

# Checking In: a relaxing, refreshing spa with a golden view

Auberge du Portage in Bas-St-Laurent offers fine food and extensive services

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 21, 2013



Guests view the magnificent sunset from the terrasse at Auberge du Portage, which overlooks the St. Lawrence River.

---

Waves wash the shore, the river sparkles in the sunset and the sky is a soothing palette of pastels and greys.

That is the setting for a sojourn at Auberge du Portage, a hotel and spa in the Bas-St-Laurent (Lower St. Lawrence) region of Quebec, a relatively easy, all-highway 440-kilometre drive from Montreal toward Gaspé.

More than 100 years ago, visitors came to the tiny Victorian hotel, Portage Inn, from near and far for the restorative qualities of the salt water from the St. Lawrence River. They soothed sore muscles and creaky joints in the “sea” and covered their faces with mud from the tidal flats to improve and tighten their skin.

The Defoy family, specifically patriarch Claude, capitalized on those local traditions about 40 years ago, importing massage techniques from Europe to create what was likely one of the first spas in Quebec. Today his widow, Ginette Defoy, and their son, Alexandre, run the four-star establishment,

which boasts extensive spa services, 51 guest rooms in a patchwork of hotel wings, a gift shop, a heated salt-water swimming pool, an attractive dining room and gardens.

As far as spa hotels go, Auberge du Portage is more about comfort and lovely views than luxury, and its prices are moderate compared to some fancier places. The clientele is mostly women — girlfriends, club members or office parties coming in groups of between two and 25.

“Some of the ladies have been clients for more than 25 years, and they knew me as a little boy,” Alexandre Defoy said. When he was a teenager, his father continually expanded the hotel, telling his son: “I am doing all of this for you, Alexandre.” So to prepare for his inheritance, the young man went off to earn his stripes in hospitality at l’Université du Québec à Montréal.

Most of Auberge du Portage’s clients opt for the Spa Health Package, so people show up at breakfast or lunch in bathrobes, coming or going from a hot tub or a massage. It’s an all-inclusive wellness stay with meals, spa treatments, a morning class of light exercise such as tai chi, yoga, East Indian dance or stretching, and afternoon wellness workshops on varied topics such as nutrition, dreams or back care.

Spa director Jacinthe Ferland greets guests and helps them choose their ideal treatments. The spa offers nearly 20 kinds of massages and 30 other body and beauty services, including balneotherapy and hydrotherapy (using water jets and showers for relaxation), fangothérapie (using mud and sea algae), pressure therapy (using air pressure to improve leg circulation) and traditional massotherapy.

Apart from the rubs, wraps and facials, spa guests spend time lolling about the sauna and steam room, the indoor and outdoor whirlpool tubs and the salt-water pool, heated to 29 C — a blessing because the weather is changeable and temperatures on this coast can be several degrees colder than Montreal. On the more strenuous side, guests can boost their cardio factor with cycling, kayaking, tennis or hiking. There is also a golf course nearby, but that’s not part of the hotel package.

Auberge du Portage is a member of the Route Saveurs du Bas-St-Laurent, a regional circuit of standout food stops. To take full advantage of the splendid view of the St. Lawrence and the sunsets, the Defoys built their dining room in a solarium where glass doors open to the sea air and reveal one of Quebec’s most idyllic water views.

Locals call the sunset “the golden bridge,” because the beams of light seem to connect to Charlevoix, 23 kilometres across the water on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. If you fancy yourself an amateur photographer, the hotel holds a contest for the best “golden bridge photo,” with a \$100 prize to be awarded at the end of the season.

Portage takes food seriously too. It cultivates its own fields at a nearby farm so it can have the freshest seasonal micro-greens, tomatoes and baby vegetables. It also works with local producers, procuring honey from the Hydromellerie in St-Paul-de-la-Croix, lamb from the Coopérative de solidarité des producteurs d’agneaux in Kamouraska, eggs from Ferme Daris & Fils in Cacouna and seafood from the Poissonnerie du Phare Ouest in Matane.

Some of the standout dishes at dinner are veal tataki, chilled avocado soup with shrimp, rabbit confit, pork with juniper berries, roast guinea fowl, duck breast with pecans, and sweetbreads with portobello mushrooms. The Lower St. Lawrence is seafood country, so there variations on shrimp, doré, cod, scallops, turbot and salmon are always available. Portage also does vegetarian choices, featuring feasts like a casserole of wild mushrooms, lentils with shallots and leeks, or fettuccine with vegetables.

## **IF YOU GO:**

Notre-Dame-du-Portage is a four-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 20 east to Exit 496 and Route 132. Auberge du Portage is located at 671 route du Fleuve, Notre-Dame-du-Portage. Open until Nov. 10. Call 877-862-3601 or 418-862-3601, or visit [www.aubergeduportage.qc.ca](http://www.aubergeduportage.qc.ca).

Price: All-inclusive (but without spa treatments) is \$134-\$155 per person, double occupancy, or \$179 for one, including three meals daily, on-site facilities, outdoor salt-water swimming pool, hot tubs, steam bath, fitness room, walking trails, bicycles, kayaks, beach, tennis (court reservations are requested and rackets are available). Children under 12 pay \$45 a day. Weekly rates save about 10 per cent. Golf is extra.

Spa Health Package: Available for two to seven nights, \$216-\$237 per person, per night, double occupancy, or \$242 for singles, including meals, facilities, one treatment per day plus leg pressotherapy, workshops, morning exercise, tea corner. From Aug. 11 to Nov. 10, prices run about 25 per cent less.

**For more info:** Tourisme Bas-St-Laurent: 800-563-5268, or visit [www.bassaintlaurent.ca](http://www.bassaintlaurent.ca).

[Rochelle@rochellelash.com](mailto:Rochelle@rochellelash.com)

Twitter: rochellelash

*The writer was a guest of the hotel. The hotel did not review or approve the story.*

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette

---

**Previous**

**Next**



Guests view the magnificent sunset from the terrasse at Auberge du Portage, which overlooks the St. Lawrence River.

---

