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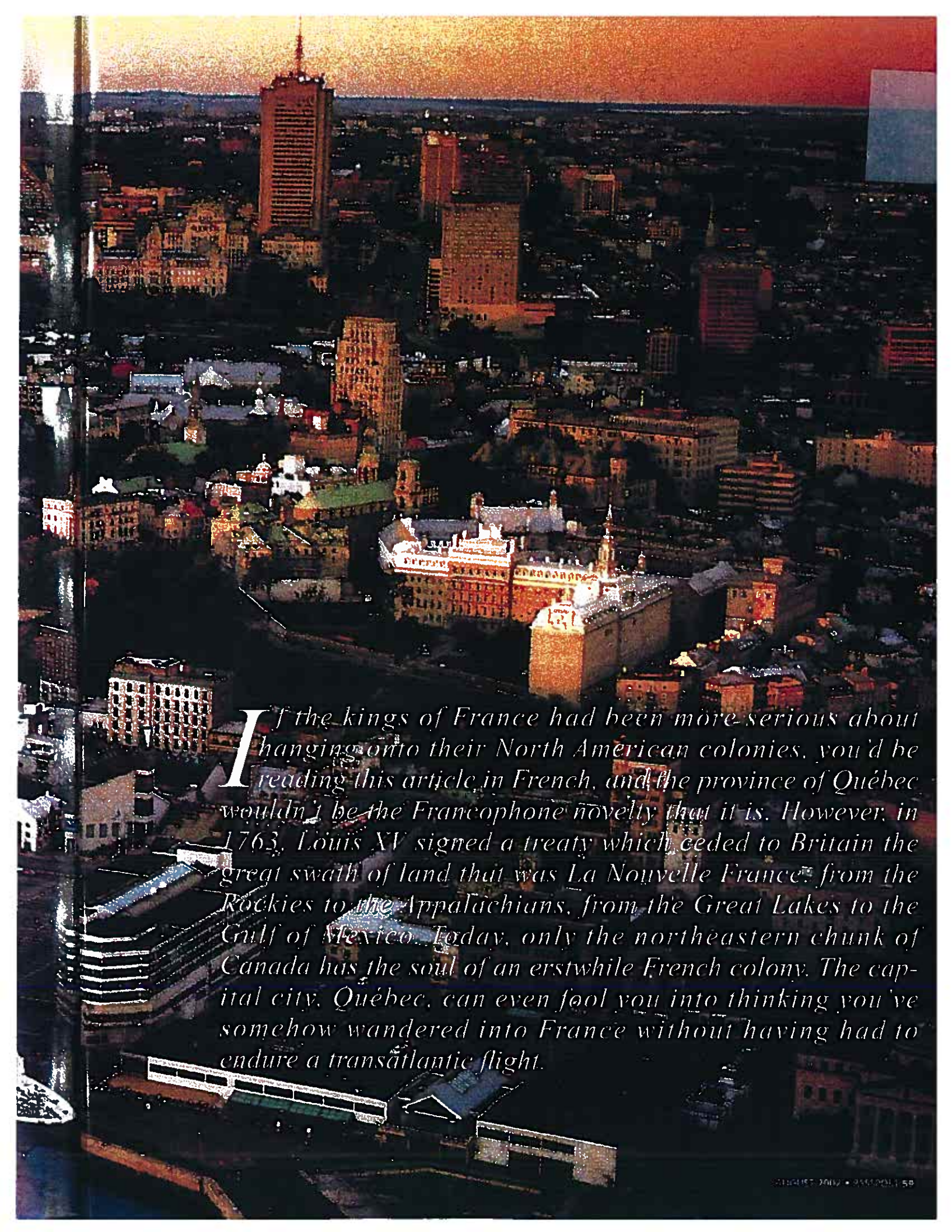


An aerial photograph of Quebec City, Canada, showing the city built on a cliffside overlooking the St. Lawrence River. A large white cruise ship is docked in the foreground. The text 'Quebec' is written in large, white, stylized letters across the middle of the image, and 'Vive la France' is written below it in a smaller, similar font. A small credit line 'by [unreadable] Blackwell' is visible near the top right.

