

Quebec, the largest of Canada's ten provinces, is also the oldest. Beginning with Samuel de Champlain's *habitation* on the banks of the St. Lawrence in 1608, Quebec has played a crucial part in opening up North America. Even today, new regions are being developed. Northern Quebec, more than twice the size of France, has vast reserves of minerals, hydroelectric power and forest lands. Immense iron ore deposits are being mined in eastern Quebec and there has been continuous exploration in the James Bay region. The future is promising. Running parallel with this economic boom is a wide-ranging cultural renaissance that has buttressed the French fact in North America.

Geography

There are three geographic areas in Quebec, which run north to south down the province. They are the Canadian Shield, the St. Lawrence Lowlands and the Appalachian Mountains. The Canadian Shield is the most spectacular region. It extends from Canada's Arctic waters in the north to the Laurentians, the world's oldest mountain range, in the south, and features interesting contrasts of plant and animal life. In the northernmost parts of the Shield, the ground is permanently frozen, and only dwarf birch trees (scarcely 30 cm in height) and a lichen called caribou moss can grow there. Farther south are groves of stunted trees but also productive

forests used by Quebec's pulp and paper and lumbering industries. Most of the province's population lives in the St. Lawrence Lowlands where the soil is most fertile. The land is cut by thousands of lakes and rivers, covering 290,000 km² of Quebec. It is here that the mighty St. Lawrence, one of the world's longest rivers, flows eastward into the Gulf of St. Lawrence with the majesty celebrated by Quebec composer André Gagnon. And, finally, the terrain becomes rocky as the St. Lawrence Lowlands give way to the Appalachian belt.

Climate

The duration of Quebec's winter varies from region to region, but snow normally covers the ground from 12 to 23 weeks. On hearing of England's conquest of New France in 1759, the French author Voltaire dismissed the lost colony as only "a few acres of snow". This was, needless to say, a glaring oversimplification. Winter temperatures, although they do plummet far below freezing, are accompanied by dazzling blue skies. And summers can be very hot. The blossoming trees and flowers of spring and the colourful foliage of autumn make today's description of Quebec, *la belle province*, much more apt.

Population

Quebec has a population of 6,289,600, of which approximately 79 per cent is of French origin and 11 per cent of