

Once off-limits to outsiders, Quebec City's Augustinian monastery now welcomes the world

With rooms starting at \$84/night, convent-cum-hotel sells sounds of silence

By Angelica Montgomery, [CBC News](#) Posted: Aug 14, 2016 6:00 AM ET Last Updated: Aug 14, 2016 6:00 AM ET



Many of the Monastère des Augustines' 65 rooms are reimagined nuns' sleeping quarters, with handmade quilts and simple antique furnishings. (André Olivier Lera/le Monastère des Augustines)

Silence flows with the light across the stark white walls of Quebec City's Augustinian monastery; it has aged into the centuries-old wood that lines the floors and ceilings.

Now, as the monastery seeks to re-invent itself in the digital age, it is hoping to turn that silence into a commodity.

Starting at \$84 a night for a single room, guests can stay in a renovated building that dates from the late 17th century.

That's a big change for the monastery's longer-term residents, the Augustinian Sisters.

When Sister Lise Tanguay first arrived at the historic Quebec City order in 1965, it was a closed community for the 170 nuns who slept and prayed there.

"We were truly cloistered," Tanguay said. "We did not leave at all to go outside."

They could only visit patients at the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, which adjoins the monastery building. Even Tanguay's visiting parents had to speak to her through a screen.

But since the boutique hotel opened last year, the 73-year-old nun shares the space with tourists from around the world.



Le Monastère des Augustines occupies the wings of the former Hôtel-Dieu de Québec monastery, which dates back to 1639. (André Olivier Lera/le Monastère des Augustines)

A simple presence

"We are a simple presence," she said, of the eight nuns who are left.

The monastery has undergone a dramatic change around them — from a strict religious society into a hotel and health and wellness centre.

The community of nuns relaxed their rules of cloister in 1965, only months after Tanguay joined, as part of the Second Vatican Council that brought sweeping changes to the Catholic Church.

Only a year ago, it underwent a second major change when it opened its doors to guests. Now, its refurbished cells are fully booked and National Geographic Traveler has named it the Number One destination for a mental and physical reboot.

One of its general managers, Marie Rübsteck, says they are so busy she often finds her parking spot taken up by guests.

"That's my indication of saying [it] must be going well because I can't even park here anymore," Rübsteck said.



The Augustinian nuns first came to Quebec City in 1637. They founded one of North America's oldest hospitals there two years later. (La Fiducie du patrimoine culturel des Augustines)

Unconventional get-away

Peace and quiet still characterize what's inside the walls of the old convent.

Guests sleep in the renovated cells that once housed 230 nuns when the convent was at its peak.

If they choose the "authentic rooms," they will have to do without a television or private bathroom. All guests are invited, but not forced, to leave their cell phones at the front desk.

And, even for guests, one of the order's ancient rules still abides — no one is to speak at breakfast.

"At the beginning, people arrived here and they're surprised 'Really? A silent breakfast?' They are a little bit scared," said Isabelle Duchesneau, the executive director of Monastère des Augustines.

She added that while many are not used to silence in their daily lives, most guests feel rejuvenated by their experience of it by the time they leave.



A \$40-million overhaul has turned the centuries-old convent into a modern hotel. (La Fiducie du patrimoine culturel des Augustines)

Options for rejuvenation

Visitors can buy one of the monastery's wellness packages that offer creativity courses, yoga or reflexology. Also offered are classes on respiration and meditation. Likewise guests can indulge in a massage or have their postures realigned by trained professionals.

It is an extension of the nun's centuries-old tradition of caring for the sick — they founded the hospital next door nearly 400 years ago. It is the oldest hospital in North America north of Mexico.

Duchesneau says guests are also drawn in by the handful of nuns who still live and pray at the convent.

"The fact that they are still here, the visitors just stop them and thank them," she said.

It took 1,000 people 300,000 hours to complete the monastery's renovations, which were largely funded by the provincial and federal governments, as well as the sisters themselves.

The two years of work on the building — a national historic site — required 52 permits from the city and the Quebec Culture Ministry.

It was the nuns' own initiative to start the hotel. They began searching for a new role for the building when they realized back in the 1980s that their numbers were dropping. Tanguay is the youngest of the eight who still live on the grounds.

"We hope to stay as long as possible, but we live on hope right now. We are aware that one day there will be no more Augustines," she said.

The monastery also still has a social mission. It welcomes caregivers who need a rest, and offers a cheap place to stay for people from rural Quebec who are accompanying sick people in the city's hospitals.

The hope is that the non-profit foundation, which runs the hotel, will sustain itself, and maintain the values of the Augustinian nuns, even after they are gone. Duchesneau admits, quietly, that could be quite soon.

"Probably in ten years from now, you know, we won't have..." she said, her voice trailing off. "There won't be a lot of sisters left."



(André Olivier Lyra/le Monastère des Augustines)

with files from Katarina Bjorcke