# Quebec

Vive la France

by [unreadable] Blackwell

An aerial photograph of a city at night, likely Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous buildings, some of which are brightly lit. The sky is dark, and the overall scene is illuminated by the city's lights. The text is overlaid on the lower portion of the image.

*If the kings of France had been more serious about hanging onto their North American colonies, you'd be reading this article in French, and the province of Québec wouldn't be the Francophone novelty that it is. However, in 1763, Louis XV signed a treaty which ceded to Britain the great swath of land that was La Nouvelle France: from the Rockies to the Appalachians, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Today, only the northeastern chunk of Canada has the soul of an erstwhile French colony. The capital city, Québec, can even fool you into thinking you've somehow wandered into France without having had to endure a transatlantic flight.*

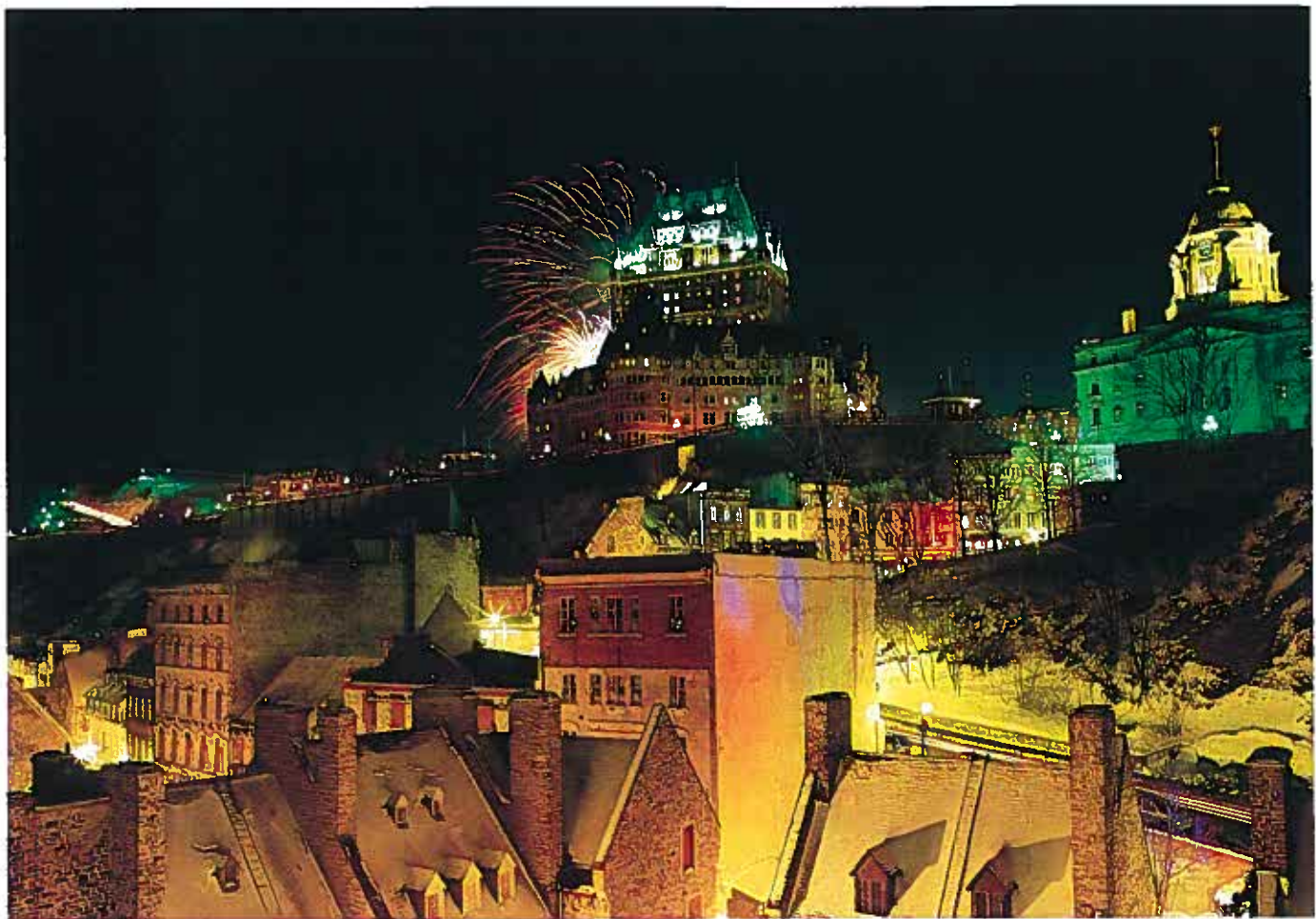


Photo Claudet Huot

If you're looking for a cosmopolitan experience, and one with a huge gay scene, go to Montréal, a sophisticated city of three million-plus multicultural souls. If you want a taste of *la Nouvelle France profonde*, the Franco-American experience in-depth, you must visit the older, smaller city of Québec, home to only six hundred thousand. This architectural jewel, the only walled city in North America, was recognized by UNESCO as a "world heritage treasure," which puts it on the shortlist with Venice. Here you can contemplate the struggle involved in establishing an outpost of European culture in the New World as you traipse through streets that serve as a living museum and sample cuisine combining the best of French rigor and American invention.

I first encounter the pleasures of Québec (pronounced *keh-bek*) in August 2001 after a whirlwind tour of Montréal as a writer invited to check out the then-candidate for the Gay Games 2006. None of the other competing cities—Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago—had bothered to contact the lesbian publication I was then editing. This fact alone says a lot about French Canada's ability to translate their *ouverture d'esprit*, or open-mindedness, into a recognition of the gay market. They actively courted the gay tourist dollar, but far from leaving me feeling like an exploited sub-niche, my first contact with les Québécois made me feel *chaleureuse*, or all warm and fuzzy inside. Not only were they friendly, funny, and well-informed, they were organized; and they had panache. Their city was also, obviously, an ideal site. They won the bid.

