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Way back in the '70s when I was attending elementary school in Montreal, the teachers would take us on class trips to a cabane à sucre, or sugar shack, in the nearby Laurentians or Eastern Townships. I have especially fond memories of these outings, a simple time when sugar-bushes and shacks were family owned and no more than 50 people could be accommodated in a rustic dining room to clog their arteries with home-cooked habitant foods such as baked beans, pea soup, mashed potatoes, cretons (salt pork), pancakes, and tourtière (meat pie). For dessert there was always sugar pie, followed by a tire d'érable session, when molten maple sap was poured onto snow packed onto purpose-built wooden tables to make maple taffy. Afterward, the dining room would be cleared and we would dance to the folksy strains of the fiddler's tunes or select our own more contemporary melodies from the jukebox.

Times have certainly changed. Families and school groups still love to partake in the annual sugaring-off ritual and visit cabanes à sucre, but with the world's maple syrup production industry run by the cartel-like FPAQ (Federation of Quebec Maple Syrup Producers) and the liquid gold now a commodity more valuable than oil, the endearing mom-and-pop operations of old are being pushed out by the big guys. Many small maple producers have been forced to sell while others have become large commercial enterprises more akin to a carnival.

Yet, in spite of modernization and commercialization, some cabanes à sucre owners are working hard to accommodate large numbers while remaining as authentic as possible to the quaint sugar shack experience of the past.

Here are six worth visiting. Fees listed have been converted from Canadian dollars to US dollars.

#### Sucrierie de la montagne

Recognized as a Quebec heritage site, this delightful 120-acre érablière (sugarbush) owned by Pierre Faucher and his son Stefan, is the real deal. Father and son are still using old school technology to produce their artisanal syrup and they bake their bread in a woodburning oven. Spread out like a small village, each building at the Sucrierie houses a different part of the operation: the maple syrup production shed, the sawmill, the bakery, the dining and dance hall, and the general store. Buffet meals featuring all the



## Quaint sugaring experiences in Quebec

traditional dishes are accompanied by live folk music. There is also a more high-end restaurant serving bison, pheasant, deer with garden herbs, and wild rice dishes, followed by miniature maple delights. Guests can also rent one of the four rustic log cabins.

*Dinner buffet adults, \$30; children ages 3 to 6, \$10; ages 7 to 12, \$15. Overnight cabins \$67 per night per person. (300 St-Georges Road, Rigaud, Quebec J0P 1P0 450-451-0831 [www.sucrieriedelamontagne.com/en](http://www.sucrieriedelamontagne.com/en))*

#### La pause Sylvestre

Vegetarians will squeal with joy to learn that no meat is served at the Pause Sylvestre. This adorable cabin nestled deep in the woods seats only 22 and serves Quebec classics with a vegetarian twist: millet pie, red bean pie, homemade sauerkraut, omelettes, and sweet crepes, along

with maple sweets, all served in handmade pottery dishes.

*\$25 per person. (58, 11e Rang, Dudswell, Quebec, J0B 2L0. Reservations essential. 819-828-0049.)*

#### L'Érablière du Lac-Beauport

Located just 15 miles outside Quebec City, L'Érablière seeks to educate as well as appeal to your taste buds and sense of fun. There's a museum dedicated to the history of maple syrup production through the ages and, for those who aren't bothered by the thought of stuffed wild animals, another about the history of hunting and trapping in Quebec. During the meal, a traditional folk dancing troupe provides entertainment.

*Weekdays, adults, \$15; children ages 6-12, \$10, ages 1 to 5, \$5.50; weekend brunch, lunch, or dinner: adults, \$20, children ages 6-12, \$12;*

#### Maple sap boils down in kettles at La Maison Amérindienne.

*ages 1-5, \$6.25. (200 Chemin des Lacs, Lac-Beauport, Quebec, G3B 1C4. 418-849-0066 [www.erabliereclacbeauport.com](http://www.erabliereclacbeauport.com))*

#### Domaine du Sucrier

A day trip from Montreal (90 miles east of the city), Domaine du Sucrier in Quebec's Mauricie region is a small family-run sugar shack that serves homemade meals and local microbrew beer. You make your own crusty bread on the wood stove while a fiddler will have you tapping your toes.

*Adults, \$19.50; children ages 8-12, \$12; ages 3 to 7, \$7. (3400 Chemin du Lac in St-Boniface. 819-535-5322. [domainedusucrier.ca](http://domainedusucrier.ca))*

#### La Maison Amérindienne

For a unique learning and dining experience, visit La Maison Amérindienne, a venue for dialogue and reconciliation between indigenous peoples and other populations through exhibitions, guided tours, workshops, and activities. Recognized by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a national benchmark for maple sugar cultivation, during maple season La Maison Amérindienne serves an indigenous-influenced meal featuring bannock, pumpkin soup, maple syrup marinated chicken, wild rice, Iroquois corn and herb salad, and the ubiquitous sugar pie.

