

Tremble

by ISABEL CONWAY

THAT was the craziest wind I ever saw up here, I was impressed you all kept going,' the ski guide admits, icicles hanging from his designer stubble.

I can barely see him through the ice pellets attached to my goggles. By now my extremities feel as if they are about to fall off, my legs still in rag doll mode after coming off Versant Sud at Mont Tremblant, Quebec. We're bent double in the eye of a blizzard, strong enough to knock one of my companions, a Texan of substantial girth, over on his face.

Thanks to the encouragement of Bill — one of the volunteer ski guides who take visitors around Eastern North America's largest and most renowned ski terrain — we survive our white-out moment with some bragging rights later at Au Grain de Café, where we nurse our 'black eye' double espressos.

Bill's pledge to 'give you Europeans the safest best possible experience of our mountains and show you some of our many beautiful trails' enticed me — reluctantly it must be said — out from the comfort of summit chalet Le Grand Manitou to join a few intrepid newbies on the wind-blown slopes.

Canada's big advantage for the nervous first-time visitor to their ski slopes is the norm of finding friendly, knowledgeable volunteer ski buddy guides to answer questions and provide guidance. Elsewhere in the world — think of France and Austria — you'd often pay an arm and a leg for an expert guided tour of the slopes.

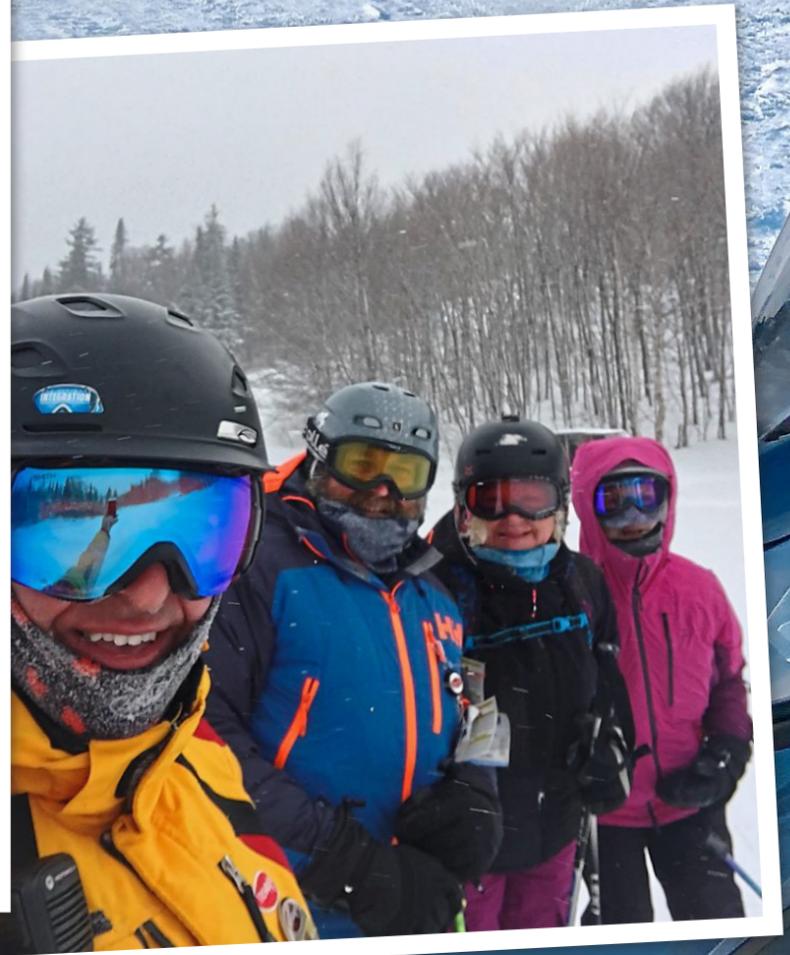
AROUND Mont Tremblant's extensive terrain, Bill introduces us to 'Le Edge', skiing at a nice easy pace, with a choice of slopes that have knee-knocking names like 'Reaction' and 'Haute Tension', not to mention 'Sensation' and 'Escapade'. Conditions improve on the lower tree-lined trails where we discover lots of feathery soft knee-high powder. Saying a quick prayer through frostbitten lips I close my eyes and glide through the snowy duvet.

We've hit one of the coldest days of the season here in mid-February with temperatures an eyelash-freezing, teeth-chattering -20C at the top. The smart skiers wear full-face masks or balaclavas under their helmets. Canny cruisers also don thermals beneath their ski wear and add magical hand warmers and foot warmers, recommended even when a day starts out brilliantly sunny.

Located in the wild Laurentian Mountains, 120km north-west of Montreal, Mont Tremblant comprises the old village of beautiful chalets (where the late prime minister Pierre Trudeau and his family, including son Justin, visited often) and the modern glitzy resort a few miles away.

The resort is easily reached via excellently maintained motorway, except for the last hilly stage. On

CANADA'S 'LITTLE WHISTLER' IS JUST AS IMPRESSIVE AS ITS BIG BROTHER — WITH TRAILS AND SLOPES TO MATCH EVERY SKIER'S ABILITY



Friendly advice: Isabel Conway and friend Sara Lawrence prepping for skidoo lift off at Kanatha-Aki adventure terrain. Inset, Isabel with a furry pal and fellow skiers. Right, Mont Tremblant village

the way back to Montreal airport in my rental car, the only moment of panic came as I skidded out from the underground car park of my hotel close to Mont Tremblant's slopes.

