

HOTEL INTEL

LODGING PROJECT DESIGNED TO PROTECT WILDERNESS

Lanaudière development offers modern getaway that respects the environment



ROCHELLE LASH

If you rent or buy a chalet at Beside Habitat Lanaudière, you have an opportunity to save the Earth, one plot of land at a time.

Beside is an innovative countryside domain of rustic-but-modern chalets with two main goals: to provide an idyllic vacation destination away from orange cones, motor noise and city lights, and to preserve the surrounding land and lakes.

How it works: Beside's first lodging venture is deep in a forest near Rawdon, about 75 minutes northeast of Montreal. The development encompasses more than 500 hectares (nearly 1,000 football fields) and the plan is to build commercial real estate on approximately 20 per cent of the land while preserving about 80 per cent.

Private owners buy the chalets — each on its own lot — and when they are not using them, put them into a rental pool managed by Beside. Chalet owners have a revenue stream and Beside Habitat uses some of the profits from real estate deals to protect the remaining land from further development.

"Beside is a sales and rental project complete with elaborate construction, as well as workers and residents taming the wilderness, but it goes beyond building chalets," said Jean-Daniel Petit, president and co-founder of Beside.

"We are committed to preserving land, and the lodgings that we erect are carefully planned to be environmentally conscious."

This protected park of Laurentian mountain forests and the crystal clear McGuire Lake will be private for Beside's owners and renters. There are hiking trails, free canoes and paddleboards and fishing opportunities, but no motorized vehicles.

Beside's lodgings are built a distance from the lake, to avoid construction along the shore and

IF YOU GO

Beside Habitat Lanaudière: online bookings at besidehabitat.com, 302 Morgan Ave., Chertsey. Prices fluctuate and are higher June 24 to Labour Day, plus holidays and spring break; and lower in spring, fall, winter. For Sept. to Oct., a two-bedroom chalet for up to six people starts at \$360 (weekdays); three-bedroom for up to nine, from \$420; four-bedroom for up to 12, from \$480. Includes Wi-Fi, parking, sauna in each chalet, bedding, towels, fireplace wood, electric car charging, access to lakes and trails. Glamping pods, some with accessible features, are planned for 2023. **Lanaudière tourism:** 450-834-2535, 800-363-2788; lanaudiere.ca.

human interference in wildlife habitats.

It's early days. The project opened with six chalets this month. It expects to have more than 10 by the end of 2021 and a total of 75 within two or three years.

Eventually, a communal pavilion will be a gathering place for yoga and cooking classes, a co-working space, performances, conferences and a café. A music studio will operate in an adjacent building.

Lodging: Beside has collaborated with like-minded suppliers. The two- to four-bedroom chalets were designed by Appareil Architecture of Montreal, which specializes in simple and sustainable homes, with open spaces, clean lines and durable structures.

Beside's chalets have steel roofing, which could last three to five times longer than a shingled roof, as well as strong cedar siding and



Beside Habitat chalets are part of a land and lake conservation project in Lanaudière. PHOTOS: FÉLIX MICHAUD



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energy-efficient double-glazed windows. The built-in furniture is cleverly designed and sturdy, the cathedral ceilings are almost six metres high and the look of the interiors is minimalist.

Each chalet is equipped with a heated concrete floor, air conditioning, an indoor sauna, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth speakers, but no TVs. Each chalet has an outdoor fire pit with cooking accessories.

The open-plan kitchens were designed by A Hauteur d'Homme with refrigerators, washer-dryers, dishwashers and something different for cooking. There are stovetop elements, but no traditional ovens. Baking and roasting are done on an Esse Bakeheart

wood-fired stove in the living room, which also produces radiant heat for the building.

The bigger picture: Beside started in 2016 with a magazine. Both in print and online, it is bilingual and published twice a year, featuring photography and articles on local food, sustainable architecture and philosophy.

The team also produced Festival Beside at Parc national des Îles-de-Boucherville in June 2019. Post-COVID, it will take place as a series of smaller events.

Petit encourages people who own 250 to 400 hectares of land less than two hours from a city to consider creating a project.

The neighbourhood: Several attractions around Rawdon match Beside's love of nature. On the laid-back side, Spa La Source is a beautiful indoor-outdoor Nordic experience of hot and cold baths. For an easygoing country walk, Parc des Chutes-Dorwin has a stunning waterfall and nature interpretation trails with signage.

