



8 EXPLORER The Highs and Lows of the Tasmanian Coast.



4 HEADS UP Fasten Your Seat Belts, It's Richard Simmons!



5 FRUGAL TRAVELER New Orleans on the Cheap: Heaven.

DISCOVERY | ADVENTURE | ESCAPE

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Travel

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINNE MUSCHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Quebec on Skis

Snow, crepes and music: joining hundreds on a traverse of the Gaspé Peninsula.

By TIM NEVILLE

Snow squeaked under my boots as I turned up the Rue Ste.-Anne and into the tangerine glow flowing from the street-lamps overhead. The storm that had blown in that afternoon had eased up for the moment, and in the distance I could just make out the sandstone spires of the St.-Michel church still shrouded in fog.

Though Percé — a small coastal community on the far eastern tip of the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec — has a handful of lovely cafes and taverns overlooking the Gulf of St. Lawrence, few places are large enough to hold hundreds of people at once. The church could.

So on that night last February I opened its big, white doors, and eased into the warmth of the narthex. I gasped at what

lay before me. Some 350 cross-country skiers with rubicund faces from three days of playing outside were packed in the nave that caterers had transformed into a magnificent dining hall. Pews ran perpendicular to the altar, and bread and wine sat on dozens of long wooden tables. Yak sausages and sauerkraut steamed in chafing dishes beneath the gaze of saints who peered down from white walls. A jazz band

waited in the pulpit, but for now the air rang with the mournful notes of “Sposa son disprezzata” from a lone soprano in the loft.

This had to be coolest ski week on earth. For the past decade, hundreds of cross-country skiers — nearly all of them from Quebec — have descended once a year on rural communities like Percé as part of a

ROOM AND BOARDS
Scenes from the Traversée de la Gaspésie, a six-day event that crosses the Gaspé Peninsula. Percé Rock is in the background, top.

THE GETAWAY

How to Get a Seat Out of Your Miles

It can be difficult to cash in, but it's not impossible, according to people who know.

By SUSAN STELLIN

On a slow day over the holidays, I added up how many frequent flier miles I had in various accounts — more than 250,000 — and realized I should start cashing in those miles for free trips.

Yes, I know how difficult this can be. When I called British Airways in November to see if I could use points for a Christmas trip to Ireland, the agent laughed and said, “I doubt that.”

But for all those who think it's impossible to book award flights, there are plenty



JOHN HERSEY

who disagree. In fact, one study comparing award availability on different airlines found that it has actually gotten a little easier to find seats in recent years.

“When the economy does poorly, cash bookings go down, and that creates more opportunity for reward travelers,” said Jay Sorensen, president of the IdeaWorks Company, a travel consulting firm that compiles an annual ranking of award availability based on thousands of attempts to book seats on popular routes.

Last year's study found that Southwest had the best availability (among domestic airlines), followed by United and JetBlue, then American and US Airways toward the bottom of the list. Delta ranked last.

Your results in trying to land a trip may

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Snow, Crepes and Music: A

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

six-day, 100-mile-plus ski odyssey through the eastern pleats of Canada’s largest province. The Crossing of the Gaspé Peninsula, or the Traversée de la Gaspésie, as it is known in French, is hardly a race. Rather, it is a roaming celebration of winter. And while the exact route changes every year, the idea is always the same: to come together, have fun and ski.

“It’s always fantastic,” said Chantal Hivon, a retired treasury employee from Montreal, who was on her fourth crossing since 2006. “It’s a demanding week, but also recharging. The places you get to go are just incredible.”

Sandwiched between the St. Lawrence River and Chaleur Bay, the Gaspé holds some of Quebec’s most impressive peaks. The Chic-Chocs soar up to around 4,000 feet and collect more than 20 feet of snow-fall a year. Caribou and moose roam the region, which has just 100,000 people spread over an area about the size of one and a half Connecticut.

The first event in 2003 was a true traverse, which meant 50-mile days with little pampering. “The lucky ones got to sleep under a table,” said Sharon Braverman, a simultaneous translator from Montreal who was on that first trip. “You were so exhausted you didn’t care.”

These days the T.D.L.G. offers a softer experience. Instead of traveling point-to-point on skis, participants spend a few days at a time in one spot — a lodge, inn or a local’s home — and slip out along trails that volunteers groom just for the event. Come evening, skiers return by bus to the same base for communal meals at any place big enough to hold them all. The group then travels by bus to the next town to explore anew.

