



Lost in Magog

by Kathryn Brockman

I puzzled: Why would anyone want to take time from their vacation to deliberately walk around in circles for hours? I had to get to the core of this, especially by lunchtime.

Magog, Canada—"Easy to Find!" the Labyrinthe brochure had promised. Then, why was I so lost? Like a mouse in a maze, I hurried along one direction, only to reach a dead end, then backtracked and scuttled along another path, just to end up back where I had been a few minutes ago.

I felt trapped in a cage, albeit a huge one, the free world just beyond...my...reach. I could see it, smell it, feel it. Over there, the terrace bar/restaurant overlooking Lake Memphrémagog, the "great expanse of water" named by the Abenakis Indians who first populated the region. In summer, a lake cruise ship plies passengers along its 30-mile waterway from the town of Magog, across the Canada-U.S. border to Newport, Vermont.

Though Canada has over 200 private, underground or completely enclosed mazes, I had been lured to this Labyrinthe Memphrémagog by its curious presence in the middle of Canada's Eastern Townships, or Cantons de l'Est, an idyllic lake-filled region that stretches 186 miles along the borders of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

In an area renowned for its year-round sports activities, small historic towns, diverse architecture, emerging boutique wineries, extreme-lean duck cuisine, exclusive abbey cheeses and exquisite chocolates, the

Labyrinthe holds its ground as a community icon that attracts the curious, the confident and the persistent.

Five thousand of them a month, from around the world, find their way to this puzzling structure, 60 miles (a one-hour drive) east of Montreal. Designed in 1996 by engineer Francois La Vigne and owned by Jean Paul Blanchard, a retired lake cruise ship captain, it is one of few public open-air labyrinths in the world—and open only five months a year, from mid-May to mid-October, when the lake breezes and sunshine are warm enough to naturally ventilate it. No lines, crowds, body fragrances or recycled air here.

But how or *would* I get out—before sundown at least, when this "child's playground" closed for the day?

Finding the Way

"Everyone finds the way out," Jean Paul Blanchard, the 62-year-old owner of Labyrinthe Memphrémagog reassured me. "And everyone finds the center." A time-challenged genius he added nonchalantly, could reach the center via 12 (of 24) gates in about 15 minutes; the average person often spends 1-1/2 hours. "But don't worry. If you don't make it, I'll come rescue you," he said, and rollerbladed off. Now *that* absolutely would not do.

After all, from the adjacent highway, the Labyrinthe had seemed so exposed and easy to figure out, unlike the lush, tall green, protective hedge mazes of historic Europe. But clearly, I'd been naive. Eight increasingly larger circles of open fencing, each surrounding the other, protect the heart of this new-age Labyrinthe, which encompasses about one mile of paved terrain for walking. Rollerbladers can also bring their blades to enjoy the Labyrinthe's smooth-paved circuits or rent them onsite for a modest fee.

My stomach growled. I closed my eyes and envisioned in the center of the Labyrinthe a chunk of full-bodied Ermite blue cheese from the cheese factory at the nearby Benedictine Abbey Saint-Benoit-du-Lac, where the entrepreneurial monks have resided since 1912. Then, a glass of ice wine, from one of the area's 14 vineyards that produce a rich, sweet wine from the juice of near-frozen grapes harvested in the cold of winter and especially appreciated in the heat of summer. My nose twitched, my taste buds salivated. Now I was focused and scurried along.

KATHRYN BROCKMAN
Cell: 714. 529. 2340
brockmankb5@yahoo.com
WEB / HOSPITALITY AND TRAVEL

Not Too Serious

"Remember, it's a game," a sign on the chain link fence reminded me as I puzzled over a drawing of a truck and a piece of golf equipment.

Illustrated cartoon riddles posted throughout the Labyrinth pose questions in English and French on science, history, literature and contemporary topics. Correct answers filled in on the visitor's Q&A sheet win prizes based on total points. The closer to the Labyrinth center, the more complex the riddles.

I gazed around me, perplexed: Labyrinth Memphrémagog had the look of a labyrinth but the feel of a maze.

Labyrinth or Maze?

Labyrinths and mazes have often been confused. Labyrinths differ from mazes in that they usually have one distinct, though intricately complex, winding and lengthy path leading to the center and back out, without cul-de-sacs or intersecting paths.

Mazes, however, pose choices of paths, trick corners, blind alleys, and many entrances and exits to reach a specific goal.

The Labyrinth Memphrémagog cleverly carves its own unique hybrid niche in the society of labyrinths by mixing elements of both maze and labyrinth with the ancient Greek mythology of the Sphinx, in which travelers were required to solve the riddle posed by the half-woman/half-lion creature to pass safely on their way.

I marked my Q&A sheet (see below for the answer), pulled the gate latch up and slipped through to the other side. An elderly couple, one seated on a bench rest, the other in a wheelchair, held hands while gazing at the sparkling lake. In another circuit, children played together laughing while their parents trailed behind, staring wistfully at a neighboring apartment complex that towered above the lake like a castle.

I could now see the center, three circuits away.

History of Labyrinths

Throughout history, labyrinths have served as elaborate, complex paths for entertainment, meditation and escape. They emerged 5,000 years ago

in Neolithic caves and as pictographs on "sacred" rocks. King Amenemhet III is credited with constructing the first walkable labyrinth in 1800 BCE at Fayum, Egypt. Greek travelers and writers, Herodotus and Pliny, later wrote about the 1,000-ft. long by 800-ft. wide labyrinth that protected the palaces and temples of twelve Egyptian kings and their gods.