For more action, Arbraska Rawdon is an adventure circuit of tree and rock climbing. There are playgrounds tucked into the forest and a network of colourful huts suspended in the trees connected by ramps, tunnels and slides.

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A medieval theme park

Rothenburg's night watchman provides a glimpse into past, **Rick Steves** writes.

Until European travel becomes fully open, here's a reminder of the fun that awaits us in Europe:

The walled town of Rothenburg, midway between Frankfurt and Munich, offers the best look possible at medieval Germany. And in this theme park of a town, the best ride is the night watchman's town walk. Each night during the tourist season, with his eyebrows frozen in a raised position, the night watchman listens to the clock tower clang nine times. Then he winks, picks up his Hellebarde (long-poled axe) and lights his lantern.

Welcoming the English-speaking group gathered in 15th-century Rothenburg, he looks believably medieval in his black robe, long curly hair, and scraggly beard. But the twinkle in his eyes admits, "I'm one of you."

With an insider's grin he begins: "It was a bad job, being medieval Rothenburg's night watchman — low esteem, low pay, dangerous work. Only two jobs were lower: the grave digger and the executioner. Yes, this was a dangerous job. All the good people were off the streets early. He would sing the 'All's well' tune at the top of the hour through the night. You didn't want to hear the night watchman at three in the morning, but you were glad he was still alive."

"These days, the job's more respectable: People take photos

of me," he continues. "And it's no longer dangerous, because you're all coming with me." The night watchman's camera-toting flock of 30 tourists, already charmed, follows his bobbing lantern down the narrow, cobbled lane.

Stopping under a sign announcing the "Kriminal Museum," we watch the rusted old dunking cage swing in the breeze. The night watchman walks over to the stocks that stand empty next to the museum door and says, "In the good old days, death sentences started with your basic execution and then got worse."

The legal concept of "cumulation" meant a criminal's punishments would multiply with his crimes. While that petty beehive thief might simply be hanged, an adulterous beehive-thieving murderer could be dragged to the place of execution with painful stops along the way for pinching with red-hot tongs.

A town's gallows, a medieval symbol of justice, was placed high for more spectacle. The most important criminals were hanged on higher platforms in anticipation of greater crowds. Bodies of particularly dishonourable criminals were left out to rot. Some were left in a cage so the birds could get to their bodies — but relatives couldn't.

Looking suspiciously at all of us, our guide turns abruptly and walks down the street. Mesmerized, we follow. He stops under



Every night during the tourism season, the night watchman leads visitors through Rothenburg, midway between Frankfurt and Munich in Germany. DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCELLI

an old-fashioned street light and says, "It was a dirty time." Pointing with his boot to a gutter in the cobbles, he continues, "All the garbage — from the people and from the animals, too — it went into the road. They had this ditch in the middle of the street. People tried to hit the ditch. This was not a good system. Summer was stinking. The rich left for countryside homes. Back then, it wasn't the Romantic Road. It was the Filthy Road. And this filth gave us the plague. The plague was a big killer. In one terrible year, in Rothenburg ... one out of every three people died."

We follow him farther to the ramparts at the edge of town.

Overlooking the valley, the watchman says, "Rothenburg was never conquered until 1631. There was a siege. The armory, which was along this wall, blew up. Double disaster: We had a hole in the wall and no ammunition to make a defence. To be looted by 40,000 mercenaries was no fun. They were Catholics, so it was even worse."

"Our town was broken. And for the rest of the Thirty Years' War, Rothenburg lay wide open, undefended. We were sacked many times. Between lootings we suffered plagues."

Popping from an alley back onto the main square, our hooded friend concludes, "From 1648 — when the war and

plagues stopped — time stood still in Rothenburg. Centuries of poverty ... and nothing changed. Rothenburg's misfortune put the town into a deep sleep. And that is why you are here today. Now I must sing the 'All's well.'"

After finishing his melody, he blows a long, haunting tone on his horn. Then he ends by saying, "You, my friends, should hurry home. Bed is the best place for good people at this hour."

This article was adapted from Rick's new book, For the Love of Europe. Rick Steves (ricksteves.com) writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. You can email Rick at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.