

THE WINDSOR STAR

28 août 2015

TRAVEL

Checking In: Wellness hotel opens in Quebec City monastery

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Aug 28, 2015 - 11:00 UTC



Le Monastère des Augustines, in a former Quebec City monastery, is a striking new hotel with a wellness theme. PHOTO CREDIT Le Monastère des Augustines 0929 travel checking in column by Rochelle Lash

Le Monastère des Augustines has two styles of rooms - authentic and contemporary (shown). PHOTO CREDIT Le Monastère des Augustines 0929 travel checking in column by Rochelle Lash

A divine boutique hotel opened in Quebec City this month with a spiritual ambience, artisanal cuisine and a wellness program that is heaven-sent.

Le Monastère des Augustines is a 65-room sanctuary on the grounds of the venerable Hôtel Dieu hospital. Its mission is to rejuvenate and heal its guests though meditation, massage and yoga, as well as holistic workshops in subjects as varied as aging and sleep enhancement.

With a commanding hilltop location, the hotel yields iconic views in different directions — the St. Lawrence River, the Old Port and the Laurentian Mountains.

It is a striking architectural fusion of old and new, the eco-conscious product of a \$40-million overhaul. The hotel modernizes and also preserves the historic character of the former residence of Les Soeurs Augustines, who were pioneers in health care as far back as the 1600s.

The industrial-inspired design of glass, steel and white walls is an airy backdrop for centuries-old furniture, aged wooden beams, rough stone and religious art. The dazzling modernistic entrance overlooks flourishing gardens, and vintage refectory halls now are used for film screenings and banquets.

All visits include access to the inspirational new Musée du Monastère des Augustines, whose artifacts illustrate the evolution of health care in New France.

My convent life

I confess I'm not a natural in the ascetic lifestyle of a convent, even one that has been transformed into an intriguing hostelry.

Le Monastère is decidedly secular, not religious, but its keywords still are simplicity and serenity. Pray tell, would I fit in? I had faith. As a hotel, Le Monastère is highly comfortable, and with its wellness options, I might easily achieve a state of grace for body and soul.

A typical day starts with an energizing breathing session at 7:30 a.m., followed by breakfast in silence, to honour the tradition of the nuns. Cellphones and iPads are discouraged in order to promote general unplugging, although guests are free to stream, talk and text in their own rooms or in the communications room, which has computers.

Peacefulness is a rare vibe for me. At 7 a.m. I'm usually gulping a double espresso and scrolling through the Montreal Gazette e-paper. Even more challenging, my travel pal Rae Turley is irrepressibly chatty, always brimming with world news and sightseeing plans.

So, we tempered our hectic pace, muted the prattle and swanned into a yoga session at 10 a.m., for harmony, flexibility and balance, then chilled during a

contemplative group stroll around the courtyard at noon. The afternoon was free time for massages or sightseeing around Quebec City.

At 5 p.m., Le Monastère suggests creative time, and we faced a wrenching decision: a saintly art lesson or a devilish happy hour at a nearby bistro.

It was a tough call, but surely if I transgressed, Saint-Augustine would forgive me. Before he found religion, the fifth-century theologian was a frisky young man who prayed: “Grant me [chastity](#) and continence, but not yet.”

Hotel basics

Le Monastère is run by a non-profit organization, so it’s not about luxury, but you won’t feel deprived.

The standards of hospitality, service and food are sky-high because savvy hoteliers are on the board, including chairman Evan Price, co-owner of the luxurious Auberge Saint-Antoine, and member Robert Jacques Mercure, general manager of the landmark Fairmont Le Château Frontenac.

Le Monastère’s guest rooms are pleasantly reimaged nun’s “cells,” all with such conveniences as air-conditioning, soft natural-fibre bedding and bathrobes, and Wi-Fi, but no televisions or radios.

There are two styles of accommodations. The “authentic” rooms share bathrooms down the hall and are quaint hideaways made pretty with hand-sewn quilts and antique pine furniture. The original low doorways add lots of charm. The “contemporary” rooms have a sleeker, minimalist look, with modern modular desks, sliding closet doors, as well as new white-tiled private bathrooms.

Le Monastère des Augustines has two styles of rooms –authentic and contemporary (shown).

Chef Christophe Perny cooks up outstanding and unusual Quebec cuisine, popping with fresh flavours from the garden’s micro-greens as well as wild marine herbs from Gaspé.

Breakfast (free for guests) features a tiny buffet of breads, nuts, wild blossom honey, herbal teas and fruit, including luscious berries from Île d'Orléans — plus main dishes such as zucchini-basil omelettes, smoothie bowls or waffles with plum jam.

Lunch (\$17) and dinner (\$25) are delightful, snappy creations built around a regional harvest of duck, beef, ribs mackerel, Matane shrimp and a cornucopia of vegetables for vegan and vegetarian options. The hotel doesn't have a bar, but it does sell Quebec wine and beer with dinner.

Wellness, all ways

Le Monastère has many levels of wellness. The basic “monastic stay” at \$72 to \$120 p.p., double occupancy, includes bed, breakfast and the museum, an ideal rest for caregivers in need of respite or people recovering from illness.

Guests seeking a more restorative retreat can add the daily \$23 five wellness sessions like tai chi or meditation. Massages run \$90-\$95 for 60 minutes and specialists offer health evaluations and nutrition consultations. And, for take-home holistic spirit, the gift shop sells herbal sachets, food products and health books.

For full immersion, Le Monastère will present 80 workshops from September 2015 to June 2016, in English or French and running one to seven days. Experts will explore such complex issues as care-giving, mourning, natural healing and stress management.

After two quick days, I only grazed Le Monastère's happenings, but I feel better already. Physical, mental and spiritual salvation is at hand, but like Saint-Augustine, just not yet.

IF YOU GO:

Le Monastère des Augustines: 844-694-1639, monastere.ca; 77 rue Remparts; walk-in entrance at 32 rue Charlevoix, Quebec City.

Price: depending on season, authentic rooms with shared bathrooms cost \$145-\$200 for two; contemporary rooms, \$185-\$240, for two; all including breakfast, museum, Wi-Fi and tips. Single rates available.

Quebec City tourism: 877-783-1608, quebecregion.com.