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The O'Brien House, a Canadian Heritage Treasure, Opens as a B&B

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Be the first guest at this boutique hotel in Quebec's uber-gorgeous Gatineau Park

Let's get the bad news out of the way. The 8200-square-foot mansion in Quebec's Gatineau Park that was slated to open last year for Canada's 150th birthday didn't quite make the deadline. However, it did manage to finally open its doors on February 22.

That can happen when you're taking on a project this ambitious. The \$3.9 million renovation of the cliffside summer home, built in 1930 by Ambrose O'Brien, the founder of the National Hockey Association (later the NHL), was worth the wait.



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Let me count the ways.

1. It's not every day you get to be first.

Last year, when every history buff on the planet was rushing to celebrate all things Canadian, Gatineau Park was busier than usual. Busy, of course, is relative as this national park is big—130-square-miles big with 103 miles of hiking trails, 56 miles of mountain bike trails and 120 miles of cross country ski trails. Enjoying its pristine natural charm is sort of a no-brainer. Even better is how easy this much awesome wilderness is to access. The main entrance is a short two-and-a-half miles from Ottawa.

2. Perfection, as they say, takes time.

O'Brien House had time to get things right. Each of the eleven suites, the ones you can be the very first to frequent, and its two treehouse suites are all individually decorated and have panoramic views of the park. We're not making any promises, but it's very likely you could catch a glimpse of the more than 100 species that call Gatineau Park home including wolves, bears, porcupines and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (well, his second home, Lac Mousseau, is located on Harrington Lake). No guarantees, but the tattooed hunk has been known to explore the trails shirtless.

3. The food is peerless, made in one of the most scenic hotel kitchens on the planet.

I know. You don't normally count on gourmet food when enjoying primo wilderness. But because O'Brien House is helmed by Patrick Marion, who has a thing for sourcing ingredients from local artisans and a thriving community of small scale farmers, the food is creative, inspiring, and the perfect reward for a day of enjoying the park's outdoor offerings. Although he's not saying, Marion was likely lured to O'Brien House because of its unique kitchen with giant windows (who does that in a hotel kitchen?) with the same panoramic views enjoyed by guests.



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4. It's minutes from North America's largest spa. Purists, of course, can find more than enough to do right within the park.

There are numerous beaches (one is even an unofficial nude beach), a fabulous ice skating rink, and the pesticide-free village of Chelsea that was once an ionospheric observatory for the Royal Canadian Navy and now sports the iconic Chelsea Pub that just happens to brews its own homemade craft beers. Or you can visit Camp Fortune that has downhill skiing in the winter and a zipline in the summer.

But whatever you do, leave time in your schedule for a visit to Nordik Spa, the largest spa in North America. It's impossible to describe the enormity of this outdoor spa, nestled within a Canadian forest, except to say it has a ginormous selection of Nordic baths and waterfalls, saunas with varying temperatures, steam baths, cold plunge pools, hot tubs, quiet rooms, restaurants, and enough offerings that it would be impossible to do them all in one day.

Savvy adventurer that I am, I opted for the Kalla, an underground salt-water pool that gives 20 guests at a time (a counter before you descend the 16-feet into the rock keeps tabs) the relaxing feeling of weightlessness much like floating in the Dead Sea. There's only one other pool like it in the world.

I also indulged in a rare Aufguss Ritual, announced six times a day by a deep, resonant gong. Once inside the sauna, an Aufguss master enters with four wooden pails filled with snowballs, each infused with essential oils. Accompanied by music (there are three songs per session), the master, one-by-one, drops the snowballs onto the hot rocks and fans the resulting steam throughout the chambers in a hypnotic dance.

