



June 10, 2011

It's Back to Nature at Rustic Spas in Quebec

By ELAINE GLUSAC

A SOFT summer rain stippled the surface of the lake. As I towed off my racer-back Speedo after a chilly swim, I spotted a muskrat busy building a nest beneath the willows. As campsites go, this clearing 30 miles northeast of [Quebec City](#) in the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains offered tranquillity. Except it wasn't a backcountry destination — it was a [spa](#) with a wild streak.

Zonespa, the site of that gentle rain shower, is among the many Canadian spas that take the Scandinavian sauna ritual as inspiration but expand on it to include aquatic therapies like warm whirlpools, bracing cascades and piping steam baths, placing them all in the midst of the north woods. Tapping [Canada's](#) natural resources, Nordic spas use rivers, ponds and lakes as additional therapy pools. The rustic theme extends to services: none offer manicures, and massages tend to be of the straightforward Swedish variety.

But within this organic theme lies variation, as I discovered last summer on a four-day stay exploring the lakes and rivers of [Quebec](#), the province most closely associated with what are known as Nordic spas. Four spas that opened since 2005 lie just 20 to 60 miles from Quebec City and close to national parks as well, creating a convenient circuit for those seeking to commune with nature on the trails and recover from that communion off-trail.

My first stop along this sybaritic trail was Siberia Station Spa, a hideaway just 17 miles from the Quebec City airport, near the resort area of Lake Beauport. Like other outdoor spas in the area, Siberia Station offered immersion in nature, with a series of Jacuzzis over several terraces on the steeply sloped bank of the Yellow River. Unlike many of them, it had features that could convince a honeymooner to forgo the Catskills for Canada. Those Jacuzzis seem designed for two, and couples waited their turn. Some did so cuddling in wide, rainbow-striped hammocks strung between the pines, in a capsule-shaped warming cabin with a flat-screen TV flashing serene images of [beaches](#), or wrapped in robes before an outdoor fire.

As directed by signs in French, I began exploring the facilities in the strongly eucalyptus-scented steam room, followed by an icy shower under a fake waterfall and a tranquil swing in a hammock serenaded by a red-winged blackbird's trill. The recommended steps — hot, cold, rest, repeat — were bracing, but after a few rounds, having my senses stunned wasn't just pleasurable, it was numbing in a way that became addictive.

Indulging in serial spas isn't often financially realistic. But Nordic spas are relatively inexpensive; access generally runs from 25 to 37 Canadian dollars (about the same in U.S. dollars), with massages extra. Affording it and needing it are two different things, of course. The next morning, I made up for my indolence with an invigorating [hike](#) through moose country in [Jacques-Cartier National Park](#), a half-hour's drive north of Lake Beauport.

A few short miles south of the park, the Jacques-Cartier River passes Le Nordique, a spa that evokes summer camp, including using the river as a cold plunge. Dotted in daisies and lupine with sunny, stone-tiled terraces and artificial waterfalls, the hillside property felt friendlier to singles and platonic pairs than did Siberia Station.

A mother and daughter emerging from the river assured me the cold dip was “très bien!” After I took my own frigid, nearly heart-stopping plunge, I realized that they had meant it “takes your breath away but is exhilarating to survive.” In the nearby sauna, a hot blast of air had a similarly jarring effect as I took a bench opposite another guest reading a novel by a window that naturally lighted the spacious wood interior.

Le Nordique most successfully channels scouting in its riverside row of wood-platform, screen-sided tents that serve as seasonal treatment rooms, where I reported for a Swedish massage. A soundtrack of tweeting, whistling and chirping [birds](#) accompanied the treatment as my therapist kneaded my backpack-forged knots.

I repeated the routine the next day, exercising in the morning by paddling and trail running at [Station Touristique Duchesnay](#), a province-managed tourist resort about 25 miles northwest of Quebec City.

Then, with sufficiently spent muscles, I showed up at one of the park's chief amenities, Tyst Tradgard. This four-year-old Nordic spa housed in a series of tidy clapboard cottages on the shore of Lake St.-Joseph offers a more private and pampering spa experience than the others, slotting guests individual time in its outdoor pools, plunges and saunas.

After meeting me in the locker room, an attendant guided me outdoors to my own private hydrotherapy [garden](#). She returned periodically during the hour before my massage to pace my journey from Jacuzzi to sauna, regulating the time I spent at each and freeing me to

study a longwing butterfly buzzing the poolside flowers, two woodpeckers tapping a maple overhead and a snail enjoying the cold mist of our shared artificial waterfall.

“Being in nature and beauty, breathing fresh air is all part of the therapy,” said Geneviève Monette, owner of Tyst Tradgard, which means “quiet garden” in Swedish.

For my final steeping, I drove east of Quebec City to Zonespa, just a few miles beyond the [ski](#) area of [Mont-Sainte-Anne](#), where I did a token hike before it began to rain. But a little drizzle isn't enough to spoil the Nordic spa experience. “We are open in all weather,” said the attendant checking me in to the contemporary, window-wrapped spa that offers the most ambitious treatment program of its class, and indeed felt, at least indoors, like a sophisticated urban spa. Still, water remained the focus, complete with a wooden dock on a private lake serving swimmers and wildlife watchers.

The spa might be weatherproof. Not so, apparently, spa-goers; there were only five the entire rainy morning I spent there, alternating among the indoor steam room and sauna, and the outdoor whirlpools, cold cascade and chilly, chin-deep lake water. The soft but steady rain convinced me that I didn't need plumbing to appreciate water's thermal effects, and I spent my recommended time-outs sitting on the dock, watching trout surface, ducklings parade, swallows skimming the lake and one very diligent muskrat — a lot like camp, but far cleaner.

WHERE TO SOAK

Le Nordique (747, Jacques-Cartier Nord, Stoneham-Tewkesbury; 418-848-7727; [lenordique.com](#)), from 32 Canadian dollars, about the same in U.S. dollars, for unlimited hydrotherapy; 99 dollars including 60-minute massage.

Siberia Station Spa (339, boulevard du Lac, Lac-Beauport; 418-841-1325; [siberiastationspa.com](#)), 37 dollars for unlimited hydrotherapy; 99 dollars with one-hour massage.

Tyst Tradgard (35, chemin de la Détente, Ste.-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier; 418-875-1645; [tysttradgard.com](#)), from 25 dollars for an hour of hydrotherapy; from 91 dollars extra with a massage.

Zonespa (186, rang St-Julien, St-Ferréol-les-Neiges; 418-826-1772; [zonespa.com](#)), 37 dollars for three hours of hydrotherapy; with 60-minute massage from 99 dollars .

WHERE TO STAY

Manoir St-Castin (99, chemin Tour-du-Lac, Lac-Beauport; 418-841-4000; hotelsvillegia.com) rooms from 99 dollars. Slightly down at the heels, this 104-room resort nonetheless offers a good restaurant and proximity to Lake Beauport and Jacques-Cartier National Park to the north.

Auberge Duchesnay (140, Montée de l'Auberge, Ste.-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier; 418-875-2122; sepaq.com) rooms from 77 dollars, including breakfast. Forty-eight modern rooms overlook Lake Sainte-Joseph with free access to on-property [hiking](#), [biking](#) and boating.