

Luxe auberge takes its cuisine to the people

History can be found everywhere in stylish, contemporary surroundings

Auberge Saint-Antoine, the superlative boutique hotel in Quebec City, is more than well designed. It is beautifully curated.

It is also more than a simple auberge. It is a 95-room Relais & Châteaux, a group of the world's finest 500 or so independent, unique hotels. Saint-Antoine has haute gastronomy, lustrous decor, magnificent harbour views and a personal style that reflects the owners, Martha Bate-Price and her grown children, Evan, Lucy and Llewellyn.

The distinctive, artful feature of Auberge Saint-Antoine is that it was built on a major archeological site and it has incorporated into its bold, modern design a museum-quality display of artifacts from the 1600s to the 1800s. Such relics as glass goblets and bone-handled utensils tell of life during the French and British colonial regimes.

You'll feel the history everywhere, even in these stylish, contemporary surroundings. A cannon peeks out in the Café-Bar Artefact, where live jazz shakes up Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. At Le Gym, you can have a Japanese massage in a centuries-old, restored warehouse of Quebec's Old Port. In Panache, the dining is formal, but with vintage industrial accents of rusty pulleys and heavy wooden beams.

Upstairs, life is luxe. The guest rooms and suites are models of sophisticated understatement. Through her own interior design company, Bate-Price, aka Muffy, handled the decor with a palette of 50 shades of grey and sensual textures from matte to glossy. Lighting changes the mood and the look ever so slightly, playing on pewter silk drapes, platinum velvet sofas and Bergères chairs lacquered in silver. The mirrored bedside tables are crystalline contrasts to the rough stone walls.

It's not all flash. There's function, too, in the sound systems, pod coffee machines, mini-bars, spacious closets, and especially the double-vanity bathrooms with their



ROCHELLE LASH
CHECKING IN

indulgent heated floors, soaking tubs and swish glass showers.

What I particularly like about Auberge-Saint-Antoine is that it is a serious hotel, but it doesn't take itself too seriously. There are whimsical touches in the design, such as bright red graphics in the corridors, a moose on a throw pillow and sculpted sparrows alighting on the wrought-iron chandeliers.

The staff members — concierge, front desk and dining room — are friendly and genuinely interested in the guests. There's no snobbery here.

The hotel has a weekly Wednesday cocktail reception. It's a simple gabfest with wine and canapés, often anchored by at least one Price family member. You'll also probably meet Auberge Saint-Antoine's suave general manager, Jean-Louis Souman, the accomplished hotelier who used to run Le Bristol, one of Paris's illustrious "palace" hotels.

I chatted with some visitors from afar, curious as to how they had lucked into this hotel.

Merilyn and Paul Heslop from Australia picked Auberge Saint-Antoine because of its Relais & Châteaux affiliation.

"The Relais are always luxurious and intimate, with great food," Merilyn Heslop said. "And the concierge has been fantastic ... we have taken the ferry, a walking tour and visited gourmet food shops."

Justin and Joelle LeBlanc from North Carolina discovered Auberge Saint-Antoine on all-powerful Trip Advisor, where the hotel is ranked No. 1 of 97 Quebec City establishments. "We like the boutique size and the new type of luxury," Joelle LeBlanc said.

The people have spoken. But the arbiters of tourism have their say as well. The hotel has been ranked among the top in Canada for several consecutive years by both



AUBERGE SAINT-ANTOINE

The Auberge Saint-Antoine, a 95-room Relais & Châteaux in Quebec City, is one of Canada's top hotels.



AUBERGE SAINT-ANTOINE

A Dutch plate from the 1700s is one of the archeological treasures on display at Auberge Saint-Antoine.

Travel + Leisure and Condé Nast Traveler magazines.

Food is a key component of any hotel's top-drawer status and Saint-Antoine's cuisine is in the hands of a young star, 25-year-old chef Louis Pacquelin. He's from France, ex of Alain Ducasse's culinary empire and the Michelin-starred Hôtel Plaza Athénée. Pacquelin presides over Saint-Antoine's gastronomic Panache Restaurant, where he uses the finest regional beef, lamb, pork and fish to create French-Quebec cuisine with a twist.

Lunch and dinner at Pa-

nache are epicurean adventures, but there is an extra perk next month. If you partake in the Mother's Day brunch on May 11 at Panache, Mom will be entered in a draw for a \$1,000 strand of pearls offered by Maison Birks. The gourmet treats include smoked salmon and blinis with poached quail eggs and lobster with tomatoes, basil and poached eggs.

Auberge Saint-Antoine also is taking its gourmandises to the people with its three summertime outdoor bistros. Panache Mobile 1 will open next month in a vine-

yard on quaint Île d'Orléans facing Montmorency Falls. Panache Mobile 2 and Café de la Promenade operate on the Promenade Samuel de Champlain, a delightful linear park overlooking the St. Lawrence River. It's all about splendid settings and such gourmet comfort food as the signature "guédille au homard," a Québécois cousin of New England's lobster roll.

Running a prestigious Relais & Châteaux is not the first time that the Price family has made its mark in Quebec.

Circa 1810, William Price left Great Britain for Quebec City and eventually entered the lumber business to supply the admiralty with lumber during a blockade by Napoleon I. Within 30 years, Price had relocated north to timber-rich territory and became known as "le père du Saguenay" for the remarkable industrial development that he fostered. The forestry empire of Price Brothers & Co. expanded into paper mills and hydro-electricity and merged in the 1970s with Abitibi Paper Co. to become Abitibi-Price, which in the 1990s became Abitibi-Consolidated, the world's largest newsprint producer, at the time.

Today, the Prices believe that small is beautiful, too. Evan and Lucy have opened Le Chic Shack, near the top

IF YOU GO

Auberge Saint-Antoine: 888-692-2211, www.saint-antoine.com; 8 Saint-Antoine St., Quebec City. Pet-friendly, \$35 a day.

Price: rooms, \$189-\$369, for two; and suites, \$499-\$1,200, including Internet, jazz on Thurs-Fri-Sat., 8 p.m.-11 p.m. Prices higher May-Oct. Extras: valet parking, massages.

Panache: breakfast, lunch and dinner daily; Mother's Day brunch, \$52 p.p. Panache Mobiles, June-Sept.

Le Chic Shack: 418-692-1485, www.chicshack.ca; 15 rue du Fort; Sun.-Wed., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Thurs.-Sat., 11 a.m. - 9 p.m.

Quebec City: 877-783-1608, www.quebecregion.com.

of the Funiculaire du Vieux-Québec. The trendy diner features poutine à la coq au vin, zingy raspberry sodas, maple-caramel milkshakes and designer burgers with cheddar or crème fraîche. Chalk up another Price family landmark, with Quebec flavour.

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

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