

THE HISTORIC ISSUE

BACKCOUNTRY

THE UNTRACKED EXPERIENCE

64 DEGREES SOUTH

SHACKLETON
TO STOUP

ANTARCTICA'S
INTREPID
EXPLORERS



INSHALLAH

TRAVERSES AND TAGINES IN
MOROCCO'S MGOUN VALLEY

MONUMENTAL

10TH MTN. DIVISION'S CAMP HALE
RECEIVES FEDERAL PROTECTION

CHAINSAW CHUTES

QUEBEC'S COMMUNITY-DRIVEN
BACKCOUNTRY REVOLUTION

Dans le Bois



With the same spirit the first French immigrants embraced when they arrived in the cold, densely forested lands of present-day eastern Canada, Quebecois skiers have charged into the backcountry, chainsaws in hand, and forged themselves trails. Today, with the help of larger organizations, those handmade glades are growing into a thriving backcountry scene.

words by Ryan Stuart
photos by Ryan Creary



"Epic snow and some of the best turns of my year,"
Ryan Creary says of this day in the Chic-Chocs
with Ryan Stuart. This is no small compliment
from the Revelstoke-based photographer.



When skiing in Quebec, "sous bois" usually means a gladed run. On Rabbit Hole, I discover something closer to its literal translation: **under wood**.



[Top] Quebecers and backcountry skiers François Martin and Mathieu Gauthier crack up after the Ryans from B.C. break out their high school French.

[Bottom] "Best ski town in the East?" Stuart walks toward Murdochville, Quebec.

[Facing Page] Martin, Gauthier and Stuart follow the path of least resistance, a corridor of aspen saplings.

For the first half of our run on Montagne St. Pierre, I arc slalom-like jump turns down a beautiful alley of birch trunks and spruce boughs. My eye naturally weaves through the trees, and my skis follow with flow.

As the pitch slackens and my turns shift from jumps to carves, I relax. My eyes wander down the run, across the narrow valley and up the forested slopes opposite me to a ridgeline blurred by fog. Suddenly, a gust of wind breaks the gray, revealing a giant wind turbine. I'm hypnotized.

Out of nowhere, a branch appears. I duck, narrowly avoiding the guillotine. But I'm out of control. I deke left, hop over a shrub, split my legs around a stump and, in a backseat tuck, charge into the low-hanging forest. With no escape in sight, I slam on the brakes.

"Are you OK, Ryan?" calls a thickly accented voice behind me. It's François Martin, our guide for the day, only I can't see him through the dense brush. It takes me a few minutes to limbo and tango through the branches and tightly spaced trees; eventually, I emerge again on Rabbit Hole, where my friend Ryan Creary, Martin and his friend Mathieu Gauthier are all laughing at my tracks.

"A little too sous bois," I say, brushing a spruce bough off my hat. The English sarcasm needs no translation. Laughing, we ski deeper into the woods.



In November 2022, Creary and I, curiosity piqued by news that an organization was steadily building a network of backcountry ski areas across Quebec, booked a trip east. That was before British Columbia was knee-deep in a succession of storms, while it was still easy to ignore two golden rules: Never ski east of the Rockies, and never leave good skiing to go skiing.

When our March departure rolled around, we felt we were making a big mistake. Forecasts predicted the parade of storms would continue across our home in B.C., while the winter had been dry and warm in Quebec. We took off wondering, could the development of a below tree line backcountry scene really be worth flying across the country for?

When we landed, it was raining.

Quebec has always stood apart from the rest of Canada. There's *la langue*, of course, but also a distinct Quebecois culture—neither explicitly French nor Canadian. The cities feel older, and the chain brands are different, a hint to provincial autonomy (though there's still a Tim Hortons in every town). No one says "eh," "aboot" or "sorry." Every village has prominent cathedrals, but the society is adamantly secular and socially liberal: Quebec was one of the first provinces to recognize same-sex marriage, and wives aren't allowed to take their husbands' last names.