A group of us took the train from Montréal to Québec, for what was one of the highlights of the trip. Three hours of sitting back and watching the scenery roll past, while being served a three-course meal by an extremely focused waiter, is my idea of heaven. Oh yes, this was first class. The appetizer was *terrine de canard aux pistaches* (terrine of duck with pistachios), on which lay two thin slices of pear boiled in red wine, surmounted by a slice of *canard fumé* (smoked duck) which was melt-in-the-mouth tender. To wash it down, I had a glass of Canadian cabernet franc. Nothing could top that opener, but the main course of ginger stir-fry scallops wasn't bad either.

Like lesbians, Quebec City is sometimes considered a 'sub-niche,' since most of the gay tourist dollars go to Montreal. Perhaps that was part of its appeal for me. Arriving in Québec after Montréal was like hitting San Francisco after New York. Everything was scaled down and the chief sensation, after all that bustle, was of beauty. Having lived in France, I had a weird sense of déjà vu. I had seen these small, curving, cobblestone streets before, with their severe stone façades exuding an impeccable sense of proportion. How wonderful to be able to taste France on this continent. Why hadn't I thought of this before?

I was eager to return to this city whose gay scene is more conducive to romance and sociability than raw sexual exploit. Recently, I had the opportunity to once again sampled Québec's old-world charm.

The night I arrived, I dropped into the *Café du Monde* for

a beer. This bistro with Parisian pretensions has the charms and limitations of a replica. Although I spoke my best French for the host, he quickly pried out of me the reason for my visit and started talking loudly in English. Carefree as a child, he scooped up a pepper mill from the bar, held it in like a microphone, and riffed in the manner of a news anchor. That wouldn't, that couldn't, happen in Paris. Then I sat down to order a glass of draft beer, one of the must-drinks on any visit to Canada. The bartender, competing for the title of friendliest guy in the world, mocked the age-old tradition of barkeeps everywhere by miming the wiping down of the counter. I've never seen anything like it. As I savored a delicious glass of *la Belle Gueule* (literally, "beautiful muzzle"), he updated me on the progress of his neighbor's tulips, marveling that the lilacs had already come and gone. While trafficking in French traditions, the Québécois instantly distinguish themselves from their snootier Old World cousins.

