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QUEBEC?
DON'T FOLLOW THE CROWD...

After calm and culture? Swap the hubbub of Quebec City for a stay that's heaven sent, says **Jini Reddy**

YOU don't normally find yourself perched on a cushion 'omming' in a meditation class while nuns sweetly sing along outside. But Le Monastère des Augustines is no ordinary monastery: it's a Unesco World Heritage site in Quebec City that has just been transformed into an unorthodox hotel for relaxation and wellness.

Sure, yoga, meditation, complementary therapies and organic food are on offer. But don't mention the words 'spa' or 'detox': the vibe here is far removed from superficial pampering or strict regimes. Then again, nor is this a cloistered spiritual retreat. Rather, think eco-conscious secular sanctuary in a setting where priceless religious art, beatifically tranquil

corridors, 17th-century staircases and antique furniture sit next to rich herb gardens. It's full of inviting nooks and crannies, as well as a museum hidden away behind a modernist glass exterior, and all the result of a multi-million pound

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Yoga: A range of classes are available in the Monastère de Augustines

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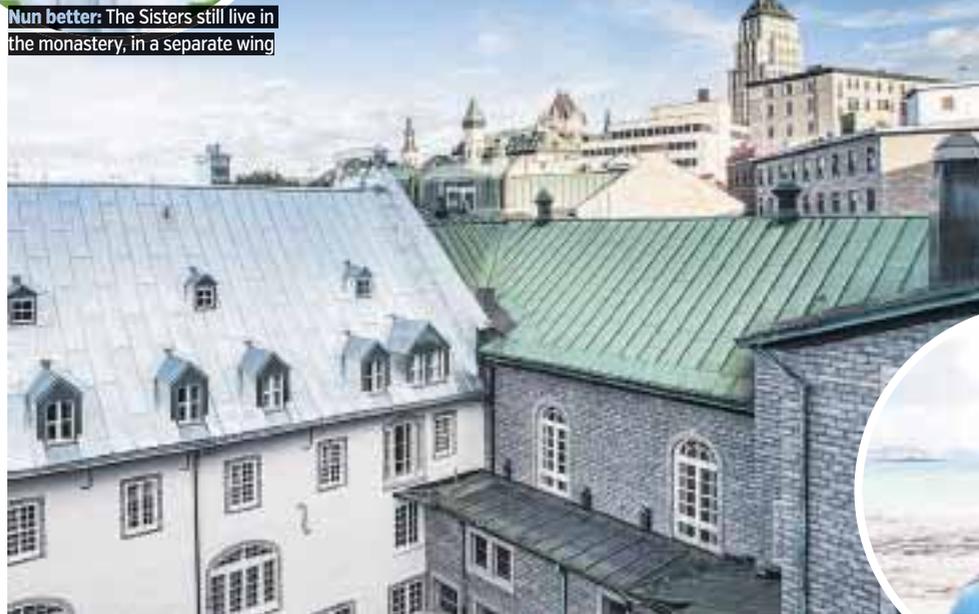
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Nun better: The Sisters still live in the monastery, in a separate wing

Meditate: The early morning sessions include breathing exercises, meditation, and then a relaxing and silent breakfast



Calm and collected: Jini Reddy

PICS: VALERIE BUSQUE/ANDRE OLIVIER LYRA



The Relaxation And Renewal package costs from £138 per night for a three-night stay. It includes meals, a holistic health consultation, massage, access to all the daily activities and the museum. monastere.ca/en Return flights from £443 via Montreal, aircanada.com. keepexploring.ca

A healing haven from the bustle

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renovation and restoration. The tradition of holistic health runs deep here. Four centuries ago, the Augustinian Sisters (an order of nuns from France) founded both the monastery and the adjoining Hotel Dieu, the first hospital in North America, north of Mexico. These women were nurses, carers and medical herbalists. Pioneers, they faced cold, hunger and isolation but were dedicated to creating a healing haven.

The minute I am led to a low-lit corridor where the nuns used to sleep, I experience a peace so profound that I want to plant myself here

Fast forward to the 21st century: today the community of Augustinian Sisters is in decline. Turning the monastery into a not-for-profit wellness hotel is a way of keeping their healing heritage alive. Paying guests either stay on a B&B basis, or sign up for wellbeing packages to relax, energise and combat insomnia, all of which helps to fund the stay of caregivers and families of hospital

patients. The Sisters live in a wing separate from the public although they can still, rather wonderfully, be glimpsed serenely flitting about in their white habits.

I'm one of the first visitors and the minute I am led down a low-lit corridor full of restored authentic 'cells', where the nuns used to sleep, I

experience a peace so profound I want to plant myself here. It's a feeling I've experienced once before: at Mother Teresa's orphanage in Calcutta, many years ago. Guests can now sleep in the cells, which are preserved in their original style, with single or twin beds, centuries-old wood desks and wardrobes, hand-embroidered quilts,

plus sinks and mirrors (bathrooms are shared). You can imagine the Sisters deep in contemplation but the peace is equally present in my own room, a contemporary-style en-suite one floor up.

A roster of daily activities, bookable treatments and health consultations are on offer. The programme has been

devised by the province's top holistic health practitioners and the monastery is at pains to be inclusive so every class is for everyone, regardless of level. This being Quebec City, sessions are bilingual.

The early-doors 'Morning Practice' catches my eye: a guided breathing, meditation and movement session in one of the monastery's many restored rooms. Led by Heather Mah, a dancer and teacher from Montreal, it's a joy, and afterwards I float out and into the restaurant for a silent breakfast, monastery-style. The food is organic, local or free-range and cooked with flair. I devour a plate of kamut waffles, with scrambled eggs and lettuce on a bed of apple-maple purée: a pretty creative breakfast. Lunch and dinner saw lots of cooking over dishes like rabbit with mustard sauce or squash risotto.

Next I have a reflexology session with Erick Lessard, whose gentle, healing touch has me nodding off. When he's not with a client, he works with a team of medics caring for patients in the hospital: the practitioners here are chosen for their compassion as well as expertise and the kindness radiates out of them. The soft-spoken therapist who gives me a blissful massage the following day tells me that 'everyone who works here feels called, somehow'.

The Sisters can relax: the monastery is in safe hands.

WANT TO STAY IN A MONASTERY?



UK
The Bar Convent in North Yorkshire, England's oldest convent, was originally founded in 1686. It's now a heritage centre with a garden and a 20-bedroom award-winning guesthouse in a Grade I-listed building.

Singles from £38 per night, including breakfast, bar-convent.org.uk



NEPAL
At the Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, home to 360 monks plus lamas, teachers and workers, you can attend meditation and Buddhism courses or stay as a private guest (when no courses are running).

From £320 for a one-month meditation course, kopanmonastery.com



SPAIN
The Parador de Santo Estevo is a Benedictine monastery turned hotel, set in deep Galician forests. Request the Abad Franquilla room, the largest and highest of the accommodation options, named after the first abbot of the monastery.

From £119 per night, parador.es/en