



Quebec a Canadian haven for quirky hotels

By Margo Pfeiff | June 28, 2017 | Updated: June 30, 2017 2:50pm



0



Photo: Margo Pfeiff, Special To The Chronicle



Staff stand outside the Ice Hotel (Hôtel de Glace), a giant igloo complex in Quebec City, rebuilt annually out of 30,000 tons of snow and 500 tons of ice.

For some travelers, a hotel is a necessary evil, a place to lay your head for a few hours. For others, a great hotel room is as important as the rest of the journey.

Around Quebec, more than a handful of hotels are the journey.

Over the past decade, creative and sometimes wacky accommodation alternatives have been popping up across the province of Quebec. You can now bed down in yurts, tepees, hobbit houses, spheres suspended among trees, and glass geodesic domes for star watching in the forest. Sleep in a submarine, a lighthouse, a tree house or a real jail. You can even snooze in an African hut in a zoo amid a thousand wild animals.

These days Quebec City, where spending the night in the grand, turreted Chateau Frontenac — a hotel that thinks it's a castle — has long been an iconic experience, is a particularly popular hub of diverse digs, downtown and in the surrounding countryside. Here are four that stand out:

Le Monastère des Augustines (The Augustine Monastery)

Just inside the stone ramparts of the walled Old Quebec City — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — is a historic oasis of peace and serenity that was the first hospital north of Mexico. Established by three French nuns in 1640, the the monastery-hospital was run for 376 years by Augustine Sisters (who were cloistered until 1962). The handful of remaining elderly nuns then donated the building to a nonprofit organization that, after renovations, opened it in 2015 as a luxury 65-room hotel, retreat and wellness center.

Once home to over 200 nuns, the elegant and unusual hotel is a blend of old and new, the no-frills monastery style converting well into a chic minimalist design with whitewashed walls, exposed wooden beams and floors, and wide hallways lined with portraits and statues leading to quiet retreats for meditation.

The secular hotel's mission is to carry on the Augustine philosophies of rejuvenating and healing its guests, now through meditation, aromatherapy, massage, yoga, holistic workshops and healthy food. The earnings provide assistance for those who need it, including respite for caregivers.



Photo: Margo Pfeiff, Special To The Chronicle



A painting in a hallway at Le Monastère des Augustines (The Augustine Monastery), originally established by a trio of French nuns in 1640.

For a true historical experience, I stay in one of Le Monastere's 33 "authentic" rooms, simple former nuns' quarters with Augustinian furniture and a single bed. The thick walls create a silent space that is truly divine. There are also bigger, "contemporary" rooms with en suite bathrooms.

An organic breakfast is served in the bright dining room in silence, according to monastery tradition, and I feel myself starting to unwind. Stepping down worn and creaky steps, I explore the hospital and Augustine museum with over 40,000 artifacts on the main floor, then head downstairs again into the massive new archives with more than half a mile of original manuscripts.

I linger in the spectacular 18th century chapel that I'm blessed to have all to myself. I peruse the boutique selling unique items including a line of herbal teas made with recipes given to the Augustinians by local First Nations people they healed hundreds of years ago. After checking out, I feel as if I've spent the night in a museum.

Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations

As a bonfire crackles under the stars, an aboriginal elder spins tales of the ancient Huron-Wendat Nation. My head filled myths and legends, I slip into the traditional longhouse and curl up on my cozy sleeping spot atop soft furs on a raised platform. I drift to sleep watching shadows flicker across the walls of the huge bark and wood structure, knowing a fire keeper will check the indoor fires to make sure they keep us warm throughout the night.

In the forest along the Saint-Charles River 15 minutes north of Quebec City, native tradition meets four-star luxury. On their land in Wendake, the 3,500 members of the Huron-Wendat Nation are keen to share their culture, traditions and lifestyles. They built an architecturally stunning hotel, as well as a longhouse and an interactive museum complex with permanent displays detailing the nation's history.



Photo: Margo Pfeiff, Special To The Chronicle



Guests sit by the fire in a traditional longhouse at Hotel-Musée Premières Nations in Wendake, which is operated by members of the Huron-Wendat Nation.

The modern hotel celebrates indigenous connections, from rooms artfully decorated with fox and beaver pelts to the subtle flavors of wild herbs from the boreal forest on the lunch and dinner plates of their restaurant.

Learning about the Wendat culture doesn't have to be a passive experience. Guests can join the daily Labrador tea ceremony in the lobby, learn how to make bannock, go dog sledding, strap on snowshoes to track caribou or sleep in the longhouse with a modern hotel room as a backup for convenience.

In La Traite restaurant, renowned Quebec chef Martin Gagné offers multicourse tasting menus to highlight his creative takes on traditional native cuisine. Locals forage for indigenous ingredients, and wild game is complemented with plants grown on site. The food is seasonal and might feature elk tartare, smoked eel, Quebec scallops with sea urchin butter, wild cattails with spicy birch syrup, red deer osso buco perfumed with bog myrtle or a fillet of seal. It's a unique and delicious culinary adventure that rounds out a welcoming and enlightening overnight experience.

EXP Cabin in Jacques-Cartier Park

Quebec's provincial park service — SEPAQ — has always dreamed up inspired ways to help people enjoy the wilderness with various levels of comfort in their 23 parks and nine wildlife reserves. They offer everything from rustic huts, yurts and log cabins to luxury backcountry lodges and pre-pitched, fully furnished family tents called Huttopia.

I drive 30 minutes north from Quebec City to try out their recently introduced contemporary Chalet EXP (“experience”) in Parc National de la Jacques-Cartier (in Quebec, provincial parks are called “national”), a vast, wild mountain plateau with steep glacial valleys. My plan is to cycle the scenic park road that follows the spectacular Jacques Cartier River upstream, do a bit of canoe paddling and hike some of the 60 miles of trails.



Photo: Margo Pfeiff, Special To The Chronicle



One of the two-person EXP cabins at Chalet EXP ("experience") in Parc National de la Jacques-Cartier.

Winding into the forest, I drive right up to the two-person EXP cabin, set alongside the river and surrounded by trees. It's a tiny house, a contemporary wooden cube with clean lines and floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides that makes me feel as if I'm outside when I'm inside. The 320-square-foot studio layout of blond wood has a sleek Scandinavian feel and includes a well-equipped kitchen and compact bathroom with shower. There is electricity, hot water, wallboard heating, bean bag chairs for lounging in front of a small wood-burning stove, and a welcoming hammock swinging inside a screened porch.

There are even logs for a bonfire. Just bring marshmallows and a sleeping bag. Or rent linens and pillows on site — SEPAQ believes in toothbrush-and-pajama camping! The cabins are available year round, and before I leave I'm already planning an EXP cross-country ski and snowshoe excursion when the snowflakes start falling.

Ice Hotel (Hôtel de Glace)

Speaking of snow, Quebec City's most unusual hotel is a giant igloo complex, rebuilt annually out of 30,000 tons of snow and 500 tons of ice. Just 30 minutes north of the city, North America's only Ice Hotel since 2001 has 44 rooms and suites, each themed with different super-clear ice sculptures. The dazzling grand lobby and its chandelier, the chapel where you can tie the knot with the bride wearing a white fur coat, the three bars — and even the glass from which I sip local ice cider — are all made of ice.

The hotel takes a team of 50 including 15 sculptors six weeks to build and opens in early January and closes late March. It rises on the grounds of the Valcartier Vacation Village entertainment complex with restaurants, an indoor water park and an outdoor winter playground with skating paths, snow rafting and more than 35 snow slides. There's also a modern hotel where every Ice Hotel guest has a backup room for modern conveniences.

After a warm-up sauna and hot tub I head to my ice bed in a spectacular room with icebergs, polar bears and seals swimming along icy blue walls that can be up to four feet thick. The room is romantically lit by a well-insulated blazing fireplace that exudes just atmosphere, not heat. Though the inside temperature is 41 F, the wooden frame and thermal mattress atop my ice bed and a weapons-grade down sleeping bag keep me warm throughout the night, dreaming about living atop an ice floe.

