

Quebec City: Carnaval for kids

Family fun starts with Bonhomme!



By Katharine Fletcher

Kids love Bonhomme, the snowman mascot of Quebec City's Carnaval. During this popular annual winter festival, the portly fellow attracts throngs of adoring children who can't wait to have their picture taken with him.

This year's Carnaval is on weekends from January 29th to February 14th.

With Quebec City's annual snowfall of 3.5 metres, residents and visitors alike have learned to revel in winter. Some of us return to Carnaval often, to be wowed with new – and celebrate traditional – activities.

Tying old and new together is red-tuqued Bonhomme, who sports a traditional woven arrow sash – the colourful ceinture fléchée – around his ample girth.

Every year, kids queue with patient parents to tour Bonhomme's Ice Castle, appropriately located opposite Quebec's parliamentary buildings. Lineups move quickly while everyone views Bonnehomme's ice bed, throne, and the clear block-ice walls of his abode. It's a fantastical sight, particularly after dark when it glows icy blue.

From there, it's a short stroll to Place Desjardins (Plains of Abraham) where the park is jam-packed with red-faced kids. Participation is what it's all about here in Mr. Christie's gameland: everywhere you look, there are races, games, and other happenings where kids rule!

Last year I watched youngsters squeeze into blue recycling bins while game parents prepared to push them down an icy "field." After a clown drops a flag, they're off, slip-sliding down an icy track – and back to the start. Winners received hearty cheers from the adulating crowd.

Kids spectacularly adore it when adults slither about – so, as you’d expect, the entire spectacle turns into riotous hilarity. The clown kept spectators amused – and engaged race-watching children at the end of each race, cajoling otherwise-shy kids and parents into participating.

Naturally, there are tent refuges dotted about the Plains. Not only do they house more games, they also entice everyone with the fragrance of hot chocolate, cider, and food.

Back outside, screams of families swooshing down hills on “snow rafts” will make you want to join in.

Their cries merge with others who are zooming down ice slides from a sparkling ice tower. This 10-metre-high structure gives a great perspective of all Place Desjardins activities. From there, choose your next adventure, then slide down to get to it.

Actually, there are so many choices you could practically linger at Place Desjardins for a couple of days and visit no other sites. There are sleigh rides, a zip-line, a Quebec sugar shack complete with “tire-sur-neige” (snow cooled taffy), and spectacles to watch such as ingeniously different types of horse races through the snow, where everyone cheers on their favourite team.

However, there are many other activity centres throughout the city during Carnaval, such as Place d’Youville. Pack your skates so you can float to music on this popular centretown, outdoor skating rink.

Understandably, Quebec City kids get the inside track on one or two activities, such as the soap box derby. Here handbuilt “cars” driven by anxious – or self-confident – youngsters descend straw-bale-lined raceways, starting opposite Fairmont Château Frontenac. Spectators join in the fun, wildly applauding each participant’s efforts.

And there are classic events to watch at every Carnaval. My absolute favourites are the in-city dogsled race (La Grande Virée) and the icy, formidable-looking canoe race across the St. Lawrence – and back. Brrrisk or what?

La Grande Virée is simply stunning, and so Canadian! Thirty or so dogsleds compete, racing through the streets of the city: they start at Fairmont Château Frontenac – the fairytale “castle” on the cliffs overlooking the St. Lawrence River.

From there, teams hurtle along Saint-Louis and Grande Allée streets to the Plains of Abraham, and then return.

Afterwards, warm up inside the Château. Here you'll find weavers demonstrating how they finger-weave the ceinture fléchée sashes.

Finally, watch the canoe race where crazy teams of canoeists brave the river's frigid waters – and treacherous ice floes. Yes, this is a cold event for spectators down on the river, so be absolutely sure to bundle up – and take a thermos of hot chocolate for the kids.

Banish winter doldrums! Head to Quebec City and join its snow-loving traditions.

Checklist before you go

Seriously: Everyone must dress very warmly, particularly with toasty warm boots, tuques and mittens.

For information, passes, news about where Bonhomme is, check carnaval.qc.ca and for places to stay and eat, visit: bonjourquebec.com.

This article originally appeared in the January 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.