

HOTEL INTEL

TOWNSHIPS TOURS
CHANNEL PENNY'S
GAMACHE NOVELS

It's no mystery why the books' locations are so charming — they're based on real world



ROCHELLE LASH

To go or not to go? If you are considering travel or a staycation, factor in that the establishments featured in Hotel Intel have instituted new physical-distancing and sanitation protocols.

Celebrated murder mystery author Louise Penny has put the Eastern Townships on the literary map, and travel expert Danielle Viau brings the region to life with her private tours.

Penny is famous for her award-winning novels focused on the sleuthing of Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Sûreté du Québec and set in the fictitious Townships village of Three Pines. The books, written in English, have been translated into 26 languages and many are New York Times bestsellers. Penny's 15th mystery, *All the Devils Are Here*, was released on Tuesday.

Viau is so taken with the charming whodunits that she organizes guided tours inspired by the novels and the brilliant, insightful Gamache.

"You can relive Louise Penny's evocative settings," said Viau, "and also simply enjoy the history and attractions of some of the Townships' most intriguing destinations."

Tours: Visitors can choose from full- or half-day excursions tooting around the countryside in a six-person van, or embark on a two-hour walking tour of Knowlton.

The full-day tour alights at five destinations:

- A tranquil community near Lake Memphremagog, home of what Penny calls the Old Hadley House, a pink Victorian landmark appearing in the books *A Fatal Grace* and *The Cruellest Month*.

- The well-known Abbaye de St-Benoit-du-Lac, which is portrayed in *The Beautiful Mystery* as Saint-Gilbert-entre-les-Loups Monastery. The abbey's gift shop is brimming with local food

products, including the monks' cheeses, and the stop includes an interlude of Gregorian chants.

- Then it's off to Manoir Bellechasse — the fictional name for a very real country hotel, made famous in the book *The Murder Stone* — where Gamache and his wife go every year for their wedding anniversary. It's almost impossible to beat the genteel experience of lunch here, overlooking Lake Massawippi.

- Brome Lake Books in Knowlton, made famous in *How the Light Gets In*, where owners Lucy Hoblyn and Danny McAuley hold book launches.

- Charming countryside attractions known in Penny's books as St. Thomas Church and Sarah's Boulangerie. Where are these for real? Viau's tours solve mysteries of Penny's fanciful land.

Lodging: Viau works with establishments of various styles and price ranges, including: Manoir Hovey, the grand Relais & Châteaux property on Lake Massawippi in North Hatley; Domaine Jolivent and Hill House B&B, both in Lac Brome/Foster; Le Pleasant Hôtel & Café in Sutton; the Ancestral B&B in Knowlton; Le Château Bromont, a resort-style hotel with a pool, spa and golf course, all at the foot of Mont Brome; and the Old Mansion House, a historic rental home for up to 20 guests in Georgeville.

The Old Mansion House is a great bet if you're travelling in a bubble — a family or literary group, for example. The antique-filled Victorian getaway is a short walk from Lake Memphremagog, with glimpses of the landscape beyond. The house has a starring role as Old Hadley House in Penny's books. Loaded with character, carefully restored, beautifully decorated and outfitted with modernized kitchens and bathrooms, this 1889 treasure is popular for special occasions, workshops and retreats.

There are so many spaces that are ideal for relaxing with a good book. The wraparound Victorian veranda is surrounded by gardens; the sitting rooms are filled with art and elegant furnishings. Dining is a delight, whether casually at the breakfast bar in the open-plan country kitchen, in the formal dining room or on



The Old Mansion House, a Victorian vacation rental in Georgeville, has a literary life in Louise Penny's Chief Inspector Armand Gamache novels as Old Hadley House. *OLD MANSION HOUSE*



Penny, left, with Danielle Viau. *COURTESY OF DANIELLE VIAU*

the patio.

The Old Mansion House has four classic bedrooms and four suites with sitting rooms and balconies. All eight accommodations have pretty pastel decor, vintage pine floors and private

bathrooms. One has a claw-foot tub.

