

Joie de vivre

From eclectic festivals to outdoor adventures, Quebec is a perfect spot to soak in the Canadian summer, finds **Laura French**

It's 9am on a Saturday and I'm dancing along to the twangs of a local folk band on the edge of a main road. The tables of the roadside Les Bonyeuses cafe are packed with other festival-goers, who clap along as they tuck into flaky croissants and pains au chocolat against a backdrop of emerald mountains. It feels like I've stepped straight into a film set.

By now I've got used to these impromptu, round-the-clock performances at Le Festif!, a four-day festival in the artsy town of Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec, where concerts pop up in just about every location (and at every hour) you can think of.

The previous day, I'd watched a Japanese flautist hypnotise us in an underground art gallery, bopped along to a soulful guitarist in a local resident's

backyard and been mesmerised by a poet-rapper-pianist on a stage strung with disco balls. The next day, I find myself immersed in a dramatic string performance in an art museum as a dozen huge double basses stun us into silence.

This is all just the beginning, according to Clément Turgeon, director and founder of the festival. He says: "Last year, the local priest was even the MC one night. He was on stage at 2am introducing a heavy metal band."

FREE SPIRITS

There's something distinctly quirky about this underrated, French-speaking province, which is three times the size of France. And Baie-Saint-Paul, home to a population of just 7,000, is the cherry on the cake. ➤

Canadian singer
Klô Pelgag performs
in the street at Le Festif!

PICTURE: Caroline Perron



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Whale breaching in St Lawrence River; Canyon Sainte-Anne; Baie-Saint-Paul; Performers on a festival bus at Le Festifl

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Juliana.B; Caroline Perron; Gremm



This bohemian town has long been known for its creative heritage. In the 1980s, a troupe of still-walking performers gained acclaim here. Founder Guy Laliberté took the show on tour across the wider

province where it became known as the now-legendary Cirque du Soleil. Today a row of art galleries and indie boutiques makes up the town's main street, with colourfully clad locals out in full force for the festival.

FAIRMONT LE CHATEAU FRONTENAC Quebec City



One of Canada's most recognisable hotels, this castle-like, Gothic-inspired feat, which first opened in 1893, has hosted everyone from Winston Churchill to Queen Elizabeth II over the years. A National Historic Site of Canada, it's located in the heart of Old Quebec, with 610 rooms and suites and a shiny lobby decked out in elaborate chandeliers, oak-panelled walls and marble floors. Lavish fine-dining restaurant Champlain offers wine-paired tasting menus (think wagyu beef, oysters and Arctic char)

under a gilded ceiling. Le Sam bistro serves more casual French dishes, and the 1608 bar ranks in Canada's 100 Best Bars list. Rooms are comfortable and contemporary, offering sweeping views of Old Quebec and the St Lawrence River, and the location is excellent, with the city's key attractions on the doorstep.

Book it: Fairmont Queen rooms start from £199 per night (room-only). fairmont.com

But it's not just about the music scene. Set at the heart of Quebec's picturesque Charlevoix region and on the shores of the St Lawrence River, Baie-Saint-Paul makes an excellent base for some outdoor adventures. One morning we head out on a five-mile kayaking trip to see its scenery from the water.

Drifting along with the flow of the current, an occasional torrent of rapids provides an exhilarating boost. It's a serene way to see this delightfully untouristy part of eastern Canada. Prices start from about £32 with local activity provider Katabatik.

WHALE OF A TIME

It's only the first of the adventures in store here. The St Lawrence River, which cuts through the heart of Charlevoix and wider Quebec, is one of the best spots in the world for whale-watching.

Humpback, minke, beluga, fin and blue whales all inhabit its waters, and one afternoon, we head out on a Zodiac from nearby Baie-Sainte-Catherine to try our chances at spotting them. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced before – not

“We watch as its giant, silver-grey back arches above the water metres from the boat, its tail emerging with a gracious swish

least because we find ourselves in the eye of an apocalyptic storm.

We zip across the water as the rain pelts down, then pull up in what feels like the middle of the sea (this is not your standard river, at around 15 miles wide in this stretch, with even wider sections and stronger currents further up in the gulf).

