

©Abbaye de Saint-Benoit-Du-Lac

# IN SILENCE AND IN SONG – In Quebec a Monastery and an Abbey Offer an Escape from the Digital World

by Debra Smith

***Le Monastère des Augustines in Quebec City and the Abbaye de Saint-Benoit-Du-Lac in the Eastern Townships would like your phone on silent mode please.***

## The Spirit of the Sisters endures in Quebec City

"People who are religious who come here find that we're not religious enough, and lots of people don't want to come here because they feel they have to be religious, or that we're going to try and convert them. Which of course we are not", says Caroline Mahau, Communications Director, as we walk the halls of Le Monastère des Augustines in the Historic District of Old Quebec, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

> **I hadn't come in search of silence, but I found it here.**

A sense of calm and wellbeing infuses every corner of the monastery, and it was a perfect escape from a day of sightseeing close to the bustling historic center of Quebec City.

The stone and plaster walls are gleaming white, and the weathered oak floors are polished and shining as befits a monastery that served as the first hospital on the continent north of Mexico.

In the monastery's museum I learned that three Augustinian nuns from Dieppe, FranceIe were sent by Cardinal Richelieu to care for the 200 colonists of New France in 1634. They founded the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, the first of twelve monasteries established across the province.

> **The other monasteries have been dissolved but our monastery continues to care for those who care for others**
>
> — **Caroline Mahau**
> *Communications Director of Le Monastère des Augustines*

The monastery was converted to a hotel in 2015, and in keeping with the principles of the Augustinian Sisters, it continues to be a nurturing non-denominational sanctuary. It's a place that offers hospitality and a chance for spiritual renewal. Silence is only strictly observed at breakfast, although a calm atmosphere pervades every public space allowing many opportunities to simply commune with your thoughts.




*Main entrance to Le Monastère des Augustines*
*©Le Monastère*



*Contemporary wing at Le Monastère des Augustines*
©Le Monastère



*Class in session at Le Monastère des Augustines*
©Le Monastère

The monastery offers yoga classes, retreats, massage treatments and a meditation path in the courtyard. Sound healing sessions are held in the ancient basement vaults where the stone walls resonate with every note.

There are two wings in the monastery and couples are welcome. Rooms in the contemporary addition have simple but modern Scandinavian style furnishings in keeping with the Augustinian ethos of sustainability and conservation.

The comfy single or double beds are decorated with a Hudson's Bay Point blanket or a handmade quilt. In the Authentic Rooms in the original building, wide casement windows shine into rooms with low, beamed ceilings, where twin-sized iron bedframes sit next to wooden desks and chairs. One can imagine the nuns deep in study or prayer in these rooms.

There are over 60,000 artifacts in the monastery's museum and a reconstructed period pharmacy, juxtaposed with several striking contemporary art pieces related to the mission of the Augustinians.

One of the most poignant artifacts is a sturdy wooden travel chest with three locks that contained all the nuns' worldly possessions. If one of the sisters wanted to leave the order, she would have to convince the other two to open the box. Guests can join tours of the museum every morning and concerts are often held in the 1930's choir room adjacent to the beautiful neoclassical Centre Catherine-de-Saint-Augustin chapel which dates to 1803.

The hotel's restaurant, Le Vivoir, serves meals made from organic, lactose and preservative- free products sourced within a 150 km radius of the kitchen. Mindful dining is encouraged, keeping the emphasis on the senses and one's state of mind. Savoring a meal in a state of gratitude and contemplation is encouraged. This includes sampling a daily selection of fine Quebec wines. The restaurant has a no cellphone policy, but there is an outdoor terrace where visitors can feel free to chat. The dinner menu changes with the seasons and is served buffet style with a wide variety of local delicacies.



