

PASSPORT

TRAVEL • CULTURE • STYLE • ADVENTURE • ROMANCE!

COURTING QUÉBEC



With its charming streets filled with romantic French influence, Quebec City is a perfect destination for a passionate escape.

BY JOSEPH PEDRO

"The city is romantic, it offers a wide variety of fine restaurants, has a European flair, and, most importantly, both visitors and residents find an openness of mind, an acceptance of differences."



We started to get nervous as a burly police officer gave us that I'm-about-to-walk-over eye. My boyfriend and I were taking a quick-kiss selfie in front of Québec City's Fontaine de Tourny. He steps over in unison with the banging of drums from a First Nations' festival happening across the street at Parc de l'Esplanade.

"Hey guys, let me take that photo for you," he says, in a deep Québec accent. We pose. I wrap my arm around Jason, but keep him at justfriends length.

"Come on," he says. "Give him another kiss, act like you like each other," he laughs while holding up the phone and crouching like a mom taking a picture of her kids before they leave for the first day of school.

We give one another a big kiss, the officer takes the snap, and then he gives us a gentle wave goodbye. "Happy pride," he says walking back to the festival gates.



Both of us were in somewhat of a shock by the incident and had to take a minute to discuss what just happened. Being from New York, we are programmed to be suspicious of strangers, never mind a cop approaching us. It was so sweet that we savored the scenario as we stood by the cascading fountain waters.

"Hi, I hope I am not bothering you," a tween in her traditional First Nations dress says to us. "But, we were all watching you two take that picture from the tent, and all of us were awwwwing over how sweet it was!" she shyly tells us before walking back to her friends who are all looking over at her.

"Does it get anymore lovely and Canadian than this?" Jason says as we walk away from the fountain down the Québec City esplanade to the soothing beat of the drums.

Are you guys here for Pride?" the young man at the front desk of Hotel Pur (395 Couronne St. Tel: 1-418-647-2611, www.starwoodhotels.com) says to us after our super-short flight. We give each other that look of childhood excitement, like a father telling his kids they can get that new toy. We weren't aware that our trip in September coincided with the city's Pride (www.fetearcenciel.ca, August 30-September 2, 2018).

Also lucky for us, the front desk consists of a crew of in-the-know gays, including the fabulous Jean-Michel Painchaud who gives us the low down on where we need to be that weekend. Maps circled with gay spots in tow, we admire the relaxed lobby with huge portraits of anthropomorphic animals. Our room is spacious and bright, with a whimsical mural of a city skyline with pops of green and yellow that drifts off toward the floor-to-ceiling window with an eye-level view of a golden Saint-Roch statue standing proudly atop his namesake chapel.

The hotel is located in what is known as the Saint-Roch area. Once poorly regarded by locals who lived atop the hill in Old Québec, it is now a young area with shops, restaurants, art galleries, and exciting energy. We explore the area in much greater detail with a pint in hand as we take the Craft Brewery Tour by Broue Tours (www.broue-tours.ca). We meet our guide around the corner at Noctem Artisans Brasseurs (438 rue du Parvis, Tel: 1-581-742-7979, www.noctem.ca) that is already packed with mid-day drinkers sipping the various beers made on-site.



Fontaine de Tourny

We find out quickly that Québec is home to a fairly large number of craft breweries (there is a map where you can get stamps for each one you visit). During the afternoon, we visit La Barberie (310 rue Saint-Roch. Tel: 1-418-522-4373. www.labarberie.com) with its sprawling outdoors. The brewery works like a co-op where bartenders and waiters volunteer hours, and workers have us sample their famous grapefruit beer. With more stops in-between, we finally end at La Korrigane (380 rue Dorchester. Tel: 1-418-614-0932. www.korrigane.ca) where the only female brew master in Québec, Catherine Foster, has created a unique series of drinks named after famous women in history. The half-day tour, a steal at \$65, includes small bites and three tastings at each venue, as well as a tour of the surrounding area.

That night, we meet Jean-Michele for dinner at Hotel Pur at their modern-bistro, TABLE. The bright eatery features new-Canadian cuisine that mixes French fare with super-hearty dishes. The chef impresses us with his finesse using local ingredients that are both savory and sweet: seared scallops with apple and maple-glazed bacon; smoked lamb with ricotta, tomato, and grapes topped with a lasagna confit. During dinner, Jean-Michele tells us about his move from Montréal to Québec City. "Québec City is the place to be oneself without having to be stuck in traffic 24/7. The city has great views, nature, fresh air, history, and all the entertainment we need."

While exploring the city the next day, a sudden downpour has us ducking for cover, soaking wet, into the **Auberge-SaintAntoine** (8 rue Saint Antoine. Tel: 418-692-2211. www.saint-antoine.com). Upon entering this family-owned 95-room boutique hotel, the staff greets us with warm towels (even though we aren't staying here) to dry off.

We fall for the architecture that houses the hotel's restaurant Chez Muffy. Located in a converted maritime warehouse, the exposed wood and eye-popping floral arrangements create an ideal escape from the elements. We plan our day looking over sprawled-out maps like military strategists, while enjoying French hot chocolates and extra-fluffy pancakes topped with local fruits.