If you go

All prices in U.S. dollars.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Augustine Monastery (Le Monastère des Augustines): 77 Rue des Remparts, Old Québec City, 1-844-694-1639 or (418) 694-1639, <http://monastere.ca/en>. Authentic rooms with shared bathrooms from \$65 per person. Contemporary en suite rooms from \$80 per person, double occupancy. Includes breakfast, access to the museum and the heritage site.

Hôtel - Musée Premières Nations: 5, Place de la Rencontre, Wendake, Quebec, 1-418-847-2222, <http://tourismewendake.ca/en/hosting/hotel-musee-premieres-nations>. From \$115 double/night in hotel. Longhouse overnight package from \$560 per night for a minimum of four people includes the cultural experience, a hotel room for modern conveniences and breakfast. Regular shuttles to and from Quebec City.

EXP Cabin in Jacques-Cartier Park: 103, chemin du Parc-National, Stoneham-et-Tewkesbury, Quebec; www.sepaq.com/annexes/hebergement/chalet-exp.dot?language_id=1. Bring your own food and sleeping bag. Linens, pillows and blankets are also available for an additional \$15 rental. From \$105 per night.

Ice Hotel: 1860 Boulevard Valcartier A, Saint-Gabriel-de-Valcartier, Quebec, 1-888-384-5524 or (418) 844-2200, www.hoteldeglace-canada.com. From \$219/double including sauna, spa and breakfast. Various packages and promotions might include activities from dog sledding to access to the adjacent Valcartier theme park complex including an indoor water park. www.valcartier.com/en/winter-playground

Parc Aventures Cap Jaseux: www.capjaseux.com/en/accommodation. Sleep in a suspended spheres or a glass geodesic dome in forest alongside Saguenay Fjord, 2 hours and 45 minutes northeast of Quebec City. From \$175 for up to 4 people.

Mont Tremblant Treehouses: 5000, ch. du Lac-Caribou, Saint-Faustin-Lac-Carré, Québec, 1-819 681-4994; www.refugesperches.com/en/our-treehouses Selection of tree houses in the Laurentian Mountains 1 hour 45 minutes north of Montreal. From \$150 for a couple or family of four.

Entre Cîmes et Racines: 80, chemin Simard, Bolton-East; 1-450-297-0770 or 1-866-297-0770; http://entrecimesetracines.com/en/portfolio_page/le-hobbit. Rustic and cozy partially underground Hobbit House an hour southeast of Montreal. From \$110/night for a maximum of four.

Spend the night in an African hut in the **Granby Zoo**, <https://zoodegranby.com/en/visit/events-and-activities/the-zoo-at-night>, on board the **Onondaga**, a submarine in Rimouski www.shmp.qc.ca/nuitabord.html or in a prison in **Trois Rivières** www.culturepop.qc.ca/en/old-prison-of-trois-rivieres/sentenced-to-one-night.

WHERE TO EAT

Restaurant La Traite: 5, Place de la Rencontre, Wendake, Quebec, 1-418-847-2222, <http://tourismewendake.ca/en/restaurants/la-traite>. Three, four and six-course tasting menus often featuring unconventional First Nations' ingredients prepared in an elegant fine dining restaurant by renowned Quebec chef, Martin Gagné. From \$75.

Le Clocher Penché: 203 Rue Saint-Joseph Est, St. Roch neighborhood, Quebec City, 1-418-640-0597, <http://www.clocherpenche.ca/en>. Elegant and casual bistro fare made from locally sourced ingredients, with a great wine list in the gentrified St. Roch neighborhood. Dinner for two from \$70.

Pub St-Gab: 1825 Boulevard Valcartier, Saint-Gabriel-de-Valcartier, QC, (418) 844-9740, www.lestgab.com/lestgab.php. Casual pub fare with live music. From \$30 for two.

MORE INFORMATION

Tourism Quebec: www.quebecoriginal.com/en-ca