The Café du Monde is located in *la Basse Ville*, or **Low Town**, the oldest part of the city, and a bastion of Frenchness. Everything discreetly competes for the tourist's attention in this handful of narrow streets nestled beneath dramatic cliffs on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. The historic and symbolic center is **La Place Royale**, so named because its centerpiece is a bust of Louis XIV. Before the Sun King was even a twinkle, Samuel de Champlain had set up housekeeping here, in 1608, in what's fondly referred to as *l'Abitation*, an antique variation on l'habitation. Although Champlain's eponymous habitation is long gone, its place is now filled by a sturdy stone A-frame with an austere steeple.

**Notre Dame-des-Victoires**, Our Lady of Victories, begun in 1688, was originally named for the Infant Jesus, but rechristened after the victory over the English in 1690; this was changed to the plural in 1711, when the French again reconquered their capital. With no separation of church and state, the Almighty's collusion in territorial politics can become intense. The devout (or merely curious) visitor will find important clues to the character of Québec in Notre Dame's lively interior. A detailed replica of the three-masted *Brézé*, which arrived in 1664 with a regiment to defend the city, hangs above the pews in offering of thanksgiving. A chapel celebrates Saint Geneviève, who fed the people of Paris during an onslaught by Attila the Hun in 451, and several centuries later miraculously saved her New World

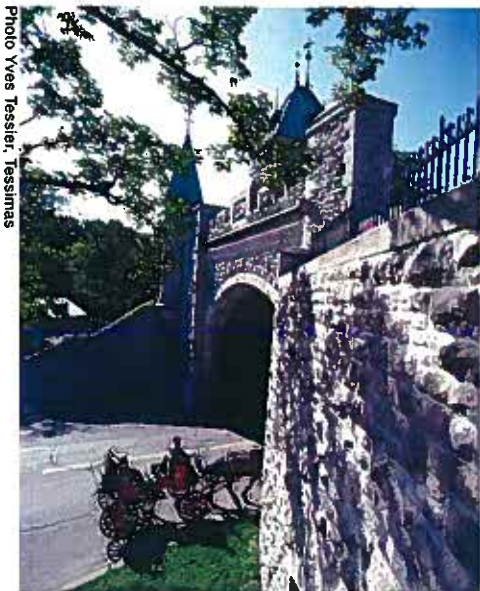
colony from starvation. On one of my visits, a baptism was being enthusiastically videotaped; on another, the church was deluged by Asian tourists.

If **La Place Royale** is the heart of the city, the most impressive monument is unquestionably the **Château Frontenac**, which despite its grand title and massive bulk was never anything but a luxury hotel built by the Canadian Pacific Railway. The American architect Bruce Price started assembling this neo-gothic pile in 1892, having sipped inspiration from the châteaux of the Loire. To get there, take *L'Escalier casse-cou*, or the **Breakneck Staircase**, which isn't as dangerous as it sounds. Or try the newly modernized funicular whose 1879 prototype was powered by a steam engine. You'll rise 195 feet, at an angle of 45 degrees, and snatch a brief panoramic view of the St. Lawrence. When you disembark, you'll be in *la Haute Ville*, or **High Town**, and you'll know why it's called that. Whether or not you decide to sleep in one of the Frontenac's 600 rooms, be sure to take a stroll around the lobby. The bellhops are old hands at posing with tourists, and you can take tea in a subtly sumptuous bar overlooking the river.

You're now inside the walled town: fortifications begun by the French in the 17th century that were eventually completed by the British. (The colony changed hands on a few dramatic occasions.) The final construction of the walls and *la Citadelle*, a vast fort which today serves as a park, were undertaken in 1820 by the British who feared a war with the United States. The fragility of any kind of settlement and the volatility of political alliances are everywhere in evidence, but you won't have to worry about all that as long as the World Trade Organization isn't visiting, as they did in 2000. You're free to lose yourself in an embarrassment of picturesque options, as you amble through cobblestone streets lined with antique stone façades, weaving in and out of shops, churches and museums. If you're in the market for a hat (God forbid it's fur) this is the place. And then, of course, there's the food.