As an avid skier in all its forms, I had learned of the crossing while researching ways to combine my twin passions for snow and all things French. The event sounded like one of those cross-state bicycle rides but on skis. Bands play along the trails. Movie stars cook and entertain. There would be lectures by provincial celebrities like the astronaut Julie Payette and the pilot Robert Piché, a reformed drug smuggler who once saved 306 lives aboard a malfunctioning Airbus. At the end of each day’s ski I could expect a trail-side party complete with an accordion player and shots of Caribou, a French Canadian cocktail of wine and booze softened with warm maple syrup.

But most of all, I loved the idea of slipping into Quebec’s winter culture, which I imagined as a mashup of New World ruggedness and Old World bonhomie. Skiing would almost be secondary.

Things kicked off on a gray Saturday when buses rolled into the Gîte du Mont-Albert, a lodge deep in Gaspésie National Park, about 450 miles northeast of Montreal — the journey’s first hub. We’d spend the next two days exploring the park before moving east to Percé and then north to the coastal town of Gaspé. The route included 110 miles of skiing in less than a week. I’d never done that much in a month.

The party was already under way when I stepped off the bus. The air smelled of spruce, and women in rubber muck boots line-danced in the frozen parking lot. Others waited for ingots of boiled maple syrup to cool in a snow trough and turn to taffy —

TIM NEVILLE, who lives in Oregon, writes frequently about the outdoors.



MAKING TRACKS On the way to Percé. About 100 miles were covered in a week.

IF YOU GO



The 2013 **Traversée de la Gaspésie** takes place Feb. 16 to 23 and will go from Gaspésie National Park to Gaspé. Fees range from 1,100 Canadian dollars, about the same in U.S. dollars, for a dorm bed to 3,100 dollars for a single room and include all meals, accommodation, transportation during the event and nightly entertainment. Sign up online or by calling the T.D.L.G. offices in Gaspé (418-368-8803; tdlg.qc.ca). Expect to ski about 22 miles a day on average over intermediate terrain. Non-skiers are welcome; guided snowshoe excursions are offered daily. Organizers can help arrange rental gear.

To get there, fly into Montreal or Quebec City. Charter buses leave from Montreal (240 dollars round trip) and Quebec City (210 dollars round trip) to the starting point on Feb. 16. Buy tickets when signing up. Or you can drive your own vehicle to Gaspésie National Park and have it delivered to you at the end of the week for 120 dollars.

la tire d’érable — that you eat with a stick. Sylvie Gallant, the accordion player, pumped out polka tunes, her hands clad in baby blue gloves with threadbare fingertips.

Claudine Roy, a gregarious 57-year-old organizer of the event, grabbed a mic and proposed a toast. “To this beautiful life that unites us all!” she said dramatically, and hundreds of glasses shot into the air.

Eager to settle in, I headed off to my room in an adjacent building, where I found two strangers getting comfortable on one of the beds.

“Uh, hi?” I said. “Is this Room 401?”

“It is!” replied a woman in perfect English. “I’m Kathleen,” she said. “This is Roger.”

“Is there room for me?” I asked, hopefully.

“Of course!” she said with a laugh. “Come in!”

I knew I’d be sharing a room since beds are limited in a small place like this. I just hadn’t quite pictured such an intimate arrangement. But as we chatted over wine and fruitcake, I quickly warmed to the idea. Kathleen Ryan was a teacher. Roger Ladouceur was a doctor. Both were from Montreal and would be my roommates for much of the trip.

The weather had been exceptionally mild for Quebec — low- to mid-20s — and the next day was no different. “You are lucky!” said Billie Flynn, a test pilot based out of Washington, D.C. “You heard about the boat, right?” I had. One year skiers used a ship along the St. Lawrence River as a mobile base, but the weather turned so “frette” — Québécois for colder than cold — that pack ice trapped them for days. “It was wonderful,” recalled Sophie Faucher, a Canadian actress in the film “Laurence Anyways” who hardly skis but comes along to do poetry readings. “The only stress was, is there enough booze?”

There was, and this year, plenty of pancakes, too. I ate a shameful amount of them before heading out to ski below 2,425-foot Mont Ernest-Laforce. I could do the full loop for about 25 miles or a shorter one for 16 miles. I chose the 16.

It had been a while since I had cross-country skied in parallel tracks, the “classic” form of the sport, but it is basically an

Dinner was in a church, the only place big enough for 350 hungry skiers. Opera and jazz accompanied the meal.

exaggerated walk. Soon I fell into a kick-glide rhythm and zipped past boughs droopy with new snow. Peaks disappeared into silver clouds. A snowmobiler motored by with a guitarist on the back of his machine.