With fresh hope for direct Aer Lingus flights connecting Dublin and Montreal in 2020 (plans to launch the route for this year were postponed) Mont Tremblant offers Irish winter sports enthusiasts a helping of Montreal's renowned culture and wonderful cuisine before some excellent skiing in a cold climate.

Intensive grooming to combat icy conditions and a good ski lift infrastructure are big pluses at Mont Tremblant, where temperatures can fluctuate massively, dipping to below -30C in the winter and soaring to 30-plus in summer. Quebec has some 75 ski centres,



at the skis



Travel facts
American Holidays has just opened two new branches, on Exchequer Street in Dublin and Lombard Street in Belfast. Drop in for advice on all things North America.

scattered throughout the province, most guaranteeing abundant snowfall, offering all manner of wintery experience apart from downhill and cross-country skiing. Few are so well geared to families and also non-skiers than the Mont Tremblant terrain of all ability downhill slopes, high-quality accommodations and varied non-ski activities.

Snowshoe walking, dog sledding, ice fishing, snowmobiling, sleigh rides, tube sliding, ice skating and hiking are some of its 'get out there and taste the chill' activities. The large pedestrianised village of cookie-cutter pastel painted chalets and French style architecture has gift shops, coffee hangouts, restaurants and bars galore. Did I mention the casino? You've been warned.

The resort is a festive winter

wonderland of upmarket hotels boasting outdoor steaming whirlpools, close to lifts and local action — in short it's a pricy winter sport location. But you'll also find more reasonably priced condos and apartments for groups and a sprinkling of decent grocery outlets and off licences to help lighten the spend. As alcohol is highly taxed in Canada and the price of wine and spirits is high, it makes sense to stock up in the duty-free on the outward journey.

Mont Tremblant is often called 'Little Whistler' because it was developed by the same consortium as its big brother out west in British Columbia. A sprinkling of Europeans and a big influx of Americans descend during my weekend stay. The Americans come because to them, just a day's drive north from New York, Trem-

blant feels like France. 'Imagine, going to Europe without the long, expensive flight,' comments a visitor from Vermont.

French chalet-style restaurants and ski shacks, including authentic timber chalets, transported from old villages, serve real French onion soup and Savoyard fare, including Swiss Raclette and Savoie fondue, crème brulee and other Gallic delicacies.

Some of the best places to eat out include La Savoie for an authentic Savoyard fondue experience, Maison de La Crepe (especially good for breakfast) and trendy La Forge Bistro, famous for its river trout and, for carnivores, its filet mignon cooked over a Maplewood grill served with healthy kale salad.

Half of Mont Tremblant's 95 runs, spread out over an elevation

of 2,871ft, are deemed advanced, but plenty of gentle blues, including lovely tree-lined slopes, sheltering skiers from fog and now showers, are easily accessed. There's also an adrenaline-pumped snow park.

I cannot comment on the blacks, though apparently they're so well-groomed they resemble European reds, according to reports.

My fear threshold is still in overdrive in the calm that follows the blizzard.

Mont Tremblant's 100-plus volunteer guides, recognisable in canary yellow ski suits trimmed with red, are always on hand to assist visitors and help them discover their slopes. Safety is at a premium, skiers are attentive and observe the rules and the vibe on the slopes is noticeably relaxed. Canada's typically polite

and friendly stereotype holds sway here.

On the summit, a huge digital board continually flashes up the weather conditions, which lifts and slopes are open, and the length of queues. Another advantage is the difficulty in getting lost, a bonus for parents, whose adventurous kids may stray because one mountain with four faces bring skiers back to base from all directions... eventually!

Mont Tremblant National Park is a vast landscape of wild beauty, forest, lakes and mountains.

DURING our stay we soak away skiing aches and pains at ScandinaVe Spa's traditional Scandinavian baths (scandinaVe.com) along the shores of the Diablot river, close to Mont Tremblant. With numerous hot and cold thermal spring baths, enclosed by pine forest, it offers open air traditional bath relaxation in a peaceful natural environment, where talking and mobile phones are banned.

Bathing in the pool on the river is not for the faint hearted, however, as you must break the thick ice to venture into its sub-zero depths.

Dog sledding is another unmissable highlight during any wintery stay in Quebec. At Kanatha-Aki in Val des Lacs on our way to Mont Tremblant, we spend a magical day in the wilderness, dog sledding, spotting bison and racing through the forest on a skidoo with the Normandy-born owner of this well-known, all-round Canadian activity centre, Stephen.

We feast on super fresh river trout, grilled over a fire, followed by delicious local Maple syrup pie, listening to stories and myths, carried down through the generations poetically told by an indigenous tribal leader, before setting off on our dog sled adventure through snow-laden forests.

Canada offers something for everyone, they say, and never a truer word was spoken.

TRAVEL FACTS

How to get there: Isabel Conway flew from London Heathrow to Montreal return with British Airways (britishairways.com) in World Traveller Plus cabin with wide width seating, more comfort and a three-course meal; World Traveller Plus fares from Dublin via London to Montreal start at €820 return plus tax. Special offers and reduced fares from €420 plus tax.

Where to stay: Isabel stayed at the Fairmont's Queen Elizabeth (fairmont.com) with doubles from €168 a night. She was a guest of Quebec Tourism.

What to do: For information on Quebec see quebecoriginal.com, for Montreal see mtl.org. For Mont Tremblant see tremblant.ca and for dog-sledding, snowshoeing and bison petting, visit kanatha-aki.com. American Holidays (americanholidays.com) has a dedicated Canada brochure which offers the most comprehensive holidays throughout the world's second largest country.