Perhaps the most famous is the great labyrinth at Knossos, Crete, built by the famed architect Daedalus for King Minos. In it, the Minotaur, a half-bull, half-man monster, chased sacrificial victims through seeming endless corridors beneath the huge palace. Theseus killed the monster and escaped the labyrinth by following a ball of twine that he had laid down at the entrance.

Catacombs were a system of underground labyrinth tunnels. Later, church labyrinths, with their inlaid floor versions of different designs, allowed sinners to negotiate these "sacred paths" on knees while praying as a penance substitute for distant, dangerous pilgrimages. Labyrinths come in various styles and types, from turf to concrete, and 3-dimensional to multi-composite designs. The pattern at Chartres Cathedral in northern France is perhaps the most famous design.

Labyrinths have also been used as central images in literature by popular authors such as Jorge Luis Borges in his short stories, Umberto Eco in "The Name of the Rose" and Nick Bantock in "Sabine's Notebook."

The meditative meandering back and forth, turning 180 degrees each time a different circuit is entered, is said to stimulate right-brain intuition, creativity and imagery, and today labyrinths are used in health care facilities, schools, social centers, corporations, retreats, recovery centers and prisons as a form of relaxation.

Labyrinth Tactics

Negotiating the Labyrinth can involve some tricky techniques. Two circuits ahead of me, two teenagers consulted their detailed, hand-drawn map, then raced off in opposite directions. They returned giggling to confer—so close, yet so far. They retreated, retracing their steps and adjusting their map routing.

Others count the number of padlocked gates, digitally photograph their progress step by step or, like Theseus, mark their way with tape or chalk.

KATHRYN BROCKMAN
Cell: 714. 529. 2340
brockmankb5@yahoo.com
WEB / HOSPITALITY AND TRAVEL

Repeat visitors, many with seasonal passes, make up about a fourth of Blanchard's customers, so the paths are reconfigured monthly to maintain the challenge level.

I was two strides away when the girls nipped around to beat me to the center. One slowly circled the small heart of the Labyrinthe, hands on hips, self-satisfied smile on her face. The other stood on her head in the middle.

Around the corner zipped the vigilant, cheerful Blanchard. "Congratulations! That's half of the fun! Now you must get back out," he cheerfully reminded us. "And don't worry. If you can't make it, I'll come get you," he said, and rollerbladed away. Now that absolutely would not do. "Come on!" the girls called to me. "You can do it." And they were off.

Not...quite...yet. Before tackling the return half of the fun, I took a bench seat and from my small backpack triumphantly pulled out my reward: a hunk of Ermete blue cheese, a half-size bottle of ice wine and a white-cloth napkin. Time to dine alfresco.

Beyond, sailboats of all sizes glided atop the lake's sunlit waters, as prostrate beachgoers soaked up the warm rays. "It's so relaxing," sighed Nikki Aspel, the parent I had seen earlier who was visiting from Spain. "It's nice to take a break from the touring and find my own space for a while. And if anyone needs me, they'll just have to come get me," she grinned, waving to her family several circuits away. Then she opened a book and began reading.

Author Johnathan Franzen once said that the first lesson reading teaches is how to be alone. I hadn't read a book in quite a while. Or sat idly, watching people, taking in nature, talking to no one. On the other side of the chain link fence, tennis players scrambled after bouncing balls, and trail bikers emerged and disappeared into the bike trail park behind the Labyrinthe. Now I understood the lure of the Labyrinthe. I was no longer lost in it.

Finding Your Way Back

I passed a little girl pulling her young brother along in a wagon as I slowly meandered back out toward the lake, the terrace bar and my rental car filled with tour pamphlets, schedules and luggage.

At the entrance, Blanchard continued multitasking, giving a pep talk to a riddle-stumped couple and fitting customers with rental rollerblades while encouraging hesitant newcomers to join in the fun. "What did I tell you?" he said to me. I turned to them, "You can do it!" In they went.

At the debriefing area, an odd assortment of outdoor tables and chairs, Blanchard poured a plastic cup of celebratory wine for the Labyrinthe victors and reviewed our performances. "Don't worry," he said looking over my half-completed answer sheet. "Not everyone knows everything. Some know a lot about something, others about another thing. It's not a competition. It's just fun. You had fun, didn't you?" he asked, handing me my reward: an exquisite chocolate.

I lolled it around in my mouth and glanced at my watch. It was mid-afternoon, enough time to wander over to the terrace bar, perhaps catch a few rays lying on that beach. I had taken time from my vacation to walk around in circles for a few hours of...fun. "I'll be back to solve the rest of the riddles," I replied.

The next day, it took me an hour and a half to conquer the amazing Labyrinthe of Magog.

(Answer: Truck driver)

Find Your Way: The Tourisme Cantons de l'Est, (800) 355-5755, www.easterntownship.org



KATHRYN BROCKMAN
Cell: 714. 529. 2340
brockmankb5@yahoo.com
WEB / HOSPITALITY AND TRAVEL

Biography

As a child, Kathryn Brockman became fascinated with labyrinths after reading Homer's Iliad and the tale of Theseus vs. the Minotaur. She is a Southern California-based travel writer, specializing in food and wine, and unusual things to see and do. Her features and photography have been widely published internationally in magazines and newspapers. A contributing book writer and web content producer, Kathryn continues to walk the circles of her life that have encompassed all seven continents. She has lived and worked in Europe and Asia, is multilingual and her features have been syndicated in several languages. Her email address is kbrockman@excite.com.

KATHRYN BROCKMAN
Cell: 714. 529. 2340
brockmankb5@yahoo.com
WEB / HOSPITALITY AND TRAVEL