“Salut, Teem!” a voice greeted me in French.

I had met Berthier Landry briefly on the ride here. He was a 64-year-old civil servant from Montreal with an athletic build. Hélène, his outdoorsy daughter and an expert skier, had persuaded him to do the T.D.L.G. with her in 2006. The two have been coming back ever since.

“Ski with us!” Berthier said. I accepted happily, as I would for the rest of the week, figuring our paces might be similar since Hélène, in her early 30s and fit, was six months pregnant. I was wrong, but the Landrys waited for me patiently at rest stops and at the tops of most hills, where we’d resume conversations about ski wax and parenting. At last we rounded a bend for an easy 7.5-mile descent back.

By the time I was close enough to hear a polka tune wafting through the woods I could barely stay upright. My skin was beet red and burning from the wind and cold. I had skied farther than I ever had, about 19 miles, (Berthier threw in an extra three), and I ached all over. I hobbled back to the room to assess the damage when Kathleen and Roger limped through the door.

“I’m 50, and I’m in pain,” Kathleen croaked.

“I’m 60, and feel like a youth!” Roger lied, reaching down for his toes. I sat on the floor and yelped stretching a tender glute.

Things improved over a dinner of scallops with grapefruit, and soon enough my body adapted. I felt better skiing on Day 2 toward 3,776-foot Mont Albert, but turned back before the top to listen to members of a Montreal folk band, La Fanfare Pour-pour, play in a trailside hut. A dance party had broken out. The windows were foggy from the heat of twirling bodies, and sunlight fell through them in gauzy puffs. I tapped my ski boots on the floor, still too sore to dance.

It was a three-hour ride the next day to Percé, where the bus took a right down Rue Annett and stopped, allowing us to ski the final 13 miles into town. I clicked into my rented Fischers and pushed off along a fence separating small farms. “My path is not a path, it is snow,” the separatist Quebec poet Gilles Vigneault crooned in his 1966 song, “Mon Pays.” “My country is not a country, it is winter.”

Indeed, the Great White North was at its finest. Before me spread an icy plain of blinding snow — the frozen Gulf of St. Lawrence. The sky had turned a deep blue with wispy fleurs-de-lis for clouds. I stepped onto the ice and picked up the pace, thrilled to be gliding off the edge of a continent.

“Merci la vie!” shouted a woman, hoisting her poles high.



I found the Landrys about an hour later near a rest stop where volunteers had a bonfire going and were serving hot rum with maple syrup. A tray of smoked mackerel canapés floated by; I ate five of them without removing my poles.

Percé came into view once we crested a hill and began our descent. The town clung to a small cape and looked like a model railroad set without the tiny trains. Percé Rock, a massive sea stack with a six-story-high arch, loomed off shore. Samuel de Champlain named it “pierced rock” when he sailed into the region in 1607, one year before he founded Quebec City as the capital of New France.

I found my way to a blue and white house near the St.-Michel church, where we’d soon have the operatic dinner. A 67-year-old retired art teacher with red-frame glasses named Jeannette Myles answered the door.

“Entrez! Entrez!” she said, showing me to her living room. A piano sat in the corner and a painting of a cellist hung on the knotty pine walls. Jeannette had volunteered to host a few skiers since almost everything is closed in Percé during the winter. Roger and Kathleen were already

there. My room had cheery blue walls and views of the rock.