**T**here's no point coming to Québec unless you're prepared to eat. Damn the cholesterol, full-course meals ahead. You won't regret the time spent at the table, which will be longer than you'd spend in the States. True children of France, these people take dining very seriously. Many locals

Photo Claudet Huot



Saint-Louis Gate, Old Québec



Saint-Louis Street at night, Old Québec

Photo Yves Tessier, Tessinas

Photo Luc-antonie Couturier

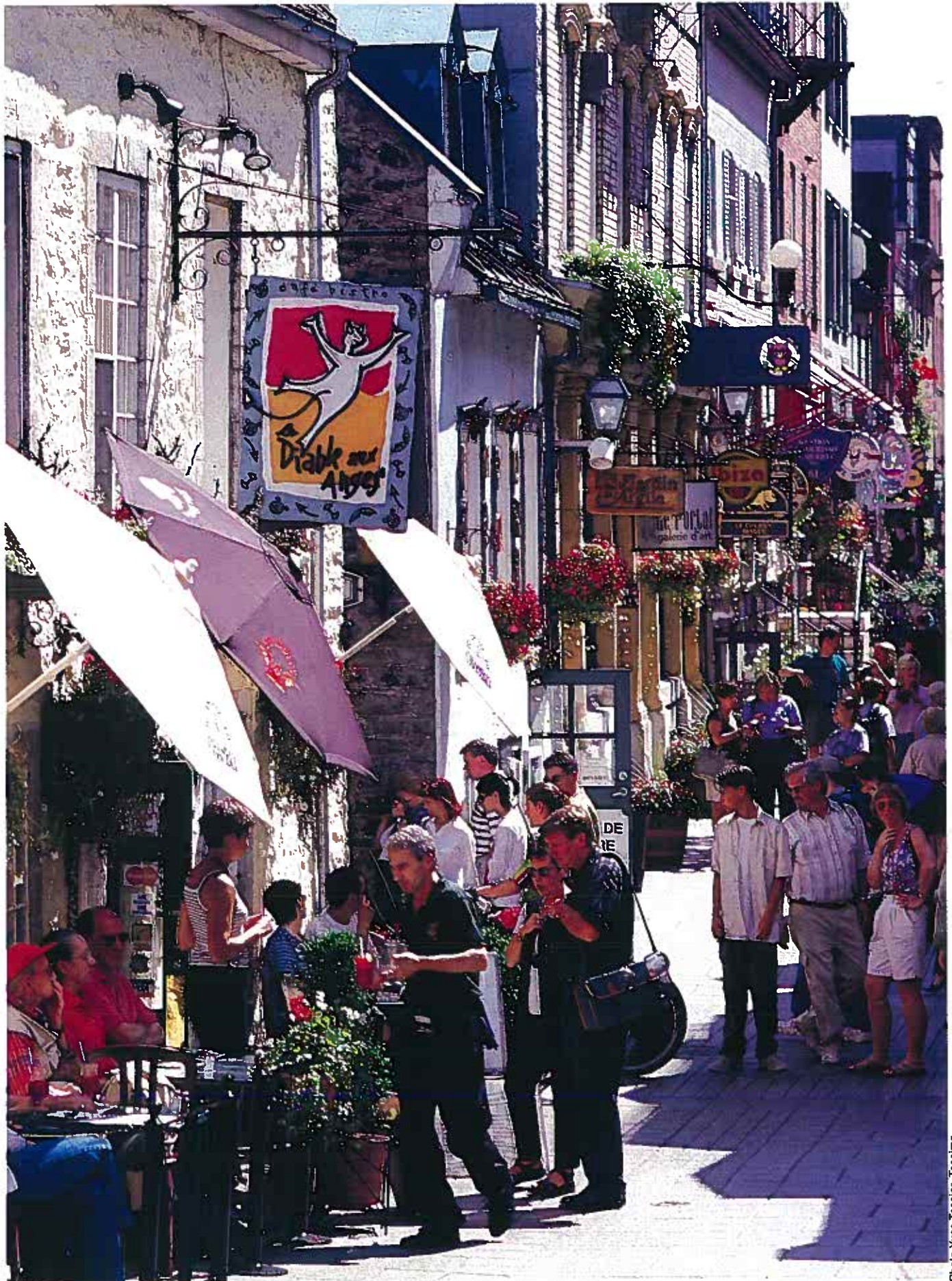


Photo Yves Tessier, Tessima

Sidewalk café on du Petit-Champlain Street

only grudgingly acknowledge the existence of those traditional dishes, now considered too heavy, which sustained their farming ancestors. The most embarrassing of these appears to be *poutine*, whose childish name announces one of the world's great comfort foods. I had a somewhat corrupt version of this traditional favorite in the Toronto airport, at a great fast-food joint called Harvey's. I got a tub of fries sitting in warm, viscous gravy, dotted with chunks of melting cheese. This was the ideal antidote to the woozy feeling engendered by a transnational journey.

On the opposite end of the culinary scale was the three-course meal I absorbed at the **Manoir Montmorency**, an elegant former country estate with a view of the spectacular **Montmorency Falls**, a 15-minute taxi ride from the city. The falls' claim to fame is to be a 100 feet higher than Niagra. When I was there in late April, between bouts of light snow, quite an extensive rainbow appeared in the mist, which I took as a sign. The manoir's claim to fame is Chef Marie-Chantal Lepage, 38, who two years ago became the first woman to be named Chef of the Year by the Société des Chefs, Cuisiniers, et Pâtisseries du Québec.

A kir royal, made with French sparkling wine and raspberry syrup from a small local producer, prepares my palate for *l'entree*, what we'd call an appetizer. The *crustallin de truite fumée au fromage fermier en feuille de Brick, caramel de figes à la cardamome*, translates as a hefty blintz made with a crunchy, paper-thin crêpe of soft white cheese dotted with chunks of smoked trout. This is to die for, especially when those accents of fig caramel seasoned with cardamon awake the remaining taste buds. Every chef must be sculptor and painter as well as cook, and work in the baroque style, creating dynamic movement, preferably skywards, *à la Bernini*. By the time I totter out, all that cuisine can do to me has been done.

