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Canada train journey: high life on the Train de Charlevoix

A newly restored loggers' railway offers a scenic route from Québec City to a region known as the 'garden of Canada'. Marc Zakian jumps aboard.



Québec's new train snakes along the St Lawrence

By Marc Zakian

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It's the perfect setting for a train departure. Beneath the watery fireworks of the Montmorency Falls, its vapour clouds spiralling skywards, we step aboard a silvery carriage pulled by a vintage diesel engine. With a double-toot of the train horn and applause from the station staff we are off into the Charlevoix hills.

This is Quebec's "circus train" – a project nurtured by the founder of Cirque du Soleil to turn a disused loggers' railway line into one of the world's great train journeys.

The track clings to a thread of rock carved between tree-lined hillsides and the shores of the St Lawrence River. The large carriage windows frame a passing landscape of mud flats dotted with white gulls, glistening reed beds, and a river of such epic dimension that it feels as if we are riding along the edge of the world.

At each farmstead, hamlet or village our train sounds its presence. It's over 30 years since the railway shifted its last log, and the Fifties sunflower-yellow bulldog of an engine tugging the shiny new wagons brings smiles and waves from farmers, schoolchildren and – at the convent of Saint François – a group of nuns. Like royalty on tour we wave back.

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Our carriage mixes grand-tour rail nostalgia with hi-tech in-train entertainment. Each wagon has high ceilings, plush green and cream leather upholstery for first-class posterior comfort, and iPods that animate the trip with films, words and music.

White-shirted waiters glide through our carriage and lay a three-course lunch in front of us without a slip. After three hours of eating, talking and waving we roll to a stop at La Malbaie, literally the end of the line. As

I step off the train a slim, athletic man fixes me with a smile: "I am Jean your guide. Super happy to meet you.

"The Charlevoix region is the garden of Canada. Every field, bush or tree is super ready to serve the local dinner table," explains Jean as we climb into his jeep. "There are 22 stops on the local 'flavour trail'; we will start at the Laiterie Charlevoix."

This dairy produces English-style cheddar, as well as Brie and Camembert. The chief cheesemaker proudly shows us the dairy museum, with its ancient wooden butter churns and Thirties milk bottles, before we head to the old farm house for the tasting.

Our bellies full of Brie, we head to Baie-Saint-Paul. This town is the cultural capital of Charlevoix, and the main street is lined with statues celebrating artists who have worked here.

But it is art of a liquid kind that we have come to sample. Frederick Tremblay is a creator of artisan ales. From the Le Saint Pub and microbrewery he has launched 14 beers, including the prize-winning La Vache Folle. We join Paul for lunch. I try the onion soup with beer, the St Lawrence River mussels with beer, and finish with blueberry beer. Jean notices that I am "super tired" and drops me at the hotel.

On my last day we head to Le Picbois wildlife reserve. Gilles, a doughty farmer turned conservationist, leads us into the forest. Hearing our steps, seven 600lb brown bears come pounding towards us ready for lunch – fortunately, it is not us. Gilles ushers our group into a tree hide, and we watch the bears feast on a mixture of molasses, fat and blueberries prepared by the reserve.

"This is why I left city life in Montréal," says Jean, "to seek the beauty of nature, and share it." As we head to the station Jean tells me that if I want to come back in winter he can build me an igloo.

The train toots and we set off back to Québec City. Along the way there are three more hours of fine food, lovely scenery, good conversation, waving... and, for me, thoughts of life in an igloo.

The essentials

GETTING THERE

Air Canada (0871 220 1111; aircanada.com (<http://aircanada.com>)) offers flights to Québec City from £450. Taxis, buses and hotel shuttles run from the airport to the city centre (from £1.80; aeroportdequebec.com).

The Train de Charlevoix leaves from Montmorency Falls Station, a short bus or a taxi ride (£15) from the city centre (lemassif.com/en/train (<http://lemassif.com/en/train>)). A return ticket is £140 plus taxes, including a three-course meal on board both ways; drinks are extra.

THE INSIDE TRACK

In Québec, consider a museum pass (or passport); £30 from the 20 participating attractions or Québec City Tourism Information Bureau (001 418 641 6290; quebecregion.com). It includes a ride on the Montmorency cable car.

Car hire in Charlevoix at discountquebec.com (<http://discountquebec.com>) costs from £45 per day.

Don't go too late in the season if you want to see bears or whales.

Museums and galleries are closed in Québec City on Mondays.

THE BEST HOTELS

Auberge des 3 Canards ££

A rustic-style hotel constructed from local pine. Low-tech but friendly. Sit on the balcony and watch the sun set over the St Lawrence (001 418 653761; auberge3canards.com (<http://auberge3canards.com>); doubles from £56).

Hôtel Baie-Saint-Paul ££

Part of the same project as the new Charlevoix train, this

62-room hotel features a spa and high-quality restaurant (435 3683; lemassif.com (<http://lemassif.com>) or hotelbaiestpaul.com (<http://hotelbaiestpaul.com>); from £56).

Fairmont le Manoir Richelieu, La Malbaie £££

The destination for grand tourists in the early 19th century, this castle on the cliffside has views across the St Lawrence (665 3703; fairmont.com/Fr/Richelieu (<http://fairmont.com/Fr/Richelieu>); £125).

THE BEST RESTAURANTS.

Micro-Brewery Le Saint Pub £

A popular pub-restaurant where you can eat outside in the summer and watch art lovers, bikers and locals on the main street. Canadian-style food. Try the double IPA Mad Cow beer if you dare (2 rue Racine, Baie-Saint-Paul; 240 2332; saint-pub.com (<http://saint-pub.com>)).

Auberge des 3 Canards ££

Well-regarded hotel restaurant, which mixes local ingredients with French cuisine; duck is a speciality (115 Côte Bellevue La Malbaie, Pointe-au-Pic; 653761).

Le Café du Clocher Penché ££

This homely, French-style bistro is a short walk from the centre of Québec City (203 rue Saint-Joseph Est; 640 0597; clocherpenche.ca (<http://clocherpenche.ca>)).

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