Today, the opened forest is easy to weave through.
But cross the line of flagging tape and **only a coureur de bois**
could find a route through the thicket.

The roots of these differences extend back to the province's French colonization, while the British primarily settled the rest of Canada. In 1608, French explorer Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec City, the first permanent European settlement in Canada. Its location at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River made the outpost ideal for the focus of New France: the fur trade.

Champlain, determined to tap into the local Indigenous people's supply of beaver pelts, sent early immigrant boys and young men to live with the Huron, Algonquin and Montagnais people. They quickly learned the languages and the complex trading systems between Indigenous nations. Dispersing up the St. Lawrence watershed, the young men would make friends, trade for various items and eventually return to Quebec City loaded with furs. They became known as "coureurs des bois," or runners of the woods.

While far from easy, the job offered a good living, and for the predominantly French immigrants who were escaping high unemployment, overcrowded cities and limited social mobility back home, the job's independence and freedom were enticing. By 1680, a colony administrator estimated that 40% of New France's population were coureurs des bois.

Though eventually ousted by monopolizing fur trading companies who preferred to use their own employees, the coureurs des bois' free spirit and curiosity never died. Today, this character and independence shines

in Quebec's preserved culture. It's a rite of passage for Quebec teenagers to travel across the country and the world (often to wash dishes in ski towns) before returning home to settle down.



Wisps of clouds flirt with the treetops, and drifts of snow tumble onto our toques. I follow Martin up a skintrack carved through the dense forest. As he breaks trail toward a run called La I, he recounts the story of Montagne St. Pierre, one of Quebec's oldest manufactured backcountry ski areas.

Martin grew up three hours northeast of Quebec City on the south shore of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence in Rimouski. When a few local tele skiers, including Martin's dad, started looking for a backcountry ski destination, St. Pierre (2,600 feet), the area's highest peak, was an obvious zone to explore. It offered a variety of terrain and enough vertical to make laps feel worthwhile just a 30-minute skin from a plowed road. There was just one problem: Like most peaks in Quebec, the slopes were thickly forested. Undaunted, the teleskiers packed in chainsaws, slashed a climbing trail through the woods and hacked out a few *sous bois* runs.

"I took my first tele turns here when I was about 12," Martin, who's explored every valley on the mountain, says with pride.

Judging by the surrounding forest, opening those first three trails took a lot of cutting. The mostly coniferous trees crowd together, their interwoven branches touching the ground. Gnarled shrubs fill any openings. Where the skintrack tunnels through the growth and into darkness, their feat is best demonstrated. Likewise, the La I run relies on logging.

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For years Martin's dad and his friends maintained the runs and uptrack, but eventually their enthusiasm waned. Gauthier picks up the story where Martin leaves off.

When the runs on St. Pierre began to disappear, the forest attempting to reclaim them, the COOP Accès Chic-Chocs stepped in and took over management. Founded by a group of skiers, the club was creating backcountry skiing where there was none, adopting shuttered ski areas and backcountry zones along the south shore of the Saint Lawrence, an area known as the Gaspé Peninsula.

We pop out of the trees into an old clear-cut to find a log cabin beckoning to us. Inside it's toasty warm; our nostrils catch a hint of fresh paint. The cabin is less than a year old. Coinciding with the growth of the province-wide backcountry ski scene, it's part of St. Pierre's newest chapter.

The Fédération Québécoise de la Montagne et de l'Escalade (FQME) is the Quebec equivalent of the American Alpine Club. Founded in 1969, FQME originally focused on *escalade* (rock climbing). Working with climbers and clubs, the organization opened access to privately owned land by providing liability insurance to landowners, insurance to climbers and unlocking funding to build and maintain crags. It now manages 40 rock climbing areas across the province. As interest in backcountry skiing grew, so did pressure for FQME to do the same for the sport. In 2015 FQME formed a ski department and hired Maxime Bolduc, a backcountry ski guide and a vice president at Xalibu Skis, a Quebec-based backcountry ski manufacturer.