**A**t theater critic in my spare time, I was dismayed to discover that for a daughter of France, Québec is shockingly theater-poor. In San Francisco, a city of comparable size, it's impossible for me to see everything that's going on. I opted for a unique local product called **Les Folies de Paris**, which is described as cabaret (a genre that lends itself to abuse) and *typique*, which could mean anything. Only a densely written novel could convey all its textures and quirks, but if you've got a perverse sense of humor, patience, and a desire to see a unique combination of naïveté, sequins, chutzpah, feathers, gender-bending, beads, and an Eiffel Tower backdrop, you should plan a long evening with a friend. The show isn't self-aware enough to be camp, but it's certainly queer. The gold standard here is an old queen named Taxi, who's a trooper and a pro.

Unless you count dining-out, Québec is not known for its nightlife. If you want a circuit party atmosphere, if you want sexual play on demand 24/7, go to Montréal. For a romantic getaway, come to Quebec City. Don't worry. You won't have to spend all your time eating, visiting museums, and buying antiques. There are friendly gay bars; and you'll certainly find restaurants that know how to accommodate their gay customers.

My one taste of the lesbian bar scene occurred at **Zazou**, a friendly mixed bar on the rue Saint Jean, just outside the city walls. During happy hour, when excellent draft beer was a mere Canadian dollar a glass, a dozen women had commandeered the tables at the front, where windows look out onto the popular shopping street. The ambience was friendly and social, not torrid, the only smoke coming from cigarettes. The



Summer Festival  
performers



Bar Le Drapeau



Waiter at Bar Le Drapeau



Atmosphère Party



Bar Le Drapeau

Top left photo Jean-Guy Lavioie. All other photos Michel Bazinet.

bar behind us was chockablock with guys of various ages and styles; in the very back, the dancefloor was full of gals and guys.

Back at my boutique hotel, a soberly cozy affair called the **Hôtel Dominion 1912**, my companion and I ran into two friends lounging on the off-white couch in front of the fireplace, nursing snifters of cognac. They'd flown up from Montréal to celebrate some amorous anniversary or other. Their dopey mutual enjoyment would have been annoying had their good mood not been inclusive. *L'amour, l'amour*. Something the French, and apparently the Québécois, know something about. That's when I realized what was missing from my visit. Why the king-size bed with its dozen pillows, on which I slept so soundly, felt like only an indulgence. There was no one in it with me! This isn't the sort of thing one can plan, but when you come to Québec, try to be in love. □

# THE NUNS MUSEUM

## *Musée des Ursulines de Québec*



Painting by Botero

When you think Québec, think nuns—because they were among the first and hardest settlers. When you think nuns, think Ursulines—because you can still absorb their religious passion and aesthetic sense through *objets d'art* in their museum at 12 rue Donnacona. Once a house, the museum's collection of paintings, sculptures, archive documents, furniture, and decorative art illustrates the life and educational work of the Ursulines in Québec City. The

order is named for St. Ursula, a Brit who was martyred along with a train of virgins when she refused to marry Attila the Hun. The monastery's founder, Marie de l'Incarnation, arrived here in 1639 with her benefactor, Madame de la Peltrie, to found the first girls school in North America. The school is still going. Besides the skull of Montcalm, the French general who lost Québec City to the British in 1759, another reason to visit this museum is its chapel. The main altar is a chef d'oeuvre of carved and painted wood from 1730, the oldest of its kind to survive intact.

**Museum Hours:** May to September: Tuesday through Saturday 10 A.M. to 12 noon, and 1 to 5 P.M. Sundays 1 to 5 P.M. October to April: Tuesday–Sunday from 1 to 4:30 P.M. Guided tours all year by appointment Tel: 418-694-0694. [www.museocapitale.qc.ca/014a.htm](http://www.museocapitale.qc.ca/014a.htm)

## QUEBEC RESOURCES

### TRANSPORTATION

**Air Canada:** For an advance taste of bilingual culture, ask the flight attendants for both an English and French-language newspaper. [www.aircanada.ca](http://www.aircanada.ca)

### INFORMATION

**Tourism and Convention Bureau:** Tel: 418-522-3511. [www.quebec\\_region.cuq.qc.ca](http://www.quebec_region.cuq.qc.ca)

**Être** (gay newspaper), 707 boulevard Charest Ouest. Tel: 418-529-5892.

### SIGHTS

**Les Folies de Paris:** 252 rue Saint-Joseph Est. Tel: 418-523-4777. [www.foliesdeparis.com](http://www.foliesdeparis.com)

**Ursulines Museum:** 12 rue Donnacona. Tel: 418-694-0694. The religious order of the Ursulines arrived in Québec in 1639 to found the first girls' school in North America. Their fine art and artifacts includes the skull of the hero Montcalm.

**Basilique Notre-Dame de Québec:** 16 rue de Buade. Tel: 418-692-2533. The city's oldest church.

**Notre-Dame-Des-Victoires:** 32 rue Sous-le-Fort. Tel: 418-692-1650.

**Musée de la Civilisation:** 85 rue Dalhousie. Tel: 418-643-2158. Four hundred years of Québécois history and more.

### HOTELS

(Note: All hotel rates are given in Canadian dollars.)

**Hôtel Dominion 1912:** 126 rue Saint-Pierre. Tel: 888-833-5153. [www.hoteldominion.com](http://www.hoteldominion.com). Rates: \$189-\$339 for a double room. Nice boutique hotel, cozy and conveniently located.

**Château Frontenac:** 1 rue de Carrières. Tel: 418-692-3861. [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com). Rates: \$449-\$759 for a double room. Standing high on a bluff this hotel, a true grande dame, is considered the heart of Old Québec.

