

HOTEL INTEL

OKA MONASTERY REBORN AS UNIQUE VACATION VILLAGE

L'Abbaye d'Oka is so vast and varied you can tailor a visit to fit your own taste



ROCHELLE LASH

The Trappist monks decamped from their Oka digs long ago, but their spirit and their famous cheese live on in one of Quebec's most dynamic and distinctive vacation centres.

Today, L'Abbaye d'Oka is so vast and varied you can tailor a visit to your taste: Active, contemplative, romantic, foodie or family.

The massive stone monastery was converted into the Auberge de l'Abbaye d'Oka, a pleasant, simply furnished getaway, the excellent Bistro Le Sacré, which has indoor and courtyard dining; Le Magasin de l'Abbaye, an outstanding gourmet shop; and the restorative Centre de Yoga pour tous.

That's only the beginning. The monks owned an impressive 270 hectares (about the size of all of Mount Royal's three peaks) and the new owner Daniel Bérard has consolidated the picturesque country domain into a village of recreation, agritourism and heaven-sent cuisine.

Visually, the Abbaye is such a unique, scenic phenomenon that it is the location of about 10 international movie shoots a year. Currently, a U.K. production is filming a TV series based on Louise Penny's mystery novels.

Agronomy: Surrounded by magnificent century-old trees, the Abbaye is home to apple and pear orchards, cornfields, nut trees, beehives and a vineyard that is

an international research centre focusing on cold climate growing. An educational summer camp for budding agronomists launched last season.

Bérard is a large-scale farmer. Broccoli, cauliflower and brussels sprouts are his specialties at properties in Joliette, Prince Edward Island and California.

"L'Abbaye is a great leisure experience and strongly about agronomy," said Bérard. "The Trappists ran the one of the first agriculture schools in Quebec and they lived off the land."

Auberge: The auberge has been cleverly and thoroughly redone, but there still is a churchy air in the corridors, with wooden pew benches and wrought-iron lighting.

The huge former monastery is operating 50 rooms for guests, with new bedding, mattresses, curtains, woodwork, ceiling fans and bathrobes. They're compact, and perfectly well-kept. And in keeping with the simple life, there are no TVs, although there is Wi-Fi, and a handful of rooms have air conditioning. The décor, grey and white, is simple but appealing, and the beds sport cosy quilts.

Here is the monastic part. The auberge has only three rooms with full private bathrooms and eight rooms with loos and sinks. Other rooms share bathrooms and showers (well-maintained and newly white-tiled). There are plans for 100 more guest rooms, larger and upgraded with private bathrooms.

An ample continental buffet breakfast is served in the market-style cafeteria, complete with espresso-cappuccino, cheese, fruit, eggs and baked goods. (All the foods are wrapped and there is no extra charge for breakfast.)



The cosy guest rooms at Auberge de l'Abbaye d'Oka have been redecored, but most share a bathroom. PHOTOS: L'ABBAYE D'OKA



Bistro Le Sacré is a stylish country eatery featuring "people-pleasing" bistro cuisine by executive chef Eric Keegan.

Bistro Le Sacré: Talented chef Eric Keegan has manned the kitchens at the prestigious Club de golf Laval-sur-le-lac, at the Marriott Château Champlain and also at the gastronomic La Forge in Tremblant. At Bistro Le Sacré he cooks up excellent fare with generous portions and lots of flavour.

"We do dishes for food lovers of all tastes," said Keegan. "It's bistro cuisine, people-pleasing."

Keegan's elegant signature dishes include salmon tartare with coriander, dreamy lobster ravioli and brandied shrimp; the grill produces filet mignon, lamb T-bones and rib steaks.

Le Sacré's informal lineup features hearty onion soup, poutine d'Oka, burgers, fish 'n' chips, and creative veggie dishes (homegrown, in season), such as roasted cauliflower with almonds, lemon and yogurt; and

maple-brushed brussels sprouts. A musical combo entertains on Saturday evenings.

Gourmet shop: The Magasin de l'Abbaye is a large, vibrant emporium of fine cheeses, chocolate, cider, jams, caramel, charcuterie, pastries, wine, oils, beer and homemade pies.

The Trappists sold their recipe for Oka cheese to Quebec dairy giant Agropur in the 1980s. The monks are now living in Lanau-dièr. Their latest best-sellers are fir-tree syrup and chocolate-covered fruitcake. Other suppliers include the Monastère de Notre-Dame Mistassini in Lac-St-Jean, the nuns' abbey of St-Benoît-Labre near St-Joseph-de-Beauce; and the renowned Abbaye St-Benoît-du-lac in Magog.

Le Sandwicherie dishes up grilled cheese (with Oka, naturally); L'Abbé Glacé, an ice cream

IF YOU GO

L'Abbaye d'Oka: 450-415-0651, abbayeoka.ca; 1600 chemin d'Oka, Oka.

Auberge de l'Abbaye: from \$115 for twin beds (shared bathroom), to \$160 for a suite with one double and one sofa-bed, (private bathroom). Queen/king beds available. Breakfast, Wi-Fi included.

Bistro Le Sacré: 450-421-9339; Wed.-Thurs. from 4 p.m.; Fri.-Sun. from 11:30 p.m.

Laurentian Tourism: 800-561-6673, laurentides.com

kiosk, serves smoothies, iced cappuccino, parfaits and the sinfully rich Monks' Waffle, topped with hot chocolate or caramel sauce and whipped cream.

Activities: L'Abbaye d'Oka has 30 kilometres of walking trails and 30 kilometres of mountain biking (rentals available), which turn to winter fat-biking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Another high-energy option is the Super Aqua Club, a water park in nearby Pointe-Calumet.

The Abbaye also offers a day at a SÉPAQ park, almost any one you choose. Don't go far. The exceptional Parc national d'Oka is home to hiking trails and a beautiful beach on Lake of Two Mountains. In October, tours will feature wine-tastings and the Abbaye's religious-themed mini-museum and chapel. rochelle@rochellelash.com

TRAVEL BRIEFS

Machu Picchu older than believed: scientists

It turns out a world-renowned Inca citadel is even older than previously believed. Scientists say Peru's Machu Picchu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and prime tourist draw for the South American country that was believed to have been built around AD 1438, is at least two decades older. The original date was based chiefly on 16th-century accounts from Spanish conquistadors, but new radiocarbon dating techniques put its founding at least 20 years earlier, according to researchers at Yale University. Anthropology professor Richard Burger, who

led the study, said: "The results suggest that the discussion of the development of the Inca empire based primarily on colonial records requires revision." It's the first time scientific methods have been used to determine the time of Machu Picchu's founding and the length of its occupation, Burger said of the findings, which were published in the journal *Antiquity*. Using accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS), the Yale team reached its conclusion by examining human remains from cemeteries at the site that were recovered during excavations

in 1912. Thought to have been built as a palace for Inca emperor Pachacuti, the mountainside collection of stone structures was abandoned around AD 1572 after the Spanish conquests but was returned to global prominence in 1911 by American explorer Hiram Bingham. Before the pandemic, it would regularly attract half a million visitors a year. In 2017, Peruvian authorities introduced ticketed time slots to control the flow and protect its architectural treasures, which include remnants of temples, granaries, aqueducts and a ceremonial bathhouse.

Andre Ramshaw, *For Postmedia News*



The archeological site of Peru's Machu Picchu could be decades older than earlier believed. ERNESTO BENAVIDES/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Wild Polar Bears are Closer Than You Think

FLY DIRECT FROM MONTRÉAL

FRONTIERS NORTH
ADVENTURES

ComeToChurchill.com

1 800 663 9832