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## SLEEPOVER QUINTESSENCE, MONT-TREMBLANT, QUE.

BY RUSSELL SMITH  
 MONT-TREMBLANT, QUE.

The strange, Disneyland-style village of Mont-Tremblant — an ersatz European hub of cobblestone streets and hotels and outdoor-wear shops clustered at the base of a magnificent ski hill — is owned and constructed by the Intrawest resort chain. It's pretty and safe and bland and packed with red-faced, wealthy Americans and pizza parlours and infused with round-the-clock Mu-

zak piped through powerful, booming speakers onto the streets.

As malls go, it's a pleasant enough one. There are a couple of upscale hotels — a Westin, a Fairmont — whose décor is late Midwestern Nice. Since the clientele for such ski resorts is affluent and increasingly sophisticated, there has been a market for something more original and exclusive.

Enter the Quintessence, a brand-new, independent luxury hotel that looks like a chateau, on the outskirts of the Intrawest village. Only

30 rooms, all suite-sized, with fireplaces and balconies and heated stone floors in the bathrooms, face pristine Lac Tremblant and its russet sunsets. It cost \$18-million to build — that's \$600,000 a room — and the attention to detail shows.

Feather beds built for the hotel bear the best down duvets and sheets; staff arrive daily to replenish your wood supply and light your fire. Highly trained French chefs are working feverishly to qualify the hotel for the revered Leading Hotels of the World group, which de-

mands that all breads, pastries and desserts be made on the premises. Quebec's youngest Master Sommelier runs a 6,000-bottle wine cellar.

A spa provides a sauna, steam room, hot tub, massages and skin treatments. A heated vanishing-edge pool fronts on the lake.

### Ambiance

Despite its high-end appeal, this is still primarily a ski resort, so Quintessence remains casual. The club-like, all-stone wine bar is often crowded and convivial, the beige-toned dining room more formal. One surprising inconsistency is the pop music that is broadcast slightly too loudly in both rooms. Shania Twain is incongruous with a \$400 bottle of wine. A place that provides Old World sophistication in all other areas deserves classier music.

### Clientele

Affluent and sophisticated, with tastes not quite as child-like as those of the MBAs chugging pints in identical bars in the "village."

### Rooms

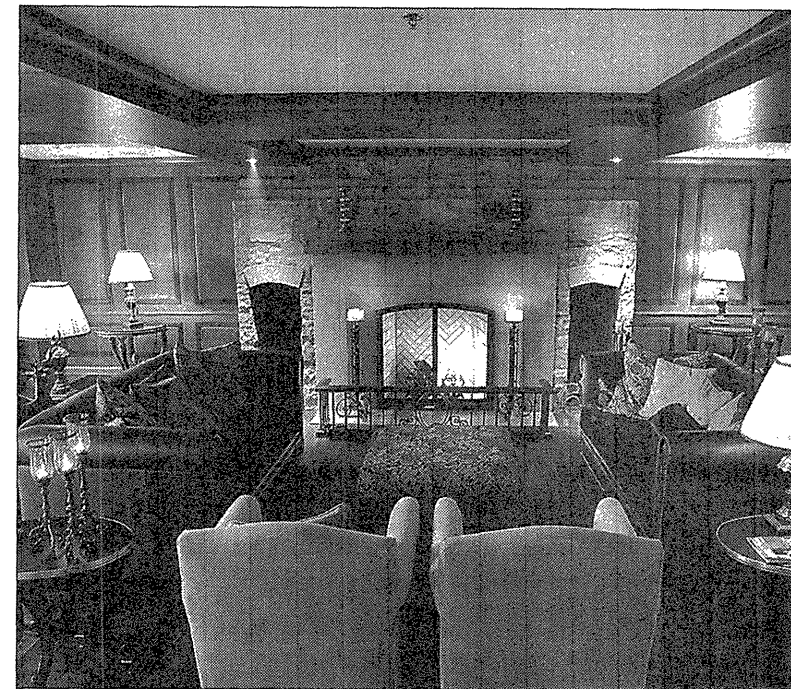
Warm and romantic, with vaulted wood-beam ceilings, neutral earth tones, no feminine florals and ruffles. The spacious bathrooms are open to the bedrooms (a hidden wood panel can be closed for privacy), so that you can sit in a vast jetted bathtub beside the fire. French doors open onto a deck. All rooms are wired for high-speed Internet, and come with high-end stereo equipment. Two presidential suites have three fireplaces — outside, on the deck, and beside the hot tub. A romantic little log cabin beside the hotel, built in 1885, serves as a super-private honeymoon suite.

### Décor

Expensive rustic: exposed wood, wrought iron, real stone, stained glass. Not modernist, not trendy, but sensuous and grown-up.

### Food and drink

This is where Quintessence rises above almost any rural inn, even in such a food-savvy place as Tremblant. Chef Jean-François Lalande, formerly of the Queen Eliza-



Each Quintessence room has a fireplace. Some suites have three.

beth in Montreal, uses as many local ingredients as he can, from his own herb garden to local duck. His French-based combinations — duck with pears and a hint of bitter cocoa; a powerful but light fish soup — are inspired and delicate, worthy of top urban restaurants.

The cheese plate, of all Quebec cheeses, is particularly interesting, especially as a match to one of the several dozen wines currently on offer. Sommelier Daniel Dumais manages to be explanatory not condescending. Mains are \$28 to \$37, with a four-course menu at \$50, not unreasonable for these ingredients and level of service.

A walk into the village will take you to another serious French dining experience: the rustic La Grappe A Vin. Local venison in fruit sauce, salmon rillettes, and more gorgeous Quebec cheese are accompanied by a serious wine list and knowledgeable servers.

### Service

Attention to personal comfort is almost obsessive. You arrive and are taken to your suite, with its roaring fire, before the formalities of check-in. You are greeted by name by friendly but deferent bilingual staff. Drivers are on hand to take you on local tours. Let them know what

time you'll be back from skiing, and the fire will be lit before your return.

The luxury of having a masseuse bring her massage table to your suite, and leave you there dozing off in front of the fire once she is finished, is also unparalleled.

### Things to do

The entire area is set up for hedonistic diversion: The ski hill is a five-minute walk away. In summer, there are a half-dozen golf courses within a half-hour drive. Cross-country ski trails crisscross the village; they become roller-blading and biking trails in the summer. The lake, at the foot of the hotel's garden, is swimmable in summer and skatable in winter. Therapists offer both Swedish and Thai massages in the ultra-private spa.

Shopping in the village doesn't offer much more than sportswear and predictable kitsch art. Then again, you're not here to shop.

### Information

Quintessence: 3004 chemin de la Chapelle, Mont-Tremblant; (819) 425-3400; hotelquintessence.com. Suites from \$278 for two.

*Russell Smith writes the Virtual Culture column for The Globe's Review section.*