

In 1639, a group of *women* came to **New France** to found Canada's first **hospital** in **QUÉBEC CITY**. Now they're *welcoming* you to stay at *Le Monastère des Augustines*...

Retreat redux

Old is new in le monastère

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY Barb Sligl

Inside the courtyard of the Séminaire de Québec, just steps away from Le Monastère des Augustines, another of Québec City's (and Canada's) founding Catholic institutions (and home to the long-standing Université Laval). The sundial at the top right corner of the door is inscribed with the Latin text, *Dies nostri quasi umbra*: Our life on earth is short and fleeting.



Leaves rustle, birds twitter, a Québec flag flutters in the wind. I'm atop ancient fortifications, older than the Citadelle of Québec, in the Parc du Cavalier-du-Moulin. Tucked away amidst the quiet streets behind Château Frontenac and in the Citadelle's shadow, this pocket park (dating to 1663) is quite hidden by a veil of trees. I have it almost to myself, the only other occupant a young man seated against one of the leafy trees.

He smiles, says *bonjour* and continues sipping his wine. How French.

I wonder if any of the Augustines stood here. I found out about this little-known hideaway in the guest-room literature at Le Monastère des Augustines, where I'm staying while in Québec City. It's just one gem I've discovered thanks to the centuries-old monastery-turned-retreat, founded even before this park.

It began as the first *hôtel-dieu* (the French name for hospitals established by nursing orders of nuns) in what was then New France, funded by a French duchess and founded by three young nuns from Dieppe. They arrived in 1639, less than three decades after Champlain

I silently thank the sisters for sharing this. And all of this surrounding me. With almost 400 years of history, Le Monastère des Augustines is a treasure, a living museum. I meander through the exhibit of some 1,000 objects from the 40,000 artifacts in the Augustinians' 12 monastery hospitals: the trunk of the *fondatrices*, the three women who crossed the Atlantic to found this place in 1639; a surgical instrument set from circa 1730, used to extract musket balls from soldiers wounded during the Battle of the Plains of Abraham; an anesthesia mask from the mid-19th century; a prayer book decorated with embroidery; the 21-piece habit of the sisters that has not changed since the 6th century. Down one hall is a wooden statue, painted in vivid red, blue and gold, Notre-Dame de la Victoire; Jesus, of course, is found in another, as are various other embellished or unadorned figures. "Everything that looks old in the monastère actually is," says Marie-Eve Perron, marketing director of the monastery.

I come across a replica of a nun's room, stark yet lovely. In each of these humble cells is a rack with a curved, custom peg upon which a sister's veil could hang crease-free. Black-and-white photos throughout also make me smile, like "Novice et postulantes au jardin" from 1945, in which the nuns sport wide grins in the courtyard garden.

LEFT The view of Lower Town from the Clergy Battery. OPPOSITE, TOP ROW FROM LEFT Display of crucifixes and cannonballs in the vault of Le Monastère des Augustines; Québec City's oldest house in Vieux-Québec; an Augustine walks in the garden. OPPOSITE, MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT The leafy view from Parc du Cavalier-du-Moulin; under the arches of the monastère's courtyard; a replica of an Augustine's room. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT Looking into the courtyard of the Séminaire de Québec; Château Frontenac; bust of King Louis XIV in Place Royale.

I'm almost reluctant to venture outside the sanctuary of the convent again, but Vieux-Québec, the oldest part of the city, is just steps away. I stroll past Château Frontenac, Dufferin Terrace and that secret park (shhh), and then continue up 310 steps to the Citadelle and Plains of Abraham—peaceful and eerie as an undeveloped monument of that epic 1759 battle between French and English. This is where Canada began. And as its first city, Québec is like a dragonfly in amber...caught in another time, a beautiful oddity because this 409-year-old city still stands between the Old World and the New World.

In the Lower Town, I stop in front of a bust (by the famous Italian sculptor Bernini) of King Louis XIV in Place Royale square—it was his predecessor, Louis XIII, who deployed those three sisters long ago to start the continent's first hospital. My head spins. It's all still so audacious. As I walk along the Clergy Battery, atop the city's ramparts, past Côte de la Montagne (once a path used by natives long before any European set foot here), I see little girls in checked uniforms playing amongst the cannons. They're from the Ursuline school (another enduring relic, started by another group of nuns who travelled across the Atlantic aboard the same ship as the Augustines in 1639).

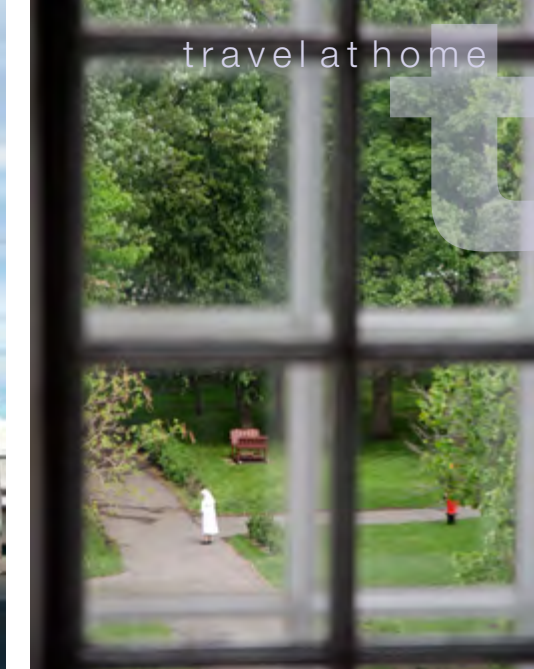
I edge along the high wall with a bird's-eye view of the Lower Town and St. Lawrence River far below. It's as if I'm walking back in time, through a diorama of steep metal roofs glinting in the sun, their vertical lines of tiles laid in the traditional French "baguette" style. As I continue past the Séminaire de Québec, I remember its sundial marked with the Latin phrase, *Dies nostri quasi umbra*: Our life on earth is short and fleeting. Words that seem to echo in this old city.

