

The advantages of North Shore living are many

JAMES CARELESS

Off Montreal's north shore, across the Rivière des Prairies, sits the city of Laval. For Montrealers longing for more space and lower housing costs, it is a place worth considering. Everything from comfortable apartments and condos to houses large and small can be found here, at prices typically more affordable than the island of Montreal. As well, there are some luxurious mansions to be found on Montreal's north shore – including Céline Dion's!

There's lots of elbow room in Laval, because 30 per cent of its land has been zoned as green space.

"As a result, there is still a lot of agriculture taking place on the island," said Denis Giroux, director of media relations for Tourisme Laval (www.tourismelaval.com). "Combined with our access to water on all sides and parkland, Laval is a true retreat for people who work in Montreal."

As for access southward? "From Laval to Montreal takes only 20 minutes by car, except during rush hour," Giroux said. For those not wanting to fight the traffic, the métro was extended into Laval last year, with three stations being opened on the Montmorency-Côte-Vertu line.

This said, it is never easy for Montrealers to move away from their beloved city. So, besides elbow room and lower housing costs, what does Laval have to offer?

Let's start with amenities: Hardcore urban shoppers will get their fix at Carrefour Laval, a shopping centre featuring 300 stores anchored by the Bay, Sears and Rona.

Carrefour Laval is also home to an immense glass conservatory roof that protects a year-round indoor garden. As the seasons change, so do the thousands of flowers grown there.

Next, family fun. With its lower real-estate prices, Laval is a magnet for young families. Once they move in, they can play together at the unique Funtropolis. This is a 20,000-square-foot indoor playground where thousands of multicoloured Styrofoam balls rain down from the ceiling, gush out from a fountain, or are shot from cannons that you can control. Children of all ages will enjoy this plus an on-site maze, trampolines, huge slides, Tarzan ropes, various obstacle courses, and games of skill.

Another place for family fun is the Récréatique. It features many activities such as the giant Bananazoo playground, laser tag, a mini indoor roller coaster, mini-golf, bowling, billiards and arcade games.

Meanwhile, the Laval Children's Museum lets children 2 to 8 years old get hands-on experience being a firefighter, police officer, doctor, ambulance staff, grocer, speleologist, astronaut, or aviator – with their parents' help, of course. And no visit to Laval would be complete without seeing the world-famous Cosmodôme Space Science Centre and Space Camp. Spend a few hours personally exploring space, including a close encounter with an actual moon rock. If you're a kid, enroll at space camp for realistic astronaut training.

Back to Laval's wide open spaces. For nature lovers of all ages, the Mille-îles River Park is a must-visit attraction. They can es-



Pony sledding at L'Auteuilloise Farm in the I

cape the city as they visit marshes and forested islands, home to a range of birds, mammals, reptiles and fish. The park also features an exceptional variety of aquatic plants and rentable water craft; there's even a tour that will keep visiting voyageurs out of currents and winds for safe paddling.

Another green option is the Nature Centre. This is a 4.2-square-kilometre refuge of mature trees, shrubs, fields and gardens around a small lake, a few ponds and a babbling brook. Children will enjoy the farm stocked with pigs, cows, goats and donkeys. You'll also find white-tailed deer on the grounds and, for stargazers, there is a well-equipped astronomical observatory.

Want a more rural experience? Then visit L'Auteuilloise Farm. In its fields, you will see red deer, pheasants and rabbits. You can also go horseback riding, take a sleigh ride or experience "pony sledding," a variation of dog sledding that replaces the dog team with a pony.

If this isn't enough, Laval is home to the Château Taillefer Lafon Vineyard. In the vineyard's first year of operation, two Château Taillefer Lafon products were entered in the global 2004 Sélections Mondiales des Vins competition. Both won: a gold medal in the ice-wine category and a silver medal in the ice-cider category. In addition, Château Taillefer Lafon was awarded the Grand Vinofed Trophy for Best Of Show, after going up against more than 2,300 products from 30 different countries.

Clearly, Montreal's North Shore has a lot to offer home-hunters, from singles and families to empty nesters and retirees.