

## SEEKING WARMTH IN QUEBEC [by Adam Hlasny]

I brace myself for the moment of impact. Mittens? Check. Ski jacket? Check. Healthy dose of insanity? Check. The snow on a centuries-old cobblestone crunches beneath my frozen feet as I emerge from the heated comfort of the tour bus to brave the elements; I've just arrived in Old Québec with a dozen intrepid classmates for the annual Carnaval d'Hiver. While my more rational friends bask in the sun-kissed sand of a Florida beach, I've dubiously decided to spend my winter break 200+ miles north of home on an immersion tour of this frigid fortified city.

I'd been enamored with Québec's history, architecture and culture since taking another class trip four years earlier, ecstatic when this prospect for a return journey presented itself. The difference was that the first trip occurred in June during Québec's ephemeral summer: resplendent flowers abloom, hooves from horse-drawn carriages clapping, glistening sunset panoramas on the St. Lawrence. Now reflecting on the frosty encore trip 14 years later, I've realized how dissimilar it was from my original expectations. Despite my best efforts, the tantalizing comfort of warmth would prove elusive on one of the strangest long weekends of my life.

To say that Québec City is cold in mid-February is akin to saying St. Peter's is 'a church in Rome', a bombastic and ludicrous understatement. Temperatures 10-20 degrees below zero with an agonizing, arctic wind made even the simplest endeavors, such as breathing, downright miserable. Despite ample cold weather gear and valiant efforts to imbibe copious quantities of hot cocoa, each foray out of doors became disagreeable after about 15 seconds; watery eyes froze, my wind-whipped face stung violently, and any non-essential body parts ceased functioning within minutes.

The ultimate confirmation of my status as outsider, however, was observing the reaction of the Québécois to these inhospitable conditions. This hearty lot celebrated -20 as if it were the most pleasant occurrence imaginable. These insouciant cultural attitudes were epitomized by the goofy, cartoonish grin of Bonhomme Carnaval, the snowman mascot of the event. This jovial, rotund fellow whose painted-on expression hadn't changed in decades seemed to mock my abominable discomfort. I imagined him smugly saying "I'm wearing nothing but hat and scarf and still smiling, so what's the problem, *mon frère?*" I had been thrust from the warmth of familiarity into the forbidding polar foreignness of a new culture, unable to gain footing on the iciness that surrounded me.

Another memorable instance of cultural chill was the bizarre failed exchange that occurred on day two. Being an immersion tour, my classmates and I were given a day to explore the city while speaking French with local students. One would think this a brilliant opportunity to make lasting acquaintances from north of the border; after the event, I indeed had a new friend... from New Jersey. Finding ourselves in a mixed student group with the Québécois, the daring and socially adroit individuals from my contingent attempted some rudimentary French, while the more linguistically timid folks (like me) congregated separately. Garden State native Marissa and I agreed that between being in a foreign land and dealing with foul weather and other teen melodrama, we were already immersed enough, thank you very much. We became fast friends, sharing life details – in English – as we ambled through archaic alleys, piquant wood smoke wafting about. The weekend's dynamic became even more absurd when a sort of rivalry developed, West Side Story-style, among the New Hampshire and New Jersey factions. I later found myself having to hide the fact that I had been hanging out with a 'Jersey girl' from my schoolmates.

After two more days of shivering in the Chateau Frontenac's crepuscular shadows, the morning of our departure finally arrived. Knowing that numbness would instantly set in anyway, I made the bold decision to walk out to the bus jacketless. As I defiantly bid *adieu* to some of the most unforgiving conditions I'd ever experienced, I recall someone announcing the wind chill was -40 that morning. I'd never really warmed up (physically or culturally) over the course of the weekend, but the trip could hardly be considered a failure. In addition to gaining a new friend, I joined the ranks of Québec winter survivors, and would have intriguing subzero stories to share long after reentry. Travel, like life, seldom works out as expected, and the coziness of returning home sometimes proves more satisfying than finding warmth on the journey itself.

Back in New Hampshire the following day, I made my way to school, the listlessly rotating thermometer at the downtown bank reading a balmy 4 degrees. Now snugly in my comfort zone, I contemplated the weekend's preposterous happenings, and a grin as wide as that of Bonhomme Carnaval crossed my face. Despite the single-digit temperatures, I had never felt warmer.