**L'Hôtel du Vieux-Québec:** 1190 rue Saint-Jean. Tel: 800-361-7787. [www.hvq.com](http://www.hvq.com). Rates: \$109-\$239 for a double room. A smaller, privately owned hotel, heavy on charm. Some room with walls of exposed ancient stonework.

**Hôtel Le Prieur:** 15 rue Sault-au-Matelot. Tel: 800-351-3992. [www.quebecweb.com/leprieur](http://www.quebecweb.com/leprieur). Rates: \$69-\$109 for a double room. With 21 rooms and five suites, this is one of Québec's delightful "finds." The outdoor dining terrace is exquisite.

**Auberge Saint-Pierre:** 79 rue Saint-Pierre. Tel: 888-268-1017. [www.auberge.qc.ca](http://www.auberge.qc.ca). Rates: \$169-\$219 for a double room. Another of the city's smaller hotels, offers cozy rooms, a pleasant restaurant, and typical charm.

### RESTAURANTS

**Le Mesclun:** 93 rue du Sault-au-Matelot. Tel: 418-692-0600. French chef Frédéric Casadei charms no more than two dozen diners at a time with his tribute to the flavors of his native Provence in an intimate setting.

**Manoir Montmorency:** 2490 Avenue Royale, Beauport. Tel: 418-663-3330. [www.chutemontmorency.qc.ca](http://www.chutemontmorency.qc.ca). Haute cuisine with regional products by an internationally known chef, plus a dining terrace that offers a panoramic view of the 250-foot Montmorency Falls.

**Café du Monde:** 57 rue Dalhousie. Tel: 418-692-4455. [www.lecafe-dumonde.com](http://www.lecafe-dumonde.com). The Québécois version of a great Parisian original—the bistro. Friendly atmosphere, good food, and a professional staff are some of the qualities that make this one of the most sought-after reservations in town.

**Restaurant La Playa:** 780 rue Saint-Jean. Tel: 418-522-3989. Not for the purist. Specialty martinis accompany eclectic fare, mostly from the Southwest.

### GAY AND LESBIAN NIGHTLIFE

**L'Amour Sorcier:** 789 côte Sainte-Geneviève. Tel: 418-523-3395. Mixed gay and lesbian bar. Sometimes the atmosphere is quiet, suitable for café socializing. At other times, especially if there's a party in the streets, this place can be packed. Either way, always a place to meet local folk.

**Bar 321:** 321 rue de la Couronne. Tel: 418-525-5107. Gay men. Popular drag shows on Wednesday nights.

**Bar 889:** 889 côte Sainte-Geneviève. Tel: 418-524-5000. Gay men, with some lesbians. Outdoor patio.

**Le Bar Mâle:** 770 côte Sainte-Geneviève. Tel: 418-648-9497. Leather and jeans male crowd.

**Le Drague:** 815 rue Saint-Augustin. Tel: 418-649-7212. Gay dance club. Pool tables also draw a crowd, and stage shows are often part of the night's entertainment. Mostly men.

**Le Paradisio:** 161 rue Saint-Jean. Tel: 418-522-6014. Gay and lesbian, mostly women.

**Zazou:** 811 rue Saint-Jean. Tel: 418-524-4982. Gay and lesbian. Friendly, often with live shows.

**Bar l'Eveil:** 670 rue Bouvier, local 118. Tel: 418-628-0610. Popular lesbian place that is usually very crowded.

**Sauna Backboys:** 264 rue de la Couronne. Tel: 418-521-6686. Sauna, steam, whirlpool, labyrinth, and snack bar. A popular, clean, friendly place. [www.backboy.qc.ca](http://www.backboy.qc.ca)

**Sauna Bloc 225:** 225 rue St. Jean. Tel: 418-523-2562. Dry sauna and steam room, bar, mirrored rooms, glory holes, sling, and TV lounge.

**Sauna Hippocampe:** 31 rue McMahon. Tel: 418-692-1521. Pool, dry sauna and steam room, solarium, bar, and massage. [www.clubsaua.com](http://www.clubsaua.com)