As the rain subsides, I enlist an old friend, Richard Seguin (www.toursvoirquebec.com), to show off his favorite parts of the Old City. His heart and soul is in the city, especially since he formerly worked for the tourist board and is now a hireable guide. We stroll the cobblestoned streets, chit chatting about his life, dating, travel, and friendships, and quickly learn just how many hidden gems there are here and what it takes to keep these historical buildings in tip-top shape.

Large window boxes erupt with end-of-summer flowers, falling down to the stone street like Rapunzel's hair. We walk up the hill, avoiding a tiny river from the last drops of the morning rain being swept from the doorsteps of shops onto the street. The crowds aren't quite out in full force (get to the Old City early warns Seguin)—as we hear that Québec City is seeing a record number of tourists.

For lunch, we pop into Le Chic Shack (15 Fort Street. Tel: 1-418-6921485. www.lechicshack.ca), which is a fashionable burger joint with a popular menu. Yes, they also sell classic and over-the-top poutine (French fries with cheese curd and gravy). Over homemade sodas, we get a firsthand account of just how much Seguin feels for Québec. "Once there was a writer who wrote: '...see the bay of Naples and then die.' One should say see "Québec City and live forever."

"That's a very strong statement. Québec City leaves visitors with a lasting impression of beauty, of harmony," he tells us. "The city is romantic, it offers a wide variety of fine restaurants, has a European flair, and, most importantly, both visitors and residents find an openness of mind, an acceptance of differences," he adds as we see a family walk by dressed in rainbow-ready fashions to enjoy the pride festivities.



As we part ways with Richard, Jason and I take a long walk home. We walk outside the castle-like Fairmont Le Château Frontenac (1 rue des Carrières. Tel: 1-418-692-3861. www.fairmont.com) and admire this architectural marvel—a true cathedral to tourism and hospitality. Seagulls lead the way toward a sunset-lit boardwalk, squawking as they fly between a Dalí elephant statue and a monument to Samuel de Champlain. As night begins to set in, the city twinkles far below and the ships light up the river. Music from a circus troupe fills the air like a scene from a French film, and we walk hand in hand under the rainbow-lit Château decorated for pride.

On our last night in Québec City, we beg our concierge for reservations at *Légende par La Tanière* (255 rue Saint-Paul. Tel: 1-418-614-2555. www.restaurantlegende.com). He giggles a little at first as it's one of the most popular restaurants in town, until he sees the determination in our eyes to try chef Frédéric Laplante's award-winning cuisine.

This cozy hideaway allows diners to enjoy their meal by candlelight under wooden beams that give a rustic feel to the dining room and the long, well-stocked bar. Here, when the waiters tell you that the food is local, they mean it. Chef Laplante will not even serve tea, only products from Québec, which provides for a delightfully adventurous menu.

I don't explain to Jason just what a Rocky Mountain oyster is when it comes as part of the chef's trio along with lamb with fries and veal brain and polenta with a side of cured vegetables. Every bite evokes a rich, French culinary tradition, including the succulent quail served with gnocchi, zucchini, and mushrooms, or the bison tataki with sunchoke and marinated mushrooms.

As we walk home from the Old Québec, hiding from the rain in ancient archways, we pass the Pride crowd. They're unfazed by the weather as they stand in an alleyway outside of **La Drague Cabaret Club** (815 rue Ste-Augustin. Tel: 418-649-7212). Cigarettes lit, drinks in hand, drag queens, boys, girls, and everyone else twirling to the music from a DJ. Others wait anxiously to get into the threefloor club. We can't help but get drawn in by the energy, and we stop for a drink outside, where we almost immediately run into some new friends we met during the week.



Le Germain Charlevoix Hotel & Spa

The true purpose of our trip to Québec was to get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. With the excitement of pride and the overwhelming amount of things to do in the city, we needed to get away from getting away. On a lastminute whim, we booked a car, and under the advice from locals, drove to the municipality of Charlevoix. Since it was the end of a holiday weekend for Canadians, we happily drove against the onslaught of traffic returning to the city. In just over an hour, we found ourselves rolling down picturesque hills with cascading mountains above the clouds, and enjoying tiny towns with white steeples lining the St. Lawrence River, local cheese purveyors, micro-breweries, and ultimately, our escape, Le Germain Charlevoix Hôtel & Spa (rue de la Ferme. Tel: 1-418-240-4100. www.legermainhotels.com).

This eco-friendly, modernist hotel is a series of structures that sit on sprawling green pastures that connect to a small beach along the river that's just a ten-minute walk into town. We check into a massive loft room with a balcony overlooking the resort's farm. At night, the only thing we hear are goats bleating to a song all their own.

For dinner at the hotel's upscale Les Labours, we sit on one side of the open kitchen where we joyfully watch the chef prepare my risotto with pumpkin, spinach, and garlic and Jason's impressively local lamb that's being unwrapped from a local butcher's paper. For desert, we indulge in a plate of exquisite local cheeses with honey from the hotel's grounds.

Afterward, we stroll the grounds and head for the thermal pool. It's just us in the 100-degree water. Steam is rising into the fresh Québec air, making its way toward the millions of stars that are lighting up the sky. "It's so quiet here," Jason says. "Just us he adds." At that exact moment, the resident bull bellows like a town crier, breaking up our romantic moment. "Does it get anymore Canadian than this," Jason laughs as we fall back into the warm waters.