

Moments of CALM

AT LE MONASTÈRE DES AUGUSTINES QUEBEC CITY

| By Yasemen Kaner-White



The Augustinian sisters of Dieppe, France, arrived in Quebec in 1639 and established temporary quarters in Sillery until their hospital

was completed in 1644. Around thirty years later it included a monastery, chapel and two wards for the sick. The nuns were also apothecaries and expanded their knowledge, particularly of local herbal remedies from the First Nations. Most remedies were made from indigenous plants but some had to be shipped from France for example dandelions for the diuretic properties and plantain for bandaging. The exchange went the other way with France importing from Canada, Canadian ginseng, maidenhair fern and of course maple sugar and maple syrup to treat coughs and colds. The site grew, was ravished by fire, restored and since 2015 has become a contemporary and cultural blend open to the public, still promoting the initial nuns sentiment, to care for people.



I heard about Le Monastère des Augustines a decade ago and wanted to visit then, always in search of new experiences in the quest of wellbeing. The thought of staying in such a historic place, to feel how the nuns would have felt, to mindfully eat breakfast in silence, to sleep in a cloister, it was all appealing. A decade on, and I did visit, though I stayed in one of their more modern rooms, still within the ancient architecture of their gorgeous 17th Century monastery. The Monastère runs numerous programmes such as the sleep programme, which is increasingly popular, to yoga sessions to personalised itineraries, as well as purely accommodation, though the surrounds will no doubt create inner calm. As the Augustinian Monastery is a non-profit organisation, profits are aimed at financially supporting its social mission. This mission includes offering stays as well as retreat programmes to caregivers of elderly and adults, as well as parents of sick or handicapped children, so they can be cared for, as it is all too easy to overlook their need for solace and support.





You could even just pop in for a meal to try some creative dishes utilising local produce. Soups and main courses change regularly, I really liked the local mushroom croque-monsieur topped with boreal spices from Quebec's Boreal forests and truffle oil. Visit the boutique shop to buy yourself some unique gifts, from in-house tea blends to body care products based on holistic, historic remedies. As the nuns religiously kept record of virtually everything, their archives are vast, so much so they have been given recognition by UNESCO, their artifacts are also immense, spanning decades, many of which you can see in Le Monastère des Augustines museum, which also houses special and contemporary exhibitions.

The thing that surprised me the most was whilst it is a monastery, the museum has religious artifacts and you will probably spot a nun or two during your stay, their approach is holistic and humanist, rather than religious, meaning everyone, regardless of faith can feel at home. It is a living museum and heritage is embraced, even on the mindful morning walk, which I really enjoyed, lead by Marjolaine Leblanc, whilst we walked, focusing on our steps rather than our surroundings, regular stops provided an opportunity for nuggets of local history which had a connection with the monastery. Marjolaine has worked there since 2015, she describes her enjoyment working there saying "I find it meaningful, giving guests tools and allowing them to take what they want from their stay".



Signature massage

Possibly the most unique massage I've had to date, this one-of-a-kind treatment ensures Augustinian traditions are embraced. You feel a sense of difference as you walk into the bright white room, juxtaposed with antique furniture and there's bunches of dried olive leaves laying on the massage bed, signifying peace and wellbeing and is also part of the Monastere logo. After taking a seat in a rocking chair - novel, though I later found out all the nuns had rocking chairs, my feet were placed in a warm bowl of water infused with purifying salt and pleasingly pungent 1639 oil. The oil is named as such to commemorate the year the founding Augustinian sisters sailed from France to Quebec to create the Monastere. Sylvie, the therapist, told me the oil was originally used by the nuns to eradicate the unpleasant sickly smells from patients, as well as to induce a sense of calm. The ritual of cleansing the feet is emulating what the nuns would have done to receive people, a warm welcome, also as many of the people who visited, would not have had facilities to wash themselves, so it was a nice thing to do as they initially came in. She encouraged me to close my eyes and open my palms, in which she dropped some 1639 oil and asked me to bring my palms to my heart, the waft of the immune-boosting sweet star anise, zesty grapefruit, enlightening eucalyptus and woody cedar, brought immediate comfort. She then rocked me in the chair, as my eyes were closed, evoking memories of childhood. After a few deep inhalations, relaxation ensued. I made my way to the massage bed, lay on my front, then she began the massage, long, soft movements to the rhythm of 12th Century monastic music created by Hildegard von Bingen who was a saint, composer and poet and who realised then, the restorative effects that music can have. At some points, whether intentional or not, it seemed as though she created a vibration, leaving complete relaxation throughout my body. A head and neck massage created a holistic calmness, before it was time to reluctantly put on my gown and sip on a restorative rose and lavender tea, which is an inhouse blend and for sale in the shop. As I thanked Sylvie, I asked what giving this unique massage made her feel, if anything, she said it wasn't about religion for her, as she is into meditation, the energy from the person she is giving the massage to, along with the music is meditative, a sentiment I could echo, the feeling wasn't just skin deep, a sense of profound peace prevailed.

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