*Adults, \$19.50; children ages 6-10, \$12; ages 5 and under, \$8. (510 Montée des Trente Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Québec J3H 2R8. Reservations necessary. 450-464-2500. [www.maisonamerindienne.com](http://www.maisonamerindienne.com))*

#### La Cabane d'à côté

Montreal celebrity chef Martin Picard of Au Pied de Cochon gourmet gluttony fame has opened his second sugar shack venture only 40 minutes outside Montreal. Opened in February, the cabane has already received gushing accolades from restaurant critics for its gastronomic take on classic habitant fare. In true Pied de Cochon fashion, most of the savory dishes are flavored with foie gras, pork fat, pork broth, and/or bacon.

*\$44 (3595 Montée Robillard, St-Benoît de Mirabel J7N 2S3. 514-281-1114. Reservations essential and can be made by e-mailing [reservations@cabanedacote.ca](mailto:reservations@cabanedacote.ca), [aupieddecochon.ca](mailto:aupieddecochon.ca))*

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# They traveled west and went back in time

#### ►ROAD TRIP Continued from Page M1

former Eagle Scout and national park ranger, who seems to know every inch of Red Rock country, along with everyone we meet along the way. He's carefully planned our itinerary, from meals to hotels to backroads we never would have found on our own.

He is also trained in first aid, a comfort for family members who balked at what began to be known as the "Thelma and Louise adventure" to Antelope Canyon. When word got out, a strong consensus emerged that Millie and Myra should not go it alone, given their ages and various medical conditions. That's why I'm along, even though Millie and Myra protested at first, and in truth, didn't really need me.

Sure, they have aches and pains, but they are not to be discussed. Nor are bum knees, bunions, neuropathy and other ailments. "The only way to live with all this is to ignore it," Myra says. "If we accept the changes in our bodies as we age, we are going to have a better life."

In younger and healthier years, Myra camped and hiked in all 50 states, and took nine vigorous bike trips with her close friend Dot through Thailand, Tuscany, New Mexico, and the Rockies, among others — an impressive peripatetic resume. "I'm not against pushing myself, but respectfully," she says.

"At our age, you have to ask yourself, to what end?" Millie responds, an admission she makes with difficulty. For decades, Millie began most mornings with a long walk, often in time for sunrise. Now, more than 10 years after double knee replacements, walking hurts. I can see grimaces she tries to hide with a smile.

Still, I understand why the two bristled at being told they are too old to travel without help. Who wants to be handled like a fragile piece of china? "I do not like it if anyone takes my arm," Myra says. "And I just hate that way of being talked down to, that condescending 'How are you, dear?'"

Millie responds instantly: "We can't stand being treated like little old ladies." Our guide Benny understands: he's neither too solicitous nor too hands-off. Instinctively he knows when the two might want a hand stepping down from his SUV, or a rest, or when a margarita is in order instead. Benny also factors in hot tub time, where visitors flock to the pair and reveal all kinds of personal details, even though Millie and Myra have a pact: Never tell anyone you are a therapist on vacation.

With Benny at the wheel, there are few logistics to worry about: no maps or navigation devices, no getting lost



### 'We can't stand being treated like little old ladies.'

MILLIE WILEN, with Myra Fischman on board a boat on Lake Powell

and fighting over directions or looking for hotels or restaurants. Benny has insider knowledge of Arizona's back roads and hidden vistas, and we are free to watch, listen and learn.

Previous desert forays with my husband and boys (both now in college) always involved long hikes followed by setting up tents and gathering firewood. Now, I am simply listening, laughing, and soaking up wisdom and great company, starting with our first (and my favorite) meal at Mariposa Latin Inspired Grille. The setting will pop into my head forever when I dream of flaming cliffs and smoky craft cocktails. We watch the sun go down, followed by an enormous moon rising over the canyons.

Benny is the one who makes sure we are up early enough to observe the bird life in Oak Creek Canyon, the Ponderosa pine forests on the Colorado Plateau, and the landmarks along historic Route 66. He's also planned a stop at the Winter Sun apothecary, a family-owned shop stocked with Native American art, traditional Hopi

Katsina carvings and a stunning array of attractively bottled and packaged organic and wild crafted herbs.

Since there's an ointment or organic potion for every ailment, we spend a lot of time here. Myra and Millie each fill a shopping bag with native herbs and curatives. I'm content with deep penetrating arnica liniment, promising soothing relief from aches and pains that will only get worse.

