

LEISURE & TRAVEL

EDITOR: Leigh Williams, 859-4978

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E-MAIL: life@timestranscript.com FAX: 859-4904



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Chateau Frontenac dominates the skyline of Old Quebec.

Captivating Quebec City

■ Even a short stay in the historic capital dazzles visitors

BY CATHY DONALDSON
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

It wasn't long after Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec City in 1608 that it became a central arrival and departure point for travellers.

Four centuries later, this city on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River continues to draw visitors, now from around the globe. In fact, 4.6 million tourists visit annually, more than a million from 75 countries outside of Canada.

Known as the cradle of French civilization in North America, Quebec's provincial capital boasts a population of more than 600,000, most of whom are French-speaking, though English is widely spoken in service industries as well as in tourist and shopping areas.

With many sites of historical and architectural interest, numerous annual festivals and events, a plethora of outdoor activities available in the region, as well

as outstanding accommodations, dining and shopping, Quebec City is consistently ranked a top destination.

During a recent visit to the city, I kicked myself for not booking a longer junket. Even as my friends and I drove across the Pont de Quebec and headed for our hotel in the old port district, I knew 24 hours would be far too short a stopover to do much wandering in this pedestrian-friendly city.

But no matter how brief your stay, Quebec City dazzles.

Fall foliage exploded in colour as we ventured along the Grande Allée, one of the city's main streets – also dubbed its Champs-Élysées. The beautiful thoroughfare, lined with buildings of diverse style, led us through Porte St. Louis, a stone gateway that is part of the city's historic fortification system, and into Vieux-Quebec.

That's when the wow factor hit high gear.

With a unique assortment of restaurants, bistros, bars, cafés, art galleries and shops of all kinds nestled in quaint quarters and often notable buildings, Old

Quebec is breathtaking. Winding streets with European flair invite visitors to explore their countless nooks and crannies. Meanwhile, the frequent nudges of history – from aged churches to museums with venerable façades – add to the beauty of the landscape. Little wonder UNESCO proclaimed Old Quebec a World Heritage Site in 1985.

Before embarking on a lengthy walking tour, my travel mates and I checked in at our hotel, Le Germain-Dominion, on St-Pierre Street. The chic boutique property is in the heart of Quebec City's old port area, a picturesque neighbourhood featuring colonial homes, antique shops, art galleries and bustling eateries.

Despite the sights that waited just outside our hotel, it was hard for three pamper-loving moms not to leave an amazingly-appointed room, a nest of goose down duvets, feather pillows and other lovely furnishings, not to mention cushy robes and luxurious bath products.

We suppressed thoughts of a nap, freshened up and toured the hotel, which opened in 1997 in a century-



CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

A street in Old Quebec, leading up the funicular.

old location that once housed the Dominion Fish and Fruit Limited. In its day, that company enjoyed an enviable setting on St-Pierre, then recognized as the Wall Street of Quebec. The building was situated next to prestigious stone buildings housing banks, insurers, lawyers and various merchants.

In 2002, the hotel grew to encompass the neighbouring building, the former Hochelaga Bank, constructed 100 years earlier.

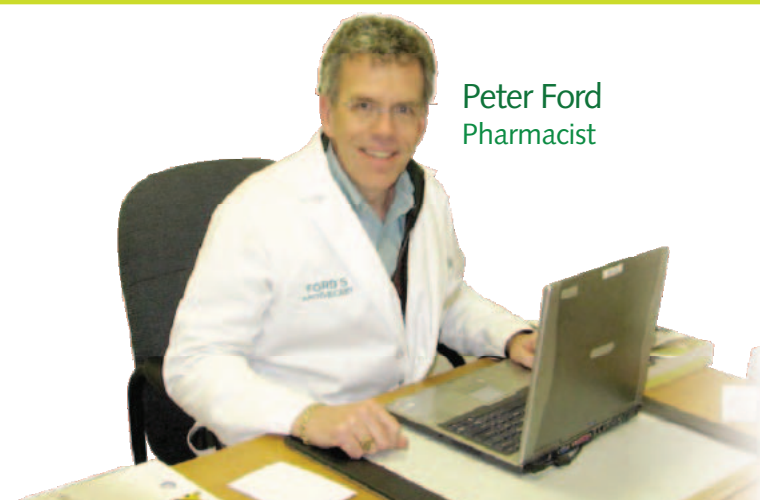
Doors from the bank's vaults have been converted for decorative use on each floor of Le Germain-Dominion.

We left our intriguing hotel and made tracks for another landmark: Place Royale, the oldest neighbourhood in Quebec City. The cobblestone plaza is home to Notre-Dame-des-Victoires church, considered the oldest stone church

► See WORK, G2

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Work up an appetite wandering the many historic streets of Old Quebec

► Continued From G1

in North America. Close by is the Place Royale interpretation centre, several arts and crafts boutiques as well as a multitude of top-notch restaurants.

