

Auberge Artistique de la Visitation

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 2, 2010



Auberge Artistique de la Visitation in Lévis is a forum for the sculpture and murals of Germain Desbiens. The house once belonged to an executive of the Davie Shipyard. "We still call the house 'English style,'" said Louise Roy, who runs the B&B.

Photograph by: Auberge Artistique de la Visitation

Scroll down for Rochelle's column.

Editor's note: Some of the details might have changed since the original publication date. Please check with the establishment before heading out!

Original publication date: Oct. 9, 2010

Lévis is a three-hour drive from Montreal. Take Highway 20 to Exit 325N and the Route du Président Kennedy.

Auberge Artistique de la Visitation & Germain Desbiens Galerie d'Art & Jardin de

Sculptures: 6104 St. Georges St., Lévis, 418-837-9619, www.aubergeartistique.com. Lodging price, until Oct. 31, \$95 for two, including breakfast. From Nov. 1 to May 31, prices start at \$85. Add dinner at l'Intimiste, Vieux Lévis' best dining spot, for \$215 for two, including one night's lodging and breakfast. Packages with Champagne and flowers are available.

Atelier Germain Desbiens: 109 Côte de Passage, Vieux Lévis, 418-837-9619; www.germainsdesbiens.com. The workshop D'une ligne naît une sculpture involves about 24 hours of instruction and practice over about three days. The cost is \$445, including materials, but not lodging.

L'Anglicane: 33 Wolfe St., Lévis, 418-838-6001, www.diffusionculturelledelevis.ca.

Lévis tourism information: 418-838-6026, www.tourismelevis.com or www.culturelevis.com.

Is it a B&B or is it an art gallery? It's both.

Louise Roy runs the Auberge Artistique de la Visitation in Lévis, a small inn that also serves as a forum for works by her husband, Germain Desbiens. A sculptor and muralist, Desbiens creates contemporary abstract pieces in aluminum, bronze and concrete.

"Art is not decoration at our inn," Roy said. "It is its heart and soul. All of the auberge's spaces, particularly the salons and the garden, exhibit Germain's artworks."

Before its rebirth as a B&B and art space, the Auberge Artistique was the home of one of the executives of the Davie Shipyard, a company key to the history of Lévis and particularly its significant anglophone history.

"We still call the house 'English style,' " Roy said of the solid red-brick structure with an inviting white veranda and set back from a leafy residential street. "That's an accepted term here for the square brick houses. There are a lot of them, but they still are exceptional in Old Lévis, where most of the buildings are sculpted in an ornate Victorian style."

Walk into Auberge Artistique and you are transported to 1901, with the home's elaborate hand-carved woodwork, soaring ceilings and ornamental radiators. The fancy spiral staircase is so unusual that is a topic of conversation. The living room is a formal parlour filled with antiques, fine furniture and damask-covered settees, all with enough history for an ambience that spans 100 years. The rooms are elegant, spacious and carefully decorated. You feel the same comfort and beauty in the guest rooms. Roy has used pastel colours, oriental rugs and open spaces to create inviting spaces.

However, it is the artwork of Desbiens that really is striking. When you walk into the inn, the first piece that you see is a mural fashioned in aluminum that depicts abstract faces in different textures. Desbiens also has displayed sketches and models of his works in progress. The sculptures and murals are delightful surprises that continue outdoors in the Jardin de Sculptures, where about 12 free-standing works are placed among the bushes and flower beds.

Visitors can also watch Desbiens in his atelier, a short walk from the auberge. If you are inspired to create after studying a master at work, you can take one of the workshops that Desbiens gives for artists of all levels. Beginners can get the feel of three-dimensional art in his seminar called D'une ligne naît une sculpture (From a Line Comes a Sculpture).

Desbiens isn't the only artist in the family. Roy practices the art of being a concierge. She is a member of Les Clefs d'Or of Canada, an association of the finest concierges across the country. With this kind of guidance, you can expect everything you need for a short visit - sightseeing advice, umbrellas, the morning newspaper, a guest computer, storage for bicycles and even breakfast in bed. She also handles breakfast, with a decidedly creative touch. Her fruit crêpes and eggs Benedict are both scrumptious and artfully presented.

The Auberge Artistique is a perfect jumping-off point from which to enjoy the old section of Lévis, a small city with major historical significance. Old Lévis is a charming quarter on an escarpment overlooking the St. Lawrence River. One of its signature features is the unusual architecture - mostly vintage houses with ornate mosaic work, colourful shutters and latticework balconies.

With brochures available at the B&B, visitors can do a self-guided tour called the Circuit des Arts, which encompasses about 10 galleries and the ateliers of several professional artists, all within a kilometre of Auberge Artistique.

As the headquarters of the A.C. Davie Shipyard during the 1800s, Lévis had a significant English population. The Anglican church that dates from those days has been transformed into a cultural centre with a concert hall called l'Anglicane and La Galerie Louise Carrier, which is exhibiting Desbiens's works until Wednesday.

rochelleink@aol.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette