



Wellness

CANADA

Nun but the healthy

Caroline Gladstone finds serenity in a former Quebec monastery.

We start the day in silence. There's early morning meditation to centre the body and soul or the luxury of sleeping in while cocooned in one of the comfiest beds on earth.

This blissful calm continues over breakfast, where the usual chatter of diners and the clatter of plates and cutlery is replaced by nothing, save the peaceful strains of classical music.

My stay at the Monastere des Augustines begins each day just as it would have for the nuns who inhabited this former Quebec City monastery during its more than three centuries of history.

I relish the opportunity to engage in "mindful eating", sampling from the simple but delicious buffet of home-made muesli, fruit, bread, jams and herb omelette along with rich brewed coffee and teas made from herbs grown in the monastery gardens.

While the Augustinian sisters took all their meals in silence, the ritual at this newly opened boutique hotel extends only to the first meal of the day. Lunch and dinner are times for friendly conviviality and a glass of wine or two.

Le Monastere des Augustines, a 65-room hotel and wellness centre,

opened in the former 18th-century built convent on August 1 last year.

Wellness centre, rather than spa, is an apt name for this warm and welcoming place. While there is meditation, yoga and massage on offer, there are no facials, body scrubs or other so-called beauty treatments.

"It's all about inner beauty; rather than outer," the hotel's tourism development manager, Marie-Eve Perron, tells me. "We're all about pleasure and balance."

There is also no "dogma", Marie-Eve emphasises. While the monastery was established by French Catholic nuns, today's hotel welcomes travellers of all creeds or none, offering a cosy place for rest and recreation right on the city's doorstep.

In its heyday of the 1950s the convent housed some 200 nuns, who continued their original mission to heal the sick, working as nurses and also pharmacists in the adjacent hospital known as Hotel-Dieu de Quebec.

Today the remaining six sisters, all in their 80s, live in another wing of the complex, which has national heritage listing.

One of the many inspiring facets of this modern wellness centre is its social justice philosophy. As a non-profit organisation, all revenue earned from the hotel and the onsite museum is used for "good works", one of which is providing free or greatly reduced

accommodation to caregivers and relatives of those receiving treatment at the hospital.

Of the 65 hotels rooms, there are 32 contemporary rooms with en suite bathrooms and 33 "authentic" rooms. I choose the

latter; if I'm staying in a former convent then I have to bed down in what was once a nun's "cell".

My cell is at the beginning of a long corridor of rooms, each with an original mid-18th century wooden door (perfect for me at just 157 centimetres tall, but perhaps a bit of a challenge for a tall person), and with original wooden ceiling beams and dormer windows. It's not big, but I'm surprised when I enter to find there's an ante-room with a sink, wardrobe, and desk that leads into another little room

just big enough for a single bed with wrought iron frame and oversized bed lamp.

Bed linen and continental quilt are deliciously dreamy and the bed is so comfortable I feel as if I'm being hugged. The wooden wardrobe and desk are original pieces used by the sisters, however the new bed frames were made by local Quebec artisan blacksmiths, while the bed quilts in each room are individually stitched and signed by their creators. Several shared bathrooms are located at



the end of each hallway and while it was a full-house during my stay in late June, I never encountered another guest in my corridor nor using any of the three bathrooms near my cell.

Contemporary rooms have modern en suites and beds, and both styles of accommodation have single, double and twin-bed configurations.

Many guests use the hotel simply as a place to stay near Quebec's beautiful old town centre; others such as the two (filial) sisters I meet at a yoga class spend all day ensconced inside its walls relaxing, reading, having massages and just recharging the batteries.

My visit is a fleeting two nights but as the hotel is so well located I have time to visit the monastery museum, which displays 1000 precious artefacts, a mere fraction of the 40,000 items the nuns have collected over the centuries. My favourite is a wooden truck that the three sisters - Marie Forestier, Marie Guenet and Anne Le Cointre - brought with them from France in 1639, containing all their earthly possessions along with medical equipment.

At night I share a table with Annick and Dominique, my new yoga buddies, for a three-course meal and a glass of wine.

In keeping with custom, it's not a late night.

I'm happy to head back to my comfy cell and tuck into my ultra-soft bed for a heavenly sleep, helped along by a nightcap of Serenity tea. **T**

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION

Quebecoriginal.com/en

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies direct from Sydney/Melbourne to Vancouver, with onward connections to Quebec City (via Montreal). See aircanada.com/Australia

STAYING THERE

Le Monastere des Augustines is inside the city walls of Quebec. Authentic rooms are from \$C84 (\$85.50) a night a person in a double room; contemporary rooms from \$C104 a night. Includes

breakfast and entrance to the Augustine museum.

See monastere.ca

Caroline Gladstone travelled as a guest of Destination Canada and Le Monastere des Augustines.





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**Praise be: (Clockwise from main)
the Monastere des Augustines;
yoga room; a bedroom.**
Photos: Caroline Gladstone

