



AMY ROSEN / NATIONAL POST

Hotel Quintessence brings a new level of luxury to Mont-Tremblant.

HOTEL OF THE WEEK

Playing with fire

HOTEL QUINTESSENCE MONT-TREMBLANT

BY AMY ROSEN

A fresh snow was blanketing the city as we headed out of Montreal toward Mont-Tremblant in the Laurentians. A good sign, seeing as the planned agenda for the weekend went like this: snowboarding, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, dog-sledding, skating and a nip of hot cocoa.

"Cute," I say, as we drive past the jellybean-coloured ski shops and cobblestone walkways of the In-trawest-built mountainside village. And "Wow," I say, when moments later we pull into the front drive of Quintessence, a new independent luxury hotel that's just a snowball's throw from the ski hills.

Romantic stone façades, turrets and cathedral ceilings are a nice start. Once inside, a roaring fireplace and casual après-ski vibe welcome you into the fold. As relaxed as it is, the Quintessence was built for grown-ups (and their brood) with discriminating tastes.

Taking in the wrought-iron spiral staircase, the soaring post-and-beam work, warm neutral tones and cozy sitting areas, I make a mental note to cross dog-sledding off the to-do list. There won't be enough time now that I'm fully ensconced in the hotel's discreet elegance — just 30 rooms, all suites, built by way of an \$18-million price tag.

"Now let's go get changed, and get ready for some of that winter fun."

"Uh-oh, my suite is nice. I mean, *really* nice. It's got a wood-burning fireplace, a perfect lake view, and an open-concept spa bathroom (with sleek pocket doors that can be closed for privacy). The pedestal jet bathtub and heated marble floors are just steps from the hearth — and the bed. And just look at that king-sized sleeper, with its feather bed overlay (custom made for the hotel), down duvet and sheets that feel like they're a million thread-count. Hmm. We'd better cross snowshoeing off the list. Instead, I call down to arrange an in-room massage in front of the fireplace. But first, I suddenly need a nap.

(Fast-forward three hours.) Geez, where did the day go? Nix the skating.

There's kindling and paper at the ready in the fireplace, and although I could call the "fire

conciierge" to get things going, I'm in the Laurentians and I'm a Canadian girl and I can do this myself.

Strike the match, light the paper here and there. Good. The kindling is blazing. Turn on the CD player in the entertainment console. Jazz is perfect. Uh-oh, the kindling is burning out — quick, throw on a log! Birch is just the thing. It's catching. Throw on another. Bad! I'm smothering it. Remove second log. Bad! Log is on fire! Hot! Throw burning log back into fireplace. Fire still dying. More kindling! Too much! It's on fire and tumbling out of the hearth. I ponder the hotel's insurance policy while avoiding the fireside leather ottoman and creamy wool carpet. Grab the iron poker and poke away. Good. Blow on the fire — fires love oxygen. Bad! Much soot in face!

Finally, fire is sizzling and popping away. I close the screen and sip on room-service Port (culled from the 5,000-bottle cellar in the Wine Bar downstairs) and nibble from an exquisite tray of Quebec cheeses and duck confit, pâté and figs, dates and fresh baked buns, plus handmade truffles. This perfect snack is courtesy of La Quintessence, the hotel's upscale restaurant, which is headed by Chef Jean-François Lalandec, formerly of the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth in Montreal.

Strolling the suite, taking in the view from my balcony: giant evergreens with boughs straining under the snowfall, frozen lake, lights twinkling from the chalets across the way. As if on cue, a deer scuttles by.

Just as I'm prepping to head down to the spa, there's a knock on the door: "Fresh ice."

Once inside, the concierge asks if I need help getting the fire started. "No thanks, I did it myself. It was easy," I point toward my dwindling handiwork. "Oh, you did a good job. But maybe..." He takes the poker, flips a log, turns the other on its end, and we've suddenly got a rager. Then he grabs the fireplace broom, deftly sweeps off the stone slab, takes the empty silver ice bucket and replaces it with a new one. He straightens his green vest, tells me to have a nice evening and shuts the door behind him.

And he never once mentioned the soot on my face.

■ Quintessence: Mont-Tremblant, Que.; 819-425-3400; hotelquintessence.com. Suites range from \$259 to \$989 for the presidential suite.

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