Our guide points to a black speck in the distance – then a jet of spray erupts before the silhouette of a tail nosedives into the water. A few minutes later, another humpback appears closer still. We watch as its giant, silver-grey back arches above the water metres from the boat, its tail emerging with a gracious swish. ➤



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Then it surfaces again and again. It's the closest I've been to a whale in the wild and the whole boat is in awe – made all the more dramatic when a vivid bolt of fork lightning flashes through the sky in an image forever imprinted in my mind.

We float for the next 30 minutes before the captain announces it's time to return. Then we pound full-throttle across the surface as the hail pours down – offering just as much of a thrill as the whale sightings (from about £68 with Croisières AML).

ADRENALINE ADVENTURES

There are more high-octane adventures above the water, too. We head to Canyon Sainte-Anne, a vast gorge carved into the rock by a 74m-high waterfall. Wooden suspension bridges take us ambling above the falls, offering panoramic views as its white plume cascades between

carpets of pine and maple trees.

But the real fun comes when we take on the AirCanyon – a two-seater chair that has us dangling freely from a cable 90m above the gorge before whizzing backwards at 30mph, a panorama of falls and forest opening out below (from £8).

We compare it with the thrills at nearby Montmorency Falls, a 15-minute drive from Quebec City. Here, a solid wall of water crashes down the cliffs into a cloud of mist, creating a rainbow that sparkles at the bottom. Viewing platforms offer close-up views, but the highlight is the zipline – a 300m-long cable where I soar bird-like over the falls as my screams ricochet off the cliffs (from about £18).

CULTURE IN QUEBEC CITY

While adventure is threaded through much of the province, it's far from its only draw. For a taste of traditional

FESTIVAL FUN



For clients keen to experience more of Quebec's festival scene, suggest timing their trip to coincide with Festival d'été de Québec (FEQ), taking place July 3-13 this year. This 11-day extravaganza attracts big names from across Canada and beyond and offers exceptional value; an 11-day pass will get you into every concert for about £90. Ben Howard, the Jonas Brothers and Post Malone were among the line-up last year and Rod Stewart, Avril Lavigne, Shania Twain and Benson Boone are set to perform this year. Expect stages across the city, including the historic Plains of Abraham, and a tangible buzz that characterises Quebec's fun summer vibes.

feq.ca/en

DESTINATIONS

QUEBEC | CANADA



AirCanyon at Canyon Sainte-Anne

Quebecois culture, I end my trip in Quebec City. On a tour of Unesco-listed Old Quebec – the original part of the city – our guide tells us about the French settlers who arrived here in the early 1600s, leaving behind an influence still heavily felt today. We wander cobbled streets, admire grey-stone buildings punctuated by colourful shutters and pass by eclectic cafes, boutiques and galleries.

There's a distinctly villagey feel that takes me back to Baie-Saint-Paul. One street is set beneath a ceiling of colourful umbrellas while another features a pastel-pink pig peering into the window of a restaurant. Central square Place-

Royale is also marked out by a striking trompe-l'oeil mural that looks so real I do a double-take.

We stroll along the riverside boardwalk then hop over to Île d'Orléans – a peaceful island where much of the city's produce is grown, with strawberry fields and vineyards carpeting the landscapes in swathes of glowing green.

Like Baie-Saint-Paul, it's an alluring nature-meets-culture combination. As an alternative to Western Canada – with all the adventurous activities, varied history and cultural quirks, but fewer crowds – Quebec has me in awe from start to finish. **TV**

BOOK IT

Premier Holidays can tailor-make a week-long trip to Quebec, including stays in Quebec City and Baie-Saint-Paul, plus whale-watching and visits to Montmorency Falls and Canyon Sainte-Anne. Prices start from £1,649, including flights from Heathrow and based on a September 1 departure. premierholidays.co.uk

Gold Medal offers four nights (room-only) at the five-star Fairmont Le Château Frontenac in Quebec City from £1,679, including flights from Gatwick and based on two sharing a Fairmont Room from July 6. goldmedal.co.uk



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