***Authentic room at Le Monastère des Augustines***
©Le Monastère

## Spending Time With the Brothers in the Eastern Townships

Each day at 11:00 a.m., the Gregorian chant of the Traditional Latin Mass rises through a forest of amber colored steel beams to the roof of Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac. It's a reminder of, and a testament to, the work of Dom Joseph Pothier, a French abbot and scholar. He is credited with almost single-handedly reviving Gregorian chant and for sending five Benedictine monks to the Eastern Townships in 1912 to found this abbey by Lake Memphremagog.

At first glance the Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac resembles a Loire Valley castle with its turrets, stone façade, and bell tower. But the interior, surprisingly, is an Art Deco influenced masterpiece, best appreciated on one of the daily tours. The tours and the abbey are non-denominational and open to all.

"The abbey was designed by two Benedictine monks who were architects and the church was designed by a Romanian born, Canadian architect named Dan Hanganu", says David Morel, Communications Coordinator. He leads the tours of the abbey, gently shepherding visitors through the corridors where chevrons of butter yellow, milk chocolate and rust colored brick decorate the doorways, echoing the intricately patterned and colored floors. The tour route leads to the church with its soaring nave and rows of dark wooden pews where visitors pause to hear part of the Mass being sung, before heading out to the terrace that overlooks the grounds.

As we walk, Morel describes a typical day in the life of a monk. Peace, prayer and silence define the Benedictine path, with the hours between services dedicated to several long-standing projects.

> **Work is our way of providing for ourselves and sharing with those less fortunate**
>
> — **David Morel**
> *Communications Coordinator of Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac*



***Apple picking at Abbaye de Saint-Benoit-Du-Lac***
©Abbaye de Saint-Benoit-Du-Lac



*Nos vergers miniature*
*©Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-Du-Lac*

The monks transform 3,500 apple trees into apple butter, apple sauce, vinaigrettes and cider each year. The orchards are open to the public for apple picking in the fall and on Saturdays and Sundays from nine am to five pm. Milk from local dairy farmers goes into the 350 kilos of award-winning gluten and lactose free cheeses that the abbey produces each year. A monk in his 80's oversees the fromagerie and he is constantly experimenting with new recipes. All the bounty of the abbey is available in their boutique, along with books, CD's and religious objects.

**The community has designated times for conversation to foster community among its members, but for guests, the rule is silence at all times, except for the areas outside the abbey.**

Although embracing silence is offered as a way to focus on inner thoughts, the abbey suggests that guests participate in at least one service during their two-night stay, and meetings with a monk for confession or counsel are also encouraged.

