



A WINTER WARM-UP IN QUÉBEC CITY

Sometimes the only way to have your favourite city run all to yourself is to do it when the mercury drops below zero and most people are still in bed.

Winter mornings have never been a runner's best friend – unless you happen to live in Québec City. I do live in Québec City for part of the year, and have found that the season is such a part of our culture and landscape, it's actually a time when that internal early morning struggle – the negotiation with oneself for a few more minutes in bed – disappears. In winter, I get up with the alarm, excited to discover how snowy it might be outside, curious about how cold it might be. On go the layers and the four-season running gear – the thermals, the tuque, the YakTrax – and off I go.

Outside, it's always minus a few and my breath steams up in great clouds around me. I never grow tired of what lies ahead: centuries of history and gorgeous natural surroundings along my favourite city run on the planet. It's a run I do a few times a week when I'm here, and it's actually best in the coldest months. However, even in winter, Québec City gets packed with people, which is why early morning is my favourite. A quiet dawn workout is the perfect way to start the day.

Québec sits high on a cape known as Cap Diamant, between the St Lawrence and St Charles Rivers. The old city was built on the site of an Iroquois village, chosen by French explorer and city founder Samuel de Champlain in 1608.

Because of its geography, the oldest part of the city is a two-tier affair. The upper city sits high on a promontory with its meandering, history-drenched thoroughfares, imposing ramparts, and the impressive Château Frontenac hotel. The lower part of



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town is full of impossibly narrow cobbled streets and quaint shops, in what's known as the Quartier Petit Champlain, a neighbourhood leading to the Old Port area.

I always begin this run near the snowy expanse of the city's largest city-centre park, the Plaines d'Abraham. When it's really cold, say, 5°F (-15°C), I head here first for a warm-up along the flat, green, manicured gardens and tree-fringed lawns. In winter, it's a huge, snowy playground with cross-country ski tracks, a skating rink and snow-running tracks.

Once at the south end of the plains, I pick up some of the off-road trails that lead through the heart of the park. Ice-crusting snow sparkles in the streetlights, early morning skiers glide by and a handful of runners leave trails of frozen exhales in the still air.

By the time I reach the Old City though, I'm often the only runner around. There's still fresh white snow on the pavement and no sound other than the rhythmic crunch underfoot. I run over ground where in 1759 the French and British fought the bloody Battle of Québec for control of the city.

Ahead is the nearly 200-year-old Citadelle, one of the best-preserved forts in North America. I jog through one of the city gates, Porte St Louis, opposite Québec's ornate icicle-adorned parliament, before passing more architectural wonders such as the chateau-esque Hôtel de Ville de Québec (the city hall) and the Notre-Dame de Québec Basilica, first built on this site in 1647. This early, I have these places all to myself and it's wonderful to be able to take them all in, in solitude.

Once at the riverside, I head down the Escalier Casse-Cou (Breakneck Stairs), a steep stone stairway where I hold tight to the railings as I clamber down, being careful not to slip on hidden ice. I then enter the narrow, cobbled streets that run between the squat, stone buildings of Quartier Petit Champlain, the oldest commercial district on the continent. These tiny shops have been selling their wares here for 400 years; today the quartier is a tourist magnet, selling everything from tacky souvenirs to fine art. I often revel in the fact that the cobbles have a fine covering of crunchy snow, which makes them slightly grippier in winter than they are during the summer.

Beyond the cobblestone is the Boulevard Champlain at the St Lawrence riverside. The river is wide here – more than a kilometre across – and steam rises in the early light. Chunks of ice jostle in the turbulent water, catching the low sun as they tumble and bob past the city.

From here, I hit the paved walking tracks that lead me north to the Old Port, before looping south again, back to the Quartier Petit Champlain. This time I'm heading uphill, as I cruise up slender Rue Petit Champlain, which is usually packed with shoppers, many of whom ride the nearby funicular that parallels the street. But not this early. Long before the shops will open, their lit windows paint the untouched snow with a warm, yellow glow.

Eventually, I arrive at the iconic view of the city: the Château Frontenac hotel, towering above me as I duck under the Porte



WINTER WORSHIP

Québec City loves its cold winters so much that the town and its residents celebrate the season with a 10-day-long winter carnival festival in February each year. The city comes alive with every kind of winter sport imaginable, including sleigh and toboggan rides, as well as snow and ice carvings, music, steaming hot food and parades. The centrepiece is a vast ice palace, made with thousands of blocks of clear ice, brought to life with cinematic lighting.