On the road, we stare at endless ribbons of highway and desert mountains outside our windows. I hear about Myra's childhood, how she hated moving back East and becoming the last girl picked for basketball. I learn how she was rescued on the court by her friend Dot, who taught her to pass the ball and became a lifelong friend and travel companion.

I hear about how Millie and Myra each married at ages that would now be considered absurdly young (19 and 20), and how they later carved out careers, joined consciousness-raising groups and marched for civil rights. Millie juggled graduate school while

raising children, while Myra crash-learned Spanish so she could enroll in Puerto Rico, where she was living at the time.

I hear how Millie and Myra first met and instantly clicked while working at a mental health clinic, and later started private practices where they've treated over a thousand patients of all ages and issues.

By the time we pull into the small town of Page, sunset is underway over the southwestern edge of Lake Powell, the enormous man-made reservoir straddling the border of Utah and Arizona on the Colorado River. This is the moment Myra has been waiting for: she wants Millie to see that the desert isn't entirely dry.

"Oh, Myra, is that the water we see?" Millie asks. "How can that be?"

The juxtaposition of blue water, red cliffs and boats seems almost mirage-like. And we'll soon be surrounded by water, staying at the sprawling Lake Powell Resort at Wahweap Marina, three miles from Glenn Canyon dam. There are busloads of tourists, but also several pools and hot tubs that look over stunning rock formations and impossibly turquoise water.

Benny checks on reservations for our all-important next day journey to Antelope Canyon, and we later toast our upcoming adventure over margaritas and Mexican food. The night air is crisp and inviting, so I decide to drag a few blankets out and sleep on the outdoor balcony, the better to see a desert sunrise.

By dawn, we're getting ready to meet our Navajo guide outside of Upper Antelope Canyon, which unlike the lower canyon, has no stairs. Still, Myra and Millie are getting nervous. Normally, Myra takes a steroid with breakfast, but we're up too early and she's concerned her legs won't hold out. Millie worries about stomach and foot problems; she regrets last night's margarita and her choice of sandals.

Both are uncharacteristically silent while Benny deals with a few mix-ups with meeting spots and guides: Myra is worried she won't see Antelope Canyon after all. Finally, we're loaded into the back of trucks shortly after 8 a.m., driving 3½ miles down a sandy road to the entrance. Myra is in awe; she steps gingerly into the canyon but never stops smiling.

Millie allows me to help her through darkened portions of the canyon where you cannot see the sky. A guide who knows the best shots offers to take a few pictures on my phone. Others around us snap photographs frantically, while we mostly stare in wonder and listen to haunting native American flute music in the background.

"I am in love," Myra says. The foot tour lasts less than 90 minutes, and we

come out relieved and ready for a celebratory breakfast at Ranch House Grille, accurately described as the place "where the locals go to eat," with specialties like Frybread.

Later that day, we have another chance to see Antelope Canyon from a different and far less intimidating perspective: on a boat cruise along Lake Powell's towering canyon walls and buttes. Myra, who waited 25 years to see Antelope Canyon, is in tears. "I can't believe I finally got to see Antelope Canyon today, and now I'm seeing it again," she says. Millie gives her a hug.

By nightfall, we're at the historic Cameron Trading Post, where the Hopi and Navajo for years gathered to barter wool, blankets and livestock for dry goods. It's also a chance to buy turquoise, silver and other native crafts at great prices. We spend the night here, stepping carefully through levels of landscaped gardens.

In the morning, we drive to the all-white Coal Mine Canyon overlook, one of the most beautiful (and least known) canyons in the world. The rest of the trip back to Sedona takes us through the candy-colored striped mountains known as Painted Desert, where Benny points out 200-million-year-old pieces of petrified wood. We also drive along stunning Schnebly Hill Road, with its steep cliffs, wild twists and hairpin turns along unpaved roads that drop more than 2,000 feet from a wooded mesa. This is not a drive for the faint of heart.

By the time we pull into Enchantment Resort, there's time for more water exercises and hot-tub soaking at the foot of red rock-boxed Boynton Canyon, part of the wildly diverse Coconino National Forest.

This hotel and spa is far more luxurious than any I've ever stayed in, and perhaps for Millie and Myra, too. But along with cherished memories, that's part of the beauty of aging. When I inquire if it's too expensive, they answer simultaneously, with laughter, "What are we saving up for?"

On our last morning, I sneak out for an early morning desert run before the hardest part: putting on shoes and packing. We say farewells without getting sentimental. Don't dare call this a bucket list trip; Millie and Myra both find that phrase too annoying.

Besides, there are still a few more canyons they haven't yet seen. "I really can do another one," Myra says. "And I need reassurance that I'm coming back."

Meantime, there's a final concession to aging: wheelchairs at the airport.

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