

Five worth the drive

For great downhill skiing

BY MICHAEL PRENTICE, OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 7, 2012

Within a three-hour drive of Ottawa are some of the finest places in the world for downhill skiing. And the après-ski is world-class, too. Closer to home, the hills are smaller, but still lots of fun. And the nearby hills are much cheaper than Whiteface or Tremblant.

1. WHITEFACE MOUNTAIN

What's best about it: Whiteface Mountain, in upstate New York, was twice the venue for alpine skiing in the Winter Olympics. It has some of the steepest, longest, most challenging ski runs in North America. The vertical drop of more than 3,000 feet is the greatest this side of the Rockies.

What it costs: Regular daily lift rates, in U.S. dollars including tax, are \$79 for adults, \$64 for teenagers, \$51 for children 7-12, \$64 for seniors 65-69, and \$38 for seniors aged 70 and up. Children six and under ski free. For non-skiers, a gondola ride to the summit is worthwhile - provided visibility is good. The ride costs \$19 for adults and teenagers, \$13 for seniors and children 12 and under.

Après-ski: There are seven places to eat and drink on the mountain, from fine dining to snacks. There are dozens more in nearby Lake Placid, a picturesque village in the Adirondack Mountains. My favourite is The Cottage, a pub and casual eatery beside the Mirror Lake Inn.

Tip: Spring skiing rates begin March 18, when the adult daily rate drops to \$58.

Getting there: In good driving conditions, Lake Placid is about a three-hour drive from Ottawa, via Ogdensburg and Tupper Lake. www.whiteface.com

2. MONT TREMBLANT

What's best about it: There is an ambience and air of excitement at Mont Tremblant that is hard to beat. People are here to have fun, on and off the slopes. With a vertical drop of more than 2,000 feet, the ski runs are challenging.

What it costs: When taxes and surcharges of more than 18 per cent are added, the regular daily cost of a lift ticket for those aged 18 and over is almost \$89. The daily cost of skiing is about \$77 for seniors, \$64 for youths 13-17, \$52 for children 6-12, and \$10 for children 3-5.

Après-ski: Le Shack and La Forge are popular, noisy spots for the young to meet and mingle. Even if you don't intend to squander money on gambling, it's fun to take a free gondola ride to the nearby casino.

Tip: Check out the Liftopia website for discount lift tickets to Mont Tremblant, Whiteface Mountain and many other ski hills. When I checked in December, Liftopia was offering lift tickets to Mont Tremblant on some days at 16 per cent below Tremblant's advertised price.

Getting there: It's easier than it used to be, thanks to highway improvements in Quebec. The journey from Ottawa, via Gatineau and Montebello, takes about two hours. www.tremblant.ca www.liftopia.com

3. MONT STE. MARIE

What's best about it: Mont Ste. Marie in west Quebec is the queen of ski hills within easy driving range of Ottawa. It has added a longer run this season. Mont Ste. Marie claims that its vertical drop of more than 1,250 feet is twice that of any of its nearby rivals - Camp Fortune, Edelweiss, Mont Cascades and Vorlage in west Quebec and Mount Pakenham in eastern Ontario.

What it costs: Mont Ste. Marie's adult lift rate is about half that at Mont Tremblant. Regular daily rates, including taxes, are about \$43 for those aged 18-55, \$38 for adults over 55 and students aged 18-21, \$34 for teens aged 13-17, and \$27 for children 7-12. Children aged six and under ski free.

Après-ski: There is a large ski lodge serving comfort food and drinks at the foot of the hill. For a more sophisticated après-ski experience, the Wakefield Mill Inn on the way back to Ottawa is a good spot, with woodburning fireplaces.

Tip: With a coupon from the popular Entertainment discount book, two people can ski for the price of one on a weekday. The discount is not valid on weekends.

Getting there: Mont Ste. Marie is about an hour drive north of Ottawa. www.montstemarie.com

4. MONT SUTTON

What's best about it: Mont Sutton, in Quebec near the Vermont border, is about a three-hour drive from Ottawa. It is rated one of the top 50 places to ski in the world by The Independent, a British daily newspaper. The only other Canadian spots to make the list were Whistler in British Columbia and Banff-Lake Louise in Alberta. Mont Sutton has a vertical drop of 1,500 feet. Abundant snowfall makes skiing possible an average of 137 days a year.

What it costs: Daily lift rates, including tax, are \$62 for adults 18-64, \$44 for seniors and students 14-25, and \$35 for children 6-13. Children under six ski free.

Après-ski: There are four restaurants at various elevations on the mountain. They feature fireplaces, extensive menus and spectacular views.

Tip: Check the Mont Sutton website for promotions. One offered recently was Seniors' Week from Jan. 23-27.

The daily lift rate offered was \$25 for anyone aged 55 or over.

Getting there: After driving from Ottawa to Montreal, take Highway 10. Before reaching Sherbrooke, turn south on Route 139 to Cowansville and Sutton. www.montsutton.com

5. CALABOGIE PEAKS

What's best about it: It offers great variety. There are easy ski runs and difficult ones, with a vertical drop of more than 750 feet. There are wonderful cross-country ski trails, for a nominal daily fee of \$2 to the Madawaska Nordic Ski Club. The surrounding wilderness is perfect for hiking on a fine winter's day.

What it costs: The regular adult daily rate for a lift ticket, including tax, is about \$38 on weekdays and \$44 on weekends and holidays. The rate for seniors and teens 13-17 is about \$33 on weekdays and \$38 on weekends and holidays. The rate for children 6-12 is about \$26 on weekdays and \$29 on weekends and holidays. Children under six ski free.

Après-ski: Canthooks restaurant, at the foot of the ski hill, promises "a culinary treat unequalled in the Ottawa Valley." It is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Sample lunch fare: French onion soup \$9, chicken club sandwich \$12. The Calabogie Peaks Resort Hotel offers packages that include free skiing.

Tip: Book lift tickets on line and save 10 per cent.

Getting there: Calabogie Peaks is beside Calabogie Lake, about an hour's drive west of Ottawa. Take Highway 417 past Arnprior, then follow signs. www.calabogie.com

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