, are available. More: www.jasperadventurecentre.com. Helicopter tour across the glaciers from \$C165 a seat. Packages including snowshoeing, picnics, heli-skiing and heli-yoga are available. More: www.icefieldheli.com.

www.travelalberta.com www.skimarmot.com www.sunshinevillage.com www.skilouise.com www.royalalbertamuseum.ca www.head-smashed-in.com www.dinosaurpark.ca www.tyrellmuseum.com

WARM-UPS AND WARNINGS

What to wear: Without proper cold-weather gear, you won't be able to venture far outside. Buy all you need at chain sports stores such as Sport Chek in main cities. (There's more variety and lower prices than in Australia.) Each of us arrived with two sets of thermals — tops, pants and socks — and a waterproof pair of hiking boots, all bought on sale in Australia, so we don't waste time chasing underwear and fitting shoes. We also have a fleece each, waterproof snow jacket, beanie, scarf, ski gloves and neckwarmer. Along the way we buy waterproof ski pants, extra glove liners and hand warmers to slip into gloves.

It is useful to have dress gloves as well as ski ones — for taking pictures, getting out change and keys — and extra socks for doubling up on very cold days. Indoors is generally well heated, so set out dressed in layers. Ski, skate and snowboard hire is easy and efficient. Helmets are recommended on the slopes and compulsory for children under 12.

Road warriors: Despite their fondness for the Commonwealth,

Canadians drive on the right. They also adopt a first-in, best-dressed rule to the many four-way stop signs. It is worth checking the road rules. Roads are broad and generally well signposted. Snow ploughs and sand or grit help control the ice and snow, with the main roads cleared first. However, Australians unfamiliar with such conditions should go rather slower than the locals.

All vehicles should be fitted with snow tyres for winter driving and most will need a block warmer, which is a sort of on-board central heating system that you plug into a power socket each night if the car is left outside. All the places we stayed offered a plug-in point or undercover parking.

The big freeze: We learn not to leave Clarence, our portable sat-nav system, in the car overnight, as it takes time to wake up in the morning. Likewise, don't leave damp gloves, full drink bottles or electronic games in a vehicle, as they will freeze. Also, don't wash the car. Any water left in the doors could freeze the locks.

Mary-Ellen Hepworth

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Series editor: Susan Kurosawa
Deputy editor: Michelle Rowe
Online editor: Bradley Wynne
Production editor: Mark Butler
Design and layout: Warren Melksham
Editorial liaison and picture research: Sharon Fowler

Contributors: Lucy Cornes, Mary-Ellen Hepworth, Sue Hoffart, Anne Kostalas, Suzanne Morphet, Charles Starmer-Smith

Advertising: Bob Rickey (02) 9288 3645
Editorial inquiries: Sharon Fowler (02) 9288 2419; travel@theaustralian.com.au
Website: www.theaustralian.com.au/travel