"Our goal was to increase the number of skiers in the province," Bolduc says. "To do that we had to offer quality practice sites close to where people live. My first objective was to build a network of pan-Quebec backcountry sites."

He looked to COOP Accès Chic-Chocs for advice. The first site FQME, under Bolduc's guidance, and COOP Accès Chic-Chocs worked on together was Maria, a hillside on the south side of the Gaspé. A private landowner wanted to provide the ski community access to a mountain-side but was afraid of liability. FQME used its climbing experience to step in and provide the insurance. After a few more collaborative projects, FQME adopted all the COOP's backcountry zones, including Montagne St. Pierre. Working together, they went on to develop Mont Lyall, one of the province's most impressive backcountry ski zones.



From Rimouski we drive the oceanside highway northeast. The towns steadily shrink and turn more picturesque, the road creeps closer to the water and the coastline becomes increasingly rugged. Eventually we're driving between ice-covered sea cliffs and ocean spray.

Near the end of the peninsula, we turn inland and the road climbs into the mountains. When we pull into Murdochville, a defunct mining town, it's snowing. We can just make out the surreal site of a mountain missing



[Facing Page] Stuart finds a fresh stash on the Gaspé Peninsula's Marsoui, a new gladed backcountry zone.

[Top] A mural on the streets of Murdochville pays homage to Canada's two favorite pastimes.

[Middle, Left] Stuart crosses the threshold into Secteur 2 on Marsoui. A steep climb up the valley awaits him on the other side.

[Middle, Right] With church bells tolling, one T-bar, 32 runs and almost nobody in sight, Murdochville's community ski hill, Mont Miller, according to Creary, is "a religious experience."

[Bottom] Funded by government donations, this warming hut on Montagne St. Pierre is perfectly placed to warm up and refuel between runs.



half its hulk. Open-pit scars and piles of mine tailings shadow the tickytacky rows of Murdochville's streets. With the miners gone, the economy now relies on more sustainable natural resources—wind and snow.

Surrounded by mountains, slopes rise more than 1,000 feet right out of backyards. The alpine is unnaturally low, a product of the acidic fog from the mine's smelter, and the Chic-Choc Mountains, the highest peaks in southern Quebec, are just a 40-minute drive east. The area receives the deepest snow in the province. Homes can be bought for \$100,000. It might just be the best ski bum town in eastern Canada.

The epicenter of town is Chic-Chac, a guiding company founded by Guillaume Molaison. He grew up nearby and returned one winter in the early 2000s to backcountry ski. Seeing the area's potential, he bought a house and started guiding ski tours.

"I knew Murdochville could be something very special on the East Coast," Molaison says.

In 2020 he bought the town's church and renovated it into Chic-Chac's headquarters, which includes a bar, restaurant, rental shop and guide office. It's the meeting spot for Chic-Chac's ski touring and cat skiing operation—the one and only in eastern Canada. Across the highway is the local ski hill, Mont Miller, and next door, connected by a tunnel, is the old priest's house-turned-hostel, also owned by Chic-Chac.

We set up camp in the hostel and fall asleep listening to the wind whip snowflakes against single-pane windows. The next morning, we

meet Simon Petitclaire, our Chic-Chac guide for the day. With most of the snow transported away from Murdochville by wind, he suggests driving 45 minutes east to Mont Lyall in the Chic-Chocs.

We set off down a snowy road, passing another manufactured ski touring zone right above town, and weave through rolling hills that gradually grow. These mountains are an extension of the Appalachians. Lyall, like most of the peaks around here, is a flat-topped ridge with steep, forested sides. What sets it apart is that COOP Accès Chic-Chocs and FQME have spent \$500,000 on chainsaw art to turn it into a backcountry ski area with five uptracks and a dozen runs and glades.

Petitclaire's local knowledge serves us well. The snow grows steadily deeper as we skin up an old road before turning into the forest. By the time we emerge from the trees into wind and avalanche-scourged pecker poles, Petitclaire is breaking trail through thigh-deep snow.

