

# South China Morning Post 南華早報

## Monastery turned wellness retreat where they'll babysit your smartphone

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*If you want to withdraw temporarily from the modern world, meditate daily and watch uplifting films, Le Monastère des Augustines, run by Augustinian nuns in Quebec City, Canada, is the place for you, writes Teresa Bergen*

**What is it?** A 17th-century monastery that has morphed into a modern wellness centre. This 65-room mixture of old cloisters and modern glass within Quebec's Old Walled City opened last August.

**Why would we want to stay in a monastery?** The centre is geared towards travellers looking to sidestep the modern world - you won't find televisions or phones in your room and you're encouraged to unplug your electronic devices; the front desk even offers a babysitting service for smartphones. History is another lure. As the only New World city north of Mexico to still have intact fortification walls, the neighbourhood of Old Quebec is a Unesco world heritage site.



**What are Augustines?** The Augustinian order of nuns' mission was to care for people, body and soul. They first arrived in Quebec from Europe in 1639 and built 12 hospitals and monasteries throughout the province. At its peak, 225 sisters lived in the Quebec City monastery, but the order has declined steadily since the 1960s and now just nine sisters live on

the premises - leaving plenty of space for visitors.

**So am I supposed to be Catholic to stay here?** No. The sisters are practical; they realised that a Catholic retreat would have limited appeal in the modern world, so opted instead for a secular wellness centre. That said, religious art decorates the hallways. Non-Catholics who appreciate religious heritage will probably like what they see; "recovering Catholics" might be put off.

**What are the rooms like?** The choice is between "authentic" and "contemporary". Authentic rooms are smaller, with a bathroom down the hall, and are furnished with antique desks, wardrobes and nightstands. If you're taller than five foot seven, you'll need to duck to get through the original doors. Contemporary rooms come with private baths. Even in the authentic rooms, guests can expect a comfortable bed and illuminated make-up mirror - rather than a bed of nails and a hair shirt.

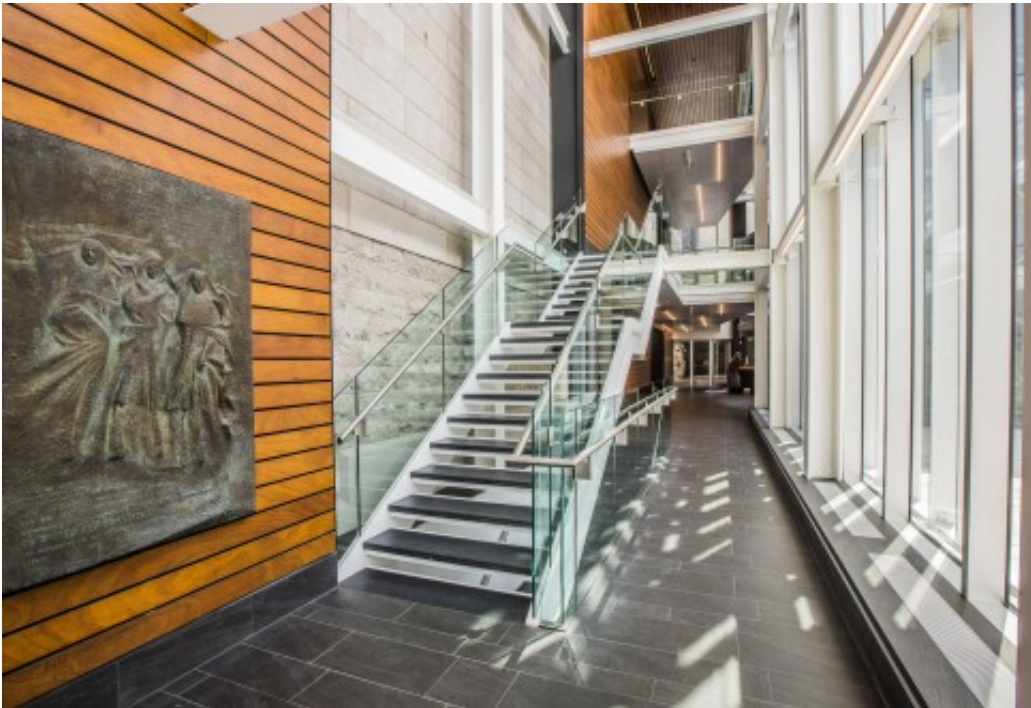
**Is there a restaurant?** There is, and it is committed to local produce and healthy food. This is one of the best places to get a vegetarian dinner in Quebec, but the chefs are also dab hands at fish and meat. Breakfast is eaten in silence, a throwback to the old days, and teas are a speciality, with herbal concoctions inspired by the apothecaries of yore.



**What do you do in a monastery?** Included in the price is a daily programme: three meditation/yoga classes (meditation room pictured above), a creativity class and a nightly "uplifting" film. For an added fee, holistic health services, such as massage and reflexology, can

be booked. The monastery emphasises health and inner beauty, so don't expect nail art and microdermabrasion. Some guests sign up for multi-day programmes, such as a five-night sleep regeneration package, or workshops on yoga or other wellness pursuits. Being a nursing order, the nuns insist the workshops remain science-based.

**What if I want to know more about these nuns?** You're in luck. The Augustinians house some of their 40,000-plus artefacts in an on-site museum. You can see the 21-piece nun habits, visit the old refectory and learn about the sisters' substantial medical contributions to Quebec.



**What else is there to do in the walled city?** If you've not yet had your fill of religion, you can visit the Ursulines Museum, to learn about that teaching order of nuns, or walk through the Holy Door of Notre Dame Cathedral, a special opportunity for pilgrims available until November. There are also many boutiques in which to shop and plenty of architectural curiosities and old cannon, which poke their noses over the city's walls, at which to gawp. Be sure to pick up maple butter and candy as souvenirs. Érico, a local chocolatier with a fun museum, has premises just outside the city walls.

**How much does it cost to stay in a monastery?** Not much. An authentic room costs from as little as HK\$470 a night while a contemporary room costs HK\$580. For more information, visit [monastere.ca/en](http://monastere.ca/en).

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