

Trois-Rivières: From prison to spa

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 2, 2012



La Vieille Prison de Trois-Rivières now is a tourist attraction, where you can spend the night in one of the cells, but life as an inmate is not for everyone.

Photograph by: Rochelle Lash, Special to The Gazette

I adore Trois-Rivières, particularly for the contrasts between its stylish new enterprises and its history as Quebec's second-oldest city — yes, it predates Montreal. Here are two totally different venues:

Spending time in the slammer is as close as I'll ever get to living the life of high-society types like Conrad Black, Martha Stewart or Paris Hilton. And even at that, I would be a cellmate in spirit only. We're all graduates of the justice system, but we didn't cross paths in the Big House.

Those A-listers did some serious time, but I got off easily with a tolerable and enlightening few hours in the hoosegow. Tourisme Mauricie had invited me to experience *La Sentence d'une Nuit* at La Vieille Prison de Trois-Rivières, once one of the most miserable penal institutions in North America, and now a tourist attraction. But I didn't have enough moxie to make it through the night.

La Vieille Prison is run like a hostel with a prison theme, and even my brief stretch was authentic enough to have convinced me that crime doesn't pay. I got chills when the big metal door slammed behind me. Then, there was the daunting tour of "the hole," a dank stone dungeon where 19th- and 20th-century prisoners were chained to the cold stone walls, ate only bread and water, and slept on a sandy floor. Gee, wouldn't the spiffy, four-star Gouverneur Hôtel across the street be a better choice for an overnight jaunt? Maybe.

Visitors can take a one-hour tour of the prison most Tuesdays through Sundays. The overnight *Sentence d'une Nuit* requires a group of at least 15 so it attracts school or youth organizations, although occasionally groups of friends will try a night in lock-up.

Jail terms start at about 7 p.m., after dinner. A guard herds visitors into a holding cell and clangs the door shut. Then, everyone is filed along for fingerprinting, mug shots and a souvenir rap sheet, which is all amusing. Later you are assigned cells, two or four “inmates” to a bare-bones bunk room with rough sheets and a thin, scratchy grey wool blanket. Here, the real fun starts — if your idea of fun is paint peeling off of the walls and spending the night without lights, Internet or cellphones. I asked some people who were leaving La Vieille Prison about their experience and they reported that they had lain awake on their thin mattresses, listening to the rustling noises of their cellmates. At least, they hoped the rustlings were their friends and not little critters.

The next morning, before visitors are freed “on parole,” they mop the prison floor and make beds. Then, La Sentence d’une Nuit ends with a breakfast of juice, coffee, yogurt, oatmeal and a muffin.

Even after only a few hours, I couldn’t wait to see daylight again and wondered what I should do first with my precious freedom. I thought of my many muses. I’ve heard Mom Boucher likes a good meal and Lindsay Lohan adores her spa rituals.

“I would go to a spa,” said La Vieille Prison’s director, Clare Plourde. “The prison doesn’t have any showers.”

’Nuff said. I sped to Kinipi Spa & Bains Nordiques, a stunning new enterprise on the outskirts of Trois-Rivières, adjacent to the historic Club de Golf Ki-8-Eb. Kinipi was a welcome change from prison with its soothing new age music, striking interiors and gourmet bistro.

Kinipi, an Algonquin word meaning “your water,” is the latest of Quebec’s distinctive Nordic spas and one of the most beautiful. The main building is a spectacular example of contemporary architecture, with stairways of glass and metal and walls of stone. Indoors, the theme is nature and the exterior also is surrounded by the Mauricie region’s famous forests.

Owner René Gigéure proudly showed me around Kinipi’s state-of-the-art mechanical systems such as the anti-bacterial thermo-pump and regulators for PH and salt levels, which keep the spa’s hot and cold waters sanitary.

But enough about machinery. Getting back to spa life, Kinipi is built around Nordic-style baths with waterfalls, saunas, steam chambers and heated sun decks. Gigéure recommends that you de-stress immediately upon arrival with a 10-minute chair massage for your head and neck, and then melt into the hot baths, punctuated by cold dips. Favourite treatments here include Sérénité pour la tête, an intensive massage for head and face using aromatic oils and the Hydralescence, a hydrating and smoothing treatment for the entire body.

If you are familiar with Nordic spa thermo-therapy of hot and cold experiences, and figure they are all the same, more or less, you’re wrong. Kinipi has a secret ingredient — the cuisine at Kinipi à la Bouche.

This spa has its own bistro and gourmet chef, Dominic Lapointe, who presides over an open kitchen.

The menu features light fare such as smoothies of mango-basil or coconut milk, shrimp salad, seafood chowder and thin-crust pizza. There are also gourmet meals, including tagliatelli with duck and wild mushrooms and dessert delights like panna cotta infused with green tea or profiteroles stuffed with praline.

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