

Letter From Morin Heights

A small, colourless sign off Route 364 welcomes you to Morin Heights, cross-country ski capital of Canada. The sign, like the town, is easy to miss. A bilingual hamlet in the Laurentian mountains of Quebec, Morin Heights is an unadorned gateway to corridors of carpeted peace.

Seventy kilometres north of Montreal, it is overshadowed by the swagger of Saint Sauveur, a crowded resort town choked with expensive restaurants and boutiques. Picturesque and chic, Saint Sauveur is the place to ski and be seen. Bypass the steak houses and haute cuisine and you soon reach Morin Heights. The town boasts a popular ski hill of its own, but a church bazaar is more likely to draw a crowd than a bistro. Morin Heights, resolutely ordinary, has none of the sheen of its sophisticated neighbour.

If it were Vail or Vermont, the town's cross-country ski centre would be a storybook chalet grafted from a Swiss village. Instead, it's housed in an old building with a handpainted sign. The "Centre du Ski de Fonds" is less a place to linger and bask in the sun than a parking lot where cars are left behind for a different journey altogether.

Maps in hand, cross-country skiers set out to glide and grunt along miles of groomed, pristine trails. One is named for the late Jackrabbit Johannsen, the Norwegian credited with popularizing the sport in Canada. Another trail has restored life to an abandoned railway line; waxed skis whisper where steel wheels once rolled.

Yellow road signs warn drivers that skiers may cross their path. Not moose or deer or snowmobiles, but cross-country skiers, traipsing over tarred roads like stick figures learning to walk for the first time. Colour-coded signposts reassure the disoriented. This way for Dutch Dash, that way for Cascades.

From my parents' house on Windigo Road I have watched them cross over a frozen lake, silent figures floating behind glass. A window transforms views into portraits that change from one moment to the next. A fresh snowfall makes it easy to forgive long winters. Cross-country skiers slide off the lake and into the woods, vanishing behind a birchbark scaffold, edging towards hidden junctions where trails loop and intersect, where trees and snow conspire to preserve a fragile silence.

By nightfall the forests reclaim their trails. Moonlight washes white snow blue. A milky patch of light simmers in the sky, brewed by the slopes of Ski Morin Heights. From a distance the mountain is a sight to behold, lights flickering along the slopes like so many candles, the enchanted trails of a mystical land.

The main street in Morin Heights remains largely unchanged by the ski hill in its midst, a triumph of function over form. A crafts shop and a small café are the town's few concessions to the urban flock that migrates from Montreal each weekend. The general store has stood its ground against the growth of generic, franchised convenience shops. A barbershop on one corner displays an outdated red, white and blue pole, as if in defiance of pricy hair salons elsewhere. The restaurants that cater to the locals don't serve cappuccino.

A proposed mall has been put on hold. Les Galeries Morin Heights would surely change the face of Morin Heights, but not disfigure it. Anything designed by architects and sold by the square foot could hardly equal the town's natural resources. As the self-anointed mecca for cross-country skiers, Morin Heights' salvation won't be found in a factory outlet.

By dusk, daytrippers strap their skis to their cars and return to Montreal. Some will stop in Saint Sauveur to dine on fine food or simply stroll along sidewalks that double as fashion runways, judging by the outfits paraded on a Saturday night. Morin Heights has few expensive restaurants and no upscale hotels. Night life is an oxymoron. Those who stay behind will find they have little choice but to surrender to the rhythms of a modest town where the lights go out early and pine trees perfume the air.

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The Globe and Mail, February 6, 1993