



Canoeing on the Ottawa River.

QUEBEC'S NEARBY PONTIAC REGION BECKONS

Little-known, but full of hefty outdoor fun

By Katharine Fletcher | Photos Eric Fletcher

Want to raft down frothing whitewater under a full moon? Hike woodland paths and canoe the Ottawa River? Race dog teams along sandy trails in summer? For full-on adventure against a backdrop of spectacular nature, grab your gear, bring the family (lots of stuff for kids), and discover the Pontiac.

It's a lesser-known part of West Quebec, and a fine outdoorsy "staycation" destination for Ottawa-Gatineau residents. Pontiac's gateway lies immediately west of Aylmer, and includes towns along Highway 148 Ouest such as Luskville, Quyon, Bristol, Fort Coulonge and beyond. Even the "orphaned" island known as Rapides-des-Joachims – Pontiac residents call it Swisha or Da Swisha – is officially in Pontiac, though you can get to it only from Ontario!

Although it's easy to drive along Highway 148, another scenic route is via the Quyon

ferry Fitzroy Harbour (Mohr's Landing) on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River to Quyon.

Here are some don't-miss attractions, starting really close to home.

Gatineau Park's Luskville Falls is a heart-healthy 4.5-kilometre (return) hike up – and down – the 290-metre Eardley Escarpment north of Luskville. Clamber up beside the falls (by mid-summer not quite as spectacular as in spring's meltwater) then ascend the ridge. Pause on sculpted Canadian Shield gneiss and granite for expansive views of the Ottawa River Valley.

Binoculars are a boost to track the turkey vultures and red-tailed hawks soaring below you as you climb, as well as to spot forest songbirds such as scarlet tanagers, black-throated blue warblers and rose-breasted grosbeaks among others.

Woof! Timberland Tours' proprietor Denis Rozon loves racing his cherished dogs at his year-round Pontiac location north of Bristol. You'd normally expect to mush sled dogs in winter, but you can spend half a day with the dogs in summertime too. Learn how to harness a team of sleek greyhound-, husky- and pointer-mix pooches to Rozon's "dryland rig," then dash along sandy trails through a pine forest.

Rozon's annual **Bristol Dryland Canadian Championship Dog Race** attracts contestants from all over the world in October. No need to bring a picnic lunch: This event includes a cold drink and hot dogs cooked over a fire.

Then you can shift out of the woods onto the water with **HorixonX**, a rafting and



kayaking outfit on the Ottawa River's **île du Grand Calumet**. Come for the rush of whitewater rafting during a full moon with the only outfitter in Canada to run night rafting.

I've been part of this full-on sensory experience: silvery moon outlining white pine silhouettes against a starry sky, then the wow factor when tranquility gives way to the sound of roaring rapids. You spy the black tongue of the rapids up ahead, and then you're scooting through the whitewater surge, heart racing as guide-owner Martin Bertrand yells "Paddle! Paddle harder!"

That isn't all. You can come here for kayak school, daytime rafting, or river boarding. Accommodations on-site. Take your tripod for a shore-shot of the rapids in the background with your rafting team in front.

Fort Coulonge's bygone lumber industry springs to life at **Parc des Chutes Coulonge** northwest of the village. Watch a logging video, stroll the interpreted trail to the waterfall and catch a thrill on the Giant Canyon zip lines. Swoosh from 260 down to 100 metres above churning gorge waters, then up cliffs on the 600-metre Via Ferrata, the rock-climbing course, negotiating two swinging bridges en route.

Tip: Take your camera

Jim Coffey's **Esprit Rafting Adventures in Davidson** welcomes adrenaline junkies as well as paddlers who prefer gentler canoeing or standup riverboarding. New this year is overnight riverboarding where you can camp out before returning to headquarters. On-site lodgings and a great deck overlooking the Ottawa River inspired us to linger and soak up the sunset while quaffing a brew and enjoying wood-fired pizza.

Tip: If you want certification in wilderness first aid and other skills, ask about Esprit's whitewater-intensive leadership development school.

Rapides-des-Joachim (Swisha) is home to **That Canadian Lodge**, a rustic inn overlooking the Ottawa River near Deep River (60 kilometres northwest of Pembroke). Go for hiking trails criss-crossing the island, or for wildlife: osprey, loons, bald eagles, deer, beaver and more may be spotted. You can take a canoe or kayak to paddle the river and bays. If you want to indulge your creativity, an art workshop is



available from Pontiac artist Tina Michaud at her on-site gallery, **Gallerie-Gallera**.

Tip: Swisha is renowned for its fishing. Lodge owner Jim Gibson – also the mayor of Swisha – can tell you where to catch pickerel, walleye, catfish and bass. ■

Katharine and photographer-husband Eric Fletcher are unabashedly keen about their home region of Pontiac. She is author of several books including *Capital Rambles: Exploring the National Capital Region*.