"The cobbles have a fine covering of crunchy snow, which makes them grippier than they are in summer"



Clockwise from top: Québec City is transformed under a blanket of snow; grippy tread keeps runners on their feet; hit the road before Old Town wakes up. Previous page: stairs get slippery under ice in winter

Prescott city gate. Built as a hotel in 1893, the chateau is vast and imaginatively spectacular. Its fairytale turrets, sharp-pointed spires and steep copper roof, sprinkled here and there with snow, make it seem like a magical winter castle. It's florid now in the rising sun. To get even closer, I climb a stone stairway and emerge onto the boardwalk of Terrasse Dufferin, which is a delight underfoot: springy, wooden, flat.

My run ends with an exhilarating climb up 300 stairs to gain the ground I have lost. It's actually several sets of steps, mercifully interspersed with flat sections. I'm careful to tread gingerly and keep an eye on my feet as I ascend the icy steps – doing this run in reverse would require a precarious plunge down the slippery descent.

Finally, I pop out at the top, next to the Citadelle and onto the Plaines of Abraham once again. The city is now awake and my tracks have long been trampled by commuters. There are people now walking – and skiing – to work. There are others out doing their morning runs. But the winter sun still is low in the sky, just enough to warm my face.

With the temperature rising, it's a slushy run back across the park. The tuque comes off and I bask in the last of the cold, clear air for a few final moments.

Of course, this is a run that's brilliant when the snow melts, too. Autumn is particularly beautiful, with the crunch of leaves underfoot. But, for me, this is an early morning winter run, a time when I have it all to myself. **GM**



ORIENTATION

Start/End // Plaines d'Abraham
Distance // About 5.5 miles (9km)

Getting there // Fly into Québec City's Jean Lesage international airport or arrive by train. It's a 3.5-hour train trip from Montreal.

When to go // To experience winter running in Québec City, visit between December and March when there's usually snow on the ground.

Where to stay // The funky C3 art hotel (www.lec3hotel.com) is just opposite the Plaines d'Abraham, making it the perfect starting place for Québec City running.

More info // www.toursvoisquebec.com/en/

Things to know // For cold winter running, bring long running trousers and thermal layers for your top half, including a light windstopper running jacket. Bring a warm hat or headband, windbreaker gloves, waterproof socks, all-weather runners and snow grips for your shoes.

Opposite: Montréal's Angel of Mt Royal

MORE LIKE THIS WINTER RUNS IN CANADA

MT ROYAL PARK, MONTRÉAL

Just east of Montréal's downtown lies the 280-hectare Mt Royal Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed New York's Central Park and named the extinct volcano at its centre. Mt Royal Park has a hundred kilometres of tracks and trails to explore, and winter transforms them. There is skating on Beaver Lake, cross-country ski tracks, downhill skiing and, of course, running tracks. A jog on the packed-snow trails, after a fall of fresh snow with the bare trees dusted in white – and the quad-burning climb to the 764ft (233m) Mt Royal summit – is an essential Montréal experience.

Start/End // Le Serpentin Trail off West Pine Ave

Distance // 3–6 miles (5–10kms)

More info // www.lemontroyal.qc.ca/en

ST JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND

The 240ft (73m)-high Signal Hill – known for being the site of the first transatlantic radio transmission – is a brutal climb with a breathtaking reward. Start in downtown St John's, where a maze of narrow laneways snake between colourfully painted wooden houses above the harbour. Follow the waterfront northwest to the northernmost head of the Narrows. Here, you climb a series of walkways and staircases to the top. Though St John's gets more than 10ft (3m) of snow a year, the Signal Hill trail is often clear underfoot because of the city's cycle of snow and thaw. Wind, however, can make this a tricky outing, so visit when things are calm. It's 5–6 miles out and back from the city centre, depending on where you start.

Start/End // St John's downtown

Distance // 5–6 miles (8–10kms)

MT TREMBLANT, QUÉBEC

As soon the snow begins to melt on the slopes of Québec's best-known ski resort, local trail runners bust out the running shoes. The classic route is a 10.5-mile (17km) circuit, known as the Johannsen-Sommets-Grand Brule circuit, that starts and ends in Mt Tremblant Village. This hilly, technical trail takes you through gorgeous, deep green forest, across grassy ski trails, over rushing mountain streams and past gushing waterfalls. You climb over 1950ft (600m) in total and take in killer views over the ski village and surrounds from the summit of Mt Tremblant and Pic Johannsen.

Start/End // Mt Tremblant Village

Distance // 10.5 miles (17km)