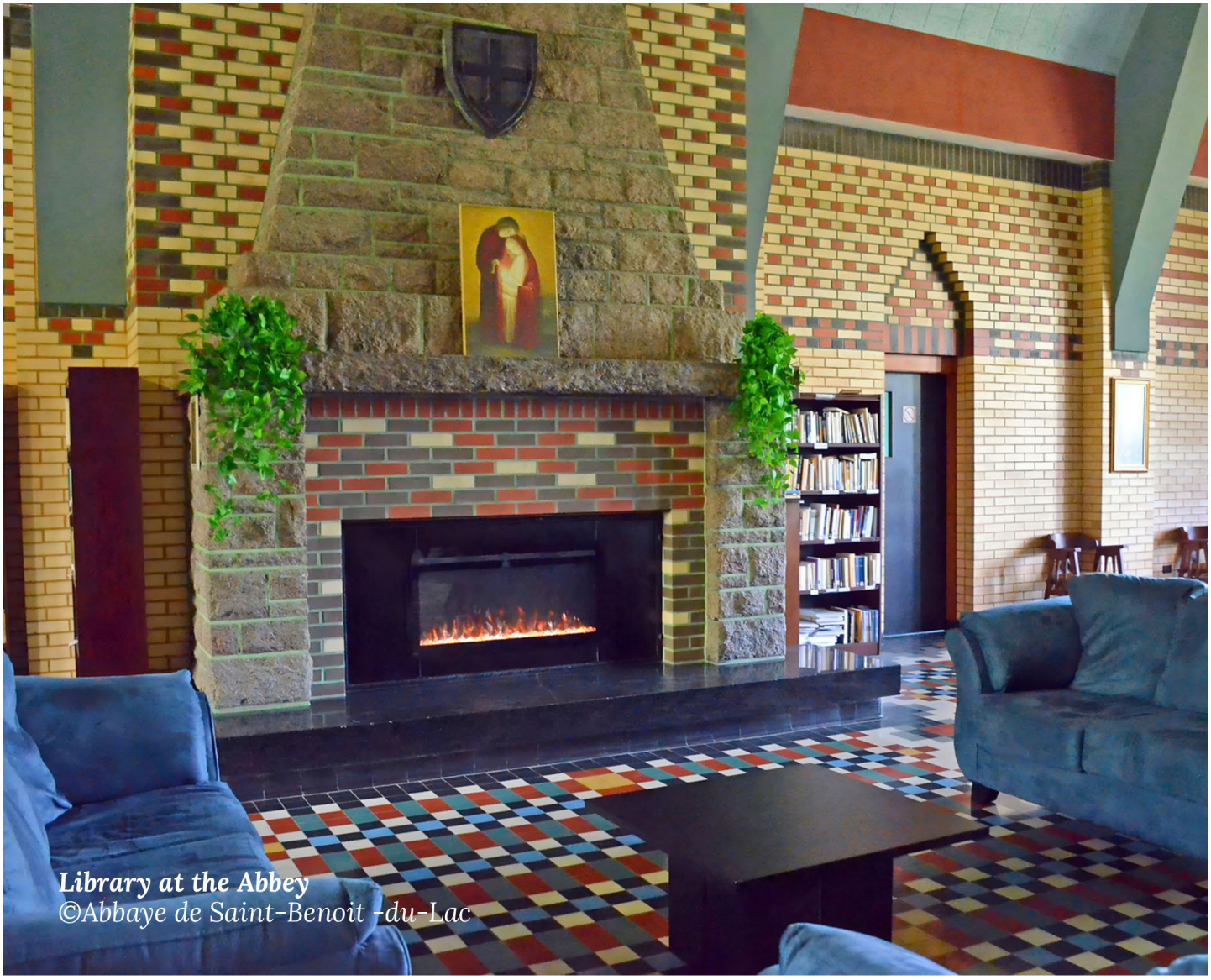
Women and men are both welcome, but not couples. The guest rooms are undecorated and functional, furnished with a single iron bedstead, a desk and chair and a washbasin. Showers and bathrooms are shared, except for accessibility rooms. Meals are taken with other guests, in silence, except for the sound of classical music or Gregorian chant. Breakfast and a three-course dinner are served promptly each day. Guests are free to leave the grounds and there are three excellent restaurants within a few miles of the abbey if you miss the dinner hour, but, like the monastery, the point is to be present with your thoughts. A two-kilometre prayer path winds through the woods and the library has cozy couches and a wi-fi connection. Stays are limited to two nights.

**As we continue to search for inner peace and meaning in our increasingly busy world, these two unique sanctuaries offer spaces for contemplation and relief from the stresses of daily life.**




***Abbey boutique***
*©Wallace Tobin*

The abbey continues to welcome new brothers into their order, a testament to the enduring values of the Benedictine way of life, while the monastery offers a special retreat for caregivers and nursing professionals honoring its Augustinian roots. I was grateful to have had the opportunity to spend time in their company and left refreshed and uplifted.



***Library at the Abbey***
*©Abbaye de Saint-Benoit -du-Lac*

## Abbaye de Saint-Benoit -du-Lac

Tours from June to September are $15 CAD for adults, $9 for children from age 6 to 18, children under 6 are free. Reservations are not offered for the tour. Guest rooms at the abbey can be reserved up to three months in advance and fill up quickly.

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## Le Monastère des Augustines

Choose from the Authentic rooms which were formerly monastic cells with shared baths, suitable for single visitors and the Contemporary rooms with en-suite baths. Dining packages are available as well as a selection of wellness offerings.

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