We pull skins and drop into the run La Langue du Troll. The turns are deep, light and ripe with face shots. I hop and sink my way down the fall-line cut. It feels like I'm skiing a resort run, but it's 11 a.m. and there are no other tracks.

At the bottom we're all snow-covered smiles.

"Those were the best turns of my season," Petitclaire says with a laugh.

"That was worth traveling from B.C. for," Creary adds.

It's clear why skiers are excited about the recent backcountry development. As of January 2024, FQME managed 22 backcountry ski sites cover-

It might just be the **best** ski bum town in eastern Canada.

Just as Bolduc envisioned, access has grown the sport in Quebec. Since expanding to include ski touring in 2015, FQME membership has increased 150% annually to 10,000 people in a province of 8 million. He expects another surge in membership when they open a new site close to Montreal this winter.

With this growth come safety challenges. On Lyall we watched a large group zigzag on top of each other toward the summit ridge, oblivious to the danger of stacking people in an avalanche start zone after recent snowfall. Most FQME sites are far below tree line, in tight forests, with marked climbing lines and skiing zones, Petitclaire explains. A visit to the Chic-Chocs is often a Quebec skier's first exposure to avalanche terrain and route finding.

"Most people don't know what they are doing or where they are going," he says. "They're not used to being in the alpine and having to choose their own route."

The FQME is working hard to educate its members. Online maps identify avalanche exposure at each site. There are first aid and rescue equipment stashes, a video series explains the dangers, an online risk avoidance course is in the works and the club runs an avalanche training program for youth that travels the province all winter.

That work all adds up to a lot of energy and excitement about backcountry skiing. But it feels different than the growth back in B.C. It has a distinct *coureur des bois* attitude. Rather than accepting the limitations of their geography, skiers have embraced the entrepreneurial spirit: They looked at their hills and decided to make a better experience for themselves.

As we top out for our third and final run at Mont Lyall, Creary and I feel jealous of what they're building here in Quebec. It's the end of the day, and despite at least 20 other skiers being on the mountain, the run Batman shows just a couple of tracks. The gladed trail rolls over and falls away, pitching through open boulders and tumbling down the forested face.

Before we drop in, we take a moment of thanks to appreciate the hard work that went into creating this run and more: the flagged uptrack; the thinned trees right to the valley; and the community of skiers collaborating to make the sport more accessible, safer and more fun. Mont Lyall would barely rate as a mountain at home in B.C., but it's a great backcountry ski experience.

"It would be really good to have this kind of organization in Revelstoke," Creary says. I nod in agreement.

Then we ski. Diving in, snow blows off my chest, skis fly through the *sous bois*, and I'm thankful I broke my "don't ski east of the Rockies" rule. There must be a little *coureur des bois* in me, too. ❁

ing 800 acres across the province. FQME developed some of them from start to finish. Others were old ski areas. Some, like Montagne St. Pierre, were adopted.

Uniting all the sites and skiers under the FQME banner brings clout, Bolduc says. The organization provides each area with insurance, and its provincial stature helps protect access. Anyone using the sites needs to have a day pass or annual membership with FQME. In exchange, they receive accident insurance and discounts at FQME partner businesses. Membership fees go back into the sites—FQME spent \$115,000 on maintenance in 2022. A paid crew travels around the province doing most of the work. In addition, each site has a local committee that guides development and organizes volunteer maintenance.

"In the past, [most Quebecers] who wanted to go backcountry skiing had to drive several hours. Now they can practice their sport closer to home," Bolduc says. "We've created a pan-Quebec powder road."

That's exactly what Creary and I have traveled. Over one week, we skied at four FQME backcountry sites, never driving more than a couple of hours in between. Along the way we met people from New Hampshire and Vermont, Ontario and New Brunswick, but the majority were friendly Quebecers.

[Photo] "We're not in B.C. anymore," Creary says, "but we could be with terrain like this." Stuart enjoys an alpine bowl filled with snow on Mont Lyall.