Back at the monastère it's lunchtime and, here, that means mindful eating. "Slow cooking" (no microwave on site) with local ingredients. Some dishes are even inspired by the archives, including the most ancient cookbook in Canada. I remember the handwritten

himself in 1608—voyageurs, explorers and adventurers just as he was. Their efforts fostered 12 monastery hospitals and 2,000 nuns over the centuries. Today there are just eight sisters left from this particular *monastère*. Their average age is 84 yet they chirp "Bonjour!" to guests and happily welcome them into what's still their home.

Don't think staid. Despite the mission of this completely refurbished hotel/retreat (a multi-million-dollar update) to keep the Augustines' tradition alive, it's surprisingly modern. "Contemporary" rooms have ensuite bathrooms, while more-traditional cell-style rooms share bathrooms (there are 65 guest rooms in total). It's a form of sustainable and cultural tourism that gives guests a historical and enriching experience that's far beyond the standard hotel.

I attend one of the vespers held in the once-segregated section of the adjoined church (an L-shape with separate wings for the nuns and the public during mass in the days of cloistered life) and get tingles hearing their sweet-and-pure voices, a stark contrast to their wrinkled faces. I think of the inscription "*Prier comme un ange*" that I noticed earlier: "...after years of practice she prays as naturally as she breathes. Silently or aloud. From awakening to bedtime. In the cloister and in the hospital. Prayer slakes her thirst for the absolute. Prayer makes her heart rejoice."



“*Sucre à la Crème au Chocolat*” recipe I saw in the museum (these nuns knew the value of indulgence too). There’s also *tisane du monastère* and *digestive et tonifiante à déguster* made of ginger, lemon, fennel, thyme and maple syrup. And organic Québec products like honey wine, Vidal wine from Domaines des Salamandres and *bière blonde biologique* from *microbrasserie* La Barberie.

Everything is connected to the centuries-long traditions and wisdom of the sisters. Breakfast is eaten in silence, a ritual that evolved out of the need for balance prior to long days in the frenzy of the hospital, tending patients. “The best state of equilibrium is a mix of action and contemplation,” is how Perron explains the Augustines’ ethos. So the sisters take their meals in silence. I venture to do the same at breakfast the next day. It’s an exercise of hyper-awareness without the usual distractions: smartphones, newspapers, idle chit-chat, TVs. It’s revelatory.

But, while silence at breakfast is expected to be adhered to, the rest of what the monastère offers is optional. You’re encouraged to leave your cell phone with reception (another exercise in confronting withdrawal). There are yoga and meditation classes, craft workshops and holistic-health sessions. “We propose experiences and our clients decide for themselves,” says Perron.

I partake in the early morning “Awake” series, during which “breathing, movement and meditation rouse the body and help you get in touch with your very essence.” Propped atop one of the monastery’s meditation cushions, I inhale the signature “1639” essential-oil blend of cardamom, cedar and citrus that’s inspired by the nuns’ long-time use of aromatherapy (for its beneficial effects in the hospital). It’s anything but woo-woo. After three mornings of this, I actually feel refreshed (again, revelatory for a non-morning person).

There’s also a “Creation” workshop on mandalas, drawing, colouring and scrapbooking. Anything you create becomes a gift for a hos-

pital patient at the connected Hôtel-Dieu de Québec. A midday “Vitality” program might include yoga or a guided “energy walk.” More yoga—qi gong, vinyasa flow, yin—takes place in the late-afternoon “Healing” session, and the evening “Inspiration” series showcases films, book discussions or some other talk promoting inner calm, peace and serenity.

During a yoga session in the whitewashed stone vault (dating back to 1644, one of the oldest in Canada), it’s as if I’m enveloped by layer upon layer of time and spirit. So much has happened, so many have been here before me. I glance at a display of cherubic angels and crucifixes next to pitted cannonballs (relics from the Battle of the Plains of Abraham that crashed through these walls). The juxtapositions are surreal—spiritual yet secular, old yet new, traditional yet contemporary, horror and healing. But somehow it all melds seamlessly in this forward-thinking, modern-day retreat.

And it reflects the core purpose of the Augustines: balance, well-being and inner peace. One morning I find a spot in the courtyard and watch a group silently trace the square path, walking under contemporary arches (12 arches for 12 monastery hospitals) that contrast the ancient stonework. Some are barefoot, some have their eyes closed, some seem to be mouthing a mantra. I close my own eyes and settle into a form of meditation, letting myself absorb a little of the magic of this place—so old yet so invigorating. I tell myself that I can practise these rituals, continue these lessons upon my return home. And I do buy the 1639 essential-oil blend and a meditation cushion at the gift shop. But my most treasured takeaway might be something one of the yoga instructors said about breath being the bridge between body and soul. Much like this place. ●

if you go
 For more on Le Monastère des Augustines and its offerings go to monastere.ca. For more on Québec City and Québec: quebecregion.com and quebecoriginal.com/en.



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