Place Royale welcomes guests to step back in time to the early days of New France because it was here that Champlain founded a trading post in 1608.

One of the sights not to be missed is the massive mural Fresque des Québécois, located on a building at the intersection of Côte de la Montagne and Notre Dame. The mural recounts the story of Quebec City, illustrating its architecture, fortifications and personalities. (A close look at the artwork's windows reveals historic figures and nearly a dozen of the province's leading writers and artists.)

As we meandered through Place Royale and other parts of "lower town," we noticed the cruise ship Brilliance of the Seas docked at the river's edge. Quebec's old port has always been a beehive of activity, from its heyday in the 19th century as one of the world's five biggest ports to its status today as a popular cruise destination.

With stomachs rumbling following an afternoon of trekking, my mates and I returned to our relaxing oasis at Le Germain-Dominion, swapping hiking shoes for heels before a dinner reservation.

We certainly had a wealth of choices; the region abounds in restaurants, from tiny establishments to culinary hotspots.

After asking some foodie friends from "la belle province" which restaurant we should choose for dinner on our one-night stay, they



Chateau Frontenac from Champlain Boulevard, Quebec City.

CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

suggested – without hesitation – Restaurant Panache on St-Antoine Street.

Located in Auberge Saint-Antoine – recently recognized by Condé Nast Traveler as one of the top hotels in Canada for the 10th consecutive year – the stone-walled building where Panache was created had been an abandoned 19th-century riverside warehouse prior to being acquired by the Price

family in 1990. When Panache opened at the site in 2004, the building had been lovingly restored to preserve its heritage, resulting in an exceptional fine-dining space.

As my friends and I entered the dining room on a cool, fall evening, a central fireplace added warmth to the rustic elegance of our surroundings. A variety of attractive light fixtures cast subtle glows over linen-draped tables, each

topped with fine silverware and crystal. Plush banquettes and other comfy seating entice patrons to linger over meals. A wrought iron staircase leading to tables on the restaurant's mezzanine level makes for a spectacular focal point.

The menu suits the setting of this AAA/AAA four-diamond-rated restaurant: traditional French-Canadian cuisine with a contemporary twist. Chef Julien Dumas' emphasis is on seasonal and local products, with produce sourced primarily from the restaurant's organic garden on Île d'Orléans – just east of Quebec City – as well as small local producers.

Wine lovers will be happy because Panache's wine list boasts more than 700 different labels from 14 countries. (The wine cellar houses over 12,000 bottles.)

Our divine dinner began with fresh bread and rolls, including a separate basket of delicious gluten-free items appreciated by the gluten-allergy sufferer in our group.

After an amuse-bouche of tender, fresh beans, we sampled Panache's signature appetizer – St. Apollinaire duck foie gras with quince and hot pepper. Chef Dumas' creation was rich, buttery, and delicate, an amazing start to what would be a memorable meal.

We were wooed by other appetizers such as Lac St. Pierre crawfish with apple and verbena, as well as a creamy egg "mollet" with corn and caraway.

The starters were cleared with friendly efficiency before we were presented with our main courses. I savoured each bite of my tender Angus beef with shallots and black elder while my gal pals dove into their halibut with porcini mushrooms and sorrel.

How we found space for a

caramel-infused apple dessert topped with oat crumble and buttermilk ice cream was a miracle. But we did, along with a well-paired iced apple cider.

Our table of three was completely impressed with Panache, from its selection of beverages to the creative dishes of Chef Dumas and his team, as well as the refined service, second to none.

The daily lunch menu at Panache is priced from \$21 while its à la carte dinner menu features dishes starting at \$35. (For a special occasion, consider the seven-course signature menu with wine pairings for \$169.)

After a short walk to take in Quebec City's beauty at night, we turned back to Le Germain-Dominion and grabbed a complimentary cappuccino in the lounge before returning to our room and drifting off in dreamy Egyptian-cotton bed linens.

The next morning, we enjoyed a fantastic continental breakfast in the hotel lobby, then took a drive near the famed Château Frontenac hotel, situated on a bluff overlooking Old Quebec.

For a finale, we set off for a stroll in Battlefields National Park. Created in 1908, the park was the site of clashes in the 1700s between British and French armies. The green space is now recognized as one of the largest and most prestigious urban parks in the world.

If you go, bring your running or walking gear to check out park trails and to counter the glorious calories you're sure to consume during your Quebec City stay.

■ **Cathy Donaldson is a Moncton-based travel and feature writer.**



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

The Citadelle, Quebec City.



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