It's a place where you can channel Penny's world of mystery and history, mixed with the seduction of an idyllic vacation.

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IF YOU GO

Three Pines Tours: 514-623-2158, threepinestours.com. May-Oct. By reservation.

Tour prices: All-day tour, \$295 for up to four people; afternoon half-day covers two locations, \$170 for up to four; two-hour walking tour of Knowlton, \$95 per person. These private tours include narration, coffee break, afternoon snack, transportation from your Eastern Townships hotel (if nearby), admission prices to attractions. Lunch and lodging are extra. Montreal departures available, with an extra fee.

Old Mansion House: info@mansionhousegeorgeville.com, mansionhousegeorgeville.com; 71 Channel Rd., Georgeville. For up to 20 guests, two-night minimum, \$825 per night on weekdays, \$845 weekends. Until Dec. 20, \$2,650 per week. Minimum of three to seven nights during certain holiday periods. Pet-friendly.

Eastern Townships tourism: 800-355-5755, eastertownships.org.

Taking a flight to nowhere

SHANNON MCMAHON

When a virtual reality experience called First Airlines started offering faux flights in the Ikebukuro neighbourhood of Tokyo in 2017, you could say it was ahead of its time.

Three years later, in the grips of a global pandemic that has grounded the vast majority of flights, Tokyo's business travellers are leaning on virtual reality for a taste of international travel without leaving their city.

"I often go overseas on business, but I haven't been to Italy," said one businessman, who tried the VR experience. "I got a sense of actually seeing things there."

The appeal of an "in flight" meal, first-class "lounge" and first-class seat on an Airbus is that most frequent travellers are unlikely to see the real thing any time soon.

The First Airlines experience channels all the details of flying, from departures screens in the lounge to flight attendants carrying out safety protocols. And the two-hour experience, complete with a four-course meal and window TV screens replicating exterior views, is cheaper than an actual first-class plane ticket at about \$60.

First Airlines calls itself the world's "first virtual aviation facil-

ty" with small touches that make it feel like an actual airport and airplane, even when your supplied VR headset isn't on.

The experience begins with an "official boarding pass" issued for the destination and kicks off with boarding procedures, drink service and a four-course culinary experi-



I often go overseas on business, but I haven't been to Italy. I got a sense of actually seeing things there.

ence created by top chefs with the passenger-chosen destination in mind.

Upon arrival, experience tours in places such as Paris, Hawaii, New Zealand, Rome, New York, California and Helsinki.

The New York menu includes Manhattan clam chowder and cheesecake, while the Hawaii and Rome options feature poke and minestrone.

Bookings are up by 50 per cent

and reservations are required. The mock flights "depart" five days a week and are regularly selling out.

But First Airlines isn't the only mock-travel player: Taiwanese carrier EVA Air has upped the ante by offering an actual flight — to nowhere — that's almost three hours long and Hello Kitty-themed.

EVA Air's Hello Kitty Dream Jet has been popular for years for its charming theme and Hello Kitty-shaped inflight food. But since suspending the Hello Kitty Jet service this April because of the pandemic, the airline now flies its Sanrio-themed aircraft locally as a special flight-to-nowhere service.

The Hello Kitty Jet flew in early August for passengers willing to spend \$180. The flight departed from Taiwan and circled the coastline as well as Japan's Ryukyu Islands before returning. Passengers were "able to overlook the magnificent scenery of Taiwan's east coastline" from a lower-than-normal altitude, EVA Air said.

"The on-board meal (was) a selection of seafood chirashi-sushi rice designed by Michelin-starred chef Motoke Nakamura."

EVA Air did not immediately respond for comment on if or when the flight might be offered again. But Taiwan, which hasn't had a confirmed coronavirus death since the seven it saw in the spring, remains closed or is imposing strict quarantines on visitors from most countries.

The Washington Post

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