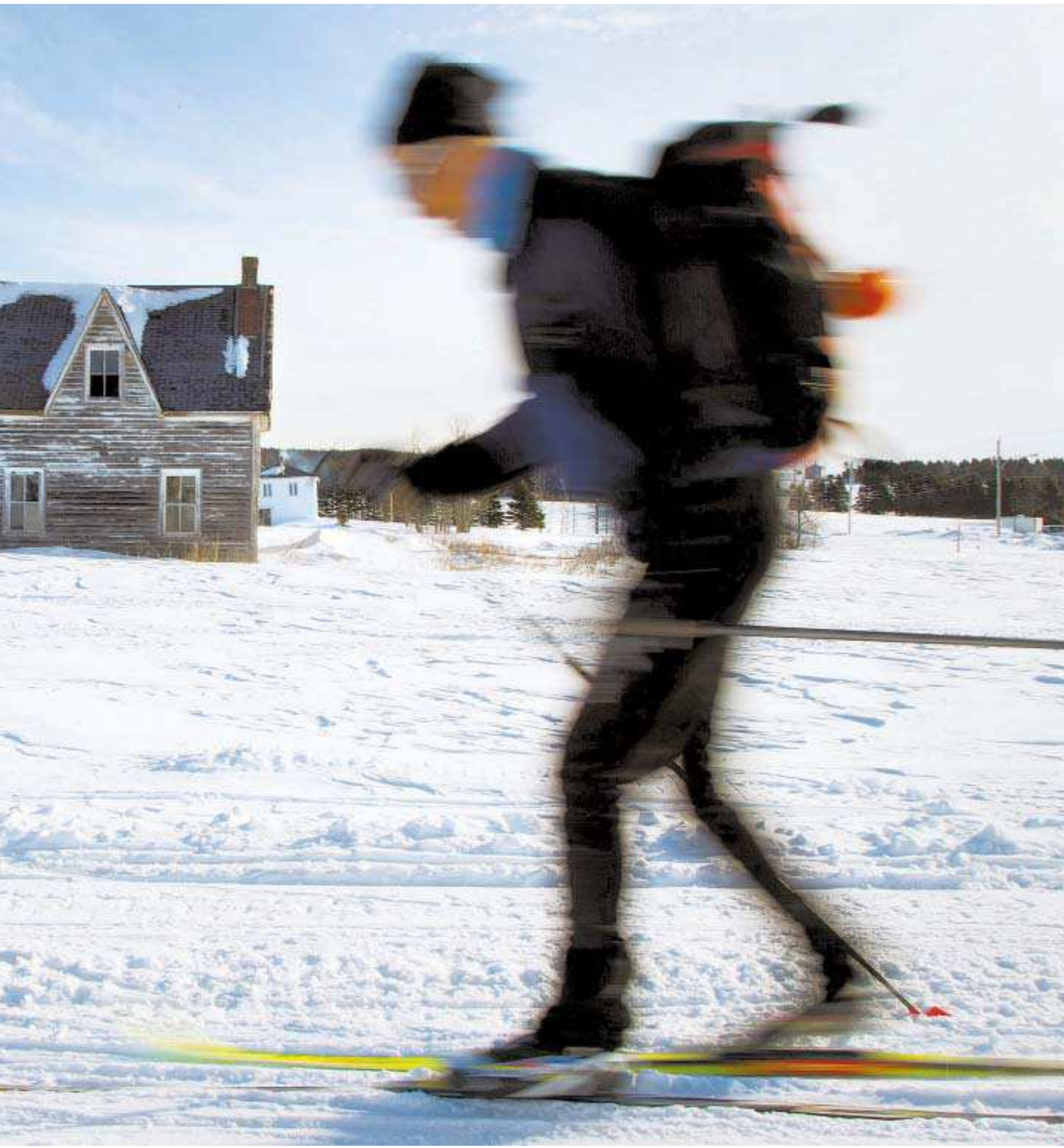
“I think I’m going to take tomorrow off,” Kathleen said, but by the time we all went to bed she’d convinced herself that Day 4 wouldn’t be so bad, which it wasn’t — 12 miles mostly down to the tiny town of St.-Isidore. There locals opened their church and stuffed it with table after table of desserts: pudding chômeur, sucre à la crème and every imaginable tarte. Once again musicians arrived and a dance party erupted. When I wobbled across the finish line with the last of the sugar-bombed stragglers, dozens of schoolchildren cheered, rang cowbells, and held up signs saying “Vive la Gaspésie!”

I felt like a winner.

The weather deteriorated over the last few days, which made the going tough. More worrisome, Day 5 was to be the most demanding one: a 28-mile grind with some punishing climbs. Kathleen got her day off, while Roger and I left Jeannette’s with bellies full of coffee, cinnamon-apple crepes and ham, and a plan to do our best.

In the interests of being fast, I had decided to change the wax on my skis for bet-

Quebec Traverse



MORE SKI EVENTS

From rural New Hampshire to urban Minneapolis, a guide to ski races, tours and festivals in the United States.

American Birkenbeiner

Hayward, Wis., Feb. 21 to 23. Few cross-country ski events command so much attention as the American Birkenbeiner, North America's largest Nordic ski race. The "Birkie" attracts some 13,000 skiers who compete in events as demanding as a 54-kilometer marathon or as goofy as the Giant Ski, in which six-person teams strap into one pair of 25-foot-long skis and attempt to ski together. Family snowshoe tours and Champagne breakfasts round out the weekend. (715-634-5025; birkie.com.)

Chocolate Inn-to-Inn Cross Country Ski Festival

Mount Washington Valley, N.H., Feb. 24. Turn calories-consumed to calories-burned when you join the Chocolate Inn-to-Inn Cross Country Ski Tour. The event is pretty much exactly what it sounds like: a 15-kilometer tour between 10 trailside stops — often manors or bed-and-breakfasts — that offer chocolate treats. Snowshoers welcome. Tickets \$30 in advance. (603-356-9920; mwvskitouring.org)

City of Lakes Loppet

Cross-Country Ski Festival
Minneapolis, Feb. 2 and 3. Minneapolis has about 30 kilometers of urban cross-country ski trails, some of which play host to two days of races, non-competitive tours and the skijoring national championships, a high-speed race in which skiers harness themselves to sled dogs and whip around a course. In between you'll find Swedish lawn games, ice-bicycle races and orienteering contests on skis. (612-604-5330; loppet.org)



Lake Tahoe Nordic Fest

Tahoe City, Calif., Feb. 8 to 10. Billed as California's first Nordic festival, this three-day inaugural event along Lake Tahoe goes beyond cross-country ski competitions to include snowshoe races, training sessions with Olympians and guided snowshoe tours with a naturalist. (Alpenglow Sports, 530-583-6917; tahoenordicfestival.com)

Yellowstone Ski Festival

West Yellowstone, Mont., Nov. 26 to 30. About 2,500 skiers descend onto the Rendezvous Trails outside Yellowstone National Park for one of the season's first races and festivals, which includes all-level clinics taught by Olympic athletes, yoga, beer tasting, a film festival and a chance to try the ski-shoot sport of biathlon. (West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce, 406-646-7701; yellowstonewskifestival.com)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINNE MUSCHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



ter glide. But waxes work only with certain temperatures and snow conditions, both of which fluctuated wildly throughout the day. Soon I had anvils of snow frozen to the bottoms of my skis. Each foot weighed tenfold and afforded zero glide.

"Do you have a thermometer?" Berthier pleaded when I found him about eight miles in, struggling with the same glop. I didn't. He guessed the temperature and helped me change waxes again. At least I could glide on the downhill.

I had wasted so much time that I grew anxious about completing the route before nightfall. The organizers had set up a checkpoint with a 3 p.m. cutoff time to do the whole loop. Miss it and we'd be diverted to a bus to take us to Gaspé, our third and final hub. Berthier and I skied in silence as the storm gathered. Fat, wet flakes stuck to my glasses and melted down my neck. One minute I was freezing, the next, roasting. With no goggles I was so blinded by the snow at times that I could only look at my feet as I shuffled along.

On and on we skied, making pit stops to slug chicken broth and fistfuls of nuts, but never pausing for long. I was too wet, too

ROCK AND ROLLS Pushing off toward the village of St-Isidore, top. Bottom, left to right: Percé, with Percé Rock; dinner is served at St-Michel church in Percé; the church.

'Merci la vie!' shouted a woman, skiing on the frozen Gulf of St. Lawrence, hoisting her poles high.

tired, too miserable to stop moving, fearing I'd never start again. Three o'clock came and went, and we were miles from the checkpoint. I was secretly relieved as I headed for the bus.

Conditions calmed the lower we went, as the trees swaddled the trail, creating a pocket of solace. A creek burbled under a bridge and by muffins of snow piled on rocks. Berthier stopped to take it in. Others did too. Roger, whom I hadn't seen for hours, came gliding up, just as a pink

streak opened overhead. Standing there on the trail I realized this is what you come for. The great food, the church parties, even the accordion and the shots: all of it was really just candy on a stick. Here I could feel my companions' visceral love for a place so ruled by winter that the land and the cold are inseparable. As a skier you can glide through the best of both.

Tomorrow we'd head to Gaspé, a town of 15,000 where Jacques Cartier staked a claim for France in 1534. We'd ski along the rocky spit of Forillon National Park and then line up to slide right through downtown between columns of drummers and hundreds of locals welcoming us. Kathleen and Roger would get their own hotel room, which, after five days of sharing space, left me a little lonely. We'd end at another church, where there'd be an oyster bar under a Jesus sculpture and a 27-piece band doing Elvis and Ricky Martin covers.

For now, I lingered just a little longer, gazing at spindly birch limbs covered with snow so confectioner-fine that they reminded me of dessert. One by one my new friends cast off down the trail and into the fog. I sped off after them on limbs that no longer seemed to ache.

