

# Checking In: Quebec City boutique hotel an ode to design

## H&#244;tel Le Germain-Dominion evolves

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JULY 31, 2013



Hôtel Le Germain-Dominion is in a 101-year-old building in the historic Old Port of Quebec City.

**Photograph by:** Groupe Germain

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Hôtel Le Germain-Dominion in Quebec City is the embodiment of a boutique hotel.

It's petite, chic, urban and an ode to design. Dark walls, black-clad staff and bold furniture make this hotel a contemporary classic. Add the allure of a 1912 heritage building and you are really living Quebec's exceptionally charming Old Port experience.

The Germain family of Quebec City became pioneers of Canada's hospitality industry 25 years ago by creating what was arguably Canada's first boutique hotel, the Germain-des-Prés in Quebec's Ste-Foy sector. It was minimalist on trappings but maxed out on style. The Germain-des-Prés was renamed the ALT Hotel Québec City — it uses all capitals to be short and punchy — and Groupe Germain now owns nine hotels across Canada in two brands: Le Germain and ALT. New ALTs are scheduled to open in 2014 in Montreal's Griffintown and Winnipeg, and in 2015 in Ottawa.

Le Germain-Dominion reminds me a little of North America's boutique landmark, Morgans in New York City, which was opened 30 years ago by Studio 54 maestros Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell, with interiors by designer Andrée Putnam of Paris. As a trendsetting team, the trio banished stodgy hotel dining rooms, long, dreary corridors and cavernous lobbies. Travellers entered the age of spare décor and nominal hotel facilities. Less was more.

Last month, I visited Le Germain-Dominion to see how the boutique hotel model has evolved. The 60-

room hotel was recently restyled by LEMAYMICHAUD — the company uses high-design spelling — a firm responsible for so many splendidly repurposed historic buildings.

The Quebec City hotel is a beautiful blend of magazine-worthy modern décor and vintage architectural features such as bare, brick walls and large mahogany-framed casement windows. Now there is more, not less, and it works handsomely.

The lobby feels like the living room in a grand house. It's a warm and inviting collection of conversation corners clustered around a wood-burning fireplace (although it's not lit in summer). There are towering book shelves in dark walnut, over-sized club chairs in a tweedy black and white cotton and white drapes cascading from high ceilings. This lounge life spills out onto a patio terrasse covered by a black canopy — a breezy summer option for reading, breakfast or drinks.

Breakfast is a small, gourmet buffet with seats at large, square tables for 10. There is a machine for cappuccino and espresso, baskets of croissants and chocolaines, granola, boiled eggs, yogurt and fruit salad. A highlight is the small cheese board, featuring award-winning Quebec products including La Sauvagine and Paillot de chèvre, both from La Fromagerie Alexis de Portneuf.

The guest rooms vary in size and bed configuration, but they all have similar understated, contemporary décor — white goose-down duvets, dark furniture and walls and work tables. There are also deluxe amenities such as Egyptian cotton sheets, terry bathrobes, pod coffee machines, two-line telephones and mini-bars.

Like many boutique hotels, Le Germain-Dominion doesn't have a restaurant, but it does work with the Old Port's best, including Laurie Raphaël, a gastronomic dining room; l'Échaudé, arguably the perfect French bistro; and Toast!, an after-dark spot for small plates with big impact.

Toast! is the creation of chef Christian Lemelin and maître d' Stéphane D'Anjou. In summer, the courtyard is a lush garden backdrop for a sensual lineup of dishes such as bison tartare, braised veal cheeks, foie gras, seared sweetbreads, mushroom crostini and lobster risotto.

L'Échaudé provides room service at Le Germain-Dominion, sending over its signature bistro dishes: appetizers such as salmon or beef tartare, fish soup in lobster bouillon, goat cheese salad with Merlot vinaigrette, and main courses including duck confit, sirloin with potato cassoulet, and the restaurant's classic desserts, crème brûlée or sugar pie.

But to fully appreciate l'Échaudé, I recommend taking advantage of one of Le Germain-Dominion's cuisine packages and going for the total experience in the restaurant. Its staff is impeccable, its wine list inspiring and its cuisine excellent, all under the direction of partners Robert Plamondon (one of the founders), Brigitte Magnan, sommelier Joëlle Lavoie and chefs Jean-François Girard and Rémy Gallant. The menu changes, but some of the summertime offerings are zingy green-pea gazpacho, rich venison with morels, piquant lamb satay, cavaletti with shrimp, exotic black pudding, light sesame-crusted halibut, lobster risotto with lemon grass and barbecued quail.

Quebec City's first Bixi station is right outside Le Germain-Dominion, and the hotel is one block from the departure point for two exceptional 12-kilometre routes: one to Montmorency Falls and the other along Promenade Samuel de Champlain, which follows the shore of the St. Lawrence River. There is a wider choice of rides at Cyclo Services on St-Paul St., including tandems, electric bikes and kids' trailers, as well as guided tours and a repair shop.

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

#### IF YOU GO:

Quebec City is a 2½-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 20 or 40 east.

Hôtel Le Germain-Dominion: 888-833-5253, 418-692-2224, [www.germaindominion.com](http://www.germaindominion.com); 126 St-Pierre St., Quebec City. Pet-friendly, \$35 per night.

Price: \$235-\$395 for two, including deluxe continental breakfast, evening turndown, Wi-Fi, espresso bar, fitness room. Until Sept. 30, the 25th-anniversary special offers second night at 25 per cent off, on weekends. November to April, \$189-\$259, except for Quebec Carnival (Jan. 31-Feb. 16). Extras: Self-parking or valet, \$23, room service, massages.

ALT Hotel Quebec City: 800-463-5253, 418-658-1224, 1200 Germain-des-Prés Ave., Quebec City; \$144-\$184, incl. parking, Wi-Fi; exercise bikes, dinner at Le Bistango, in-house. Same 25th-anniversary discount.

L'Échaudé: 418-692-1299, [www.echaude.com](http://www.echaude.com), 73 Sault-au-Matelot St., Old Port; lunch, Mon.-Fri.; dinner, Mon.-Sun.; brunch from 10 a.m., Sat.-Sun.

Restaurant Toast!: 418-692-1334, [www.restauranttoast.com](http://www.restauranttoast.com); 17 Sault-au-Matelot St., Old Port; dinner, Mon.-Sun.

Cyclo Services: 418-692-4052, [www.cycloservices.net](http://www.cycloservices.net); 289 St-Paul St.; delivery to hotel, \$5; hybrid bikes, \$35 a day.

Quebec City regional tourism: 877-783-1608, [www.quebecregion.com](http://www.quebecregion.com)

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