

CHECKING IN

Three great getaways for romance in Quebec City



ROCHELLE LASH

Lovers, you're in luck.

The fabulous Carnaval de Québec winds up Feb. 15, and next week you will be able to enjoy — without crowds — the superb cuisine and intriguing history of Quebec City.

La Capitale is a romantic destination par excellence, and particularly enchanting in winter with its horse-drawn calèches and snowflakes twinkling on cobblestone streets.

You don't need the hearts and flowers of Valentine's Day. Any time is romance time at these three getaways. And they fit small, medium or large budgets.

Big heart, small budget

If you have a big heart but a teeny bank balance, HI-Auberge Internationale de Québec is the perfect solution. Modern and efficient, the auberge operates in a trio of historic buildings in Upper Town, halfway between Château Frontenac and Hôtel du Parlement.

It's not The Ritz, but if you spring for one of the 16 private rooms, you can cuddle in a secluded hideaway in a house built in 1789, the year of the French Revolution. Romantic, thrifty and historic.

The exceptional feature is the auberge's group activity calendar. If you are travelling solo and seeking company, you'll never be alone. The hostel has 29 dorm rooms, a terrific bar, a TV lounge and a communal kitchen where you can cook or prepare a picnic for an outing on the Plains of Abraham.

On the Auberge's exciting social agenda are: a pub crawl, ice skating and free guided tours, as well as excursions to Lévis via ferry and Montmorency Falls by bus.

Marketing manager Danisse Neashit also gave me a great idea for dining out. Le Bureau de Poste, a rustic bistro in the hip St. Roch district, does \$5 meals of yummy dishes such as prawns in garlic, potato skins with bacon and cheese, spicy Asian stir-fry, shepherd's pie, penne alla pesto, braised beef and salads of beet-and-chèvre.

Mid-range romance

Hôtel Le Priori, a petite bijou



The two-level suite at Hôtel Le Priori in Old Quebec has a working fireplace, a kitchenette, a queen-size bed and a private outdoor whirlpool tub on the balcony. *HÔTEL LE PRIORI*

of Old Quebec, is steps from the venerable Place Royale, where Samuel de Champlain settled in the 1600s.

Almost everything else about Le Priori is very today, including its minimalist, urban interiors and the hip bistro named Toast! It's a stylish boutique hotel with lots of deluxe features and it is one of the smallest in Quebec to have a top-level Clefs d'Or concierge who will organize museum visits, ski days and sightseeing.

Original stone and brick walls are a background to white-draped beds, and amenities such as glass showers, iPod docks and flat-screens. There are 28 rooms and suites, all enchanting hideaways, but the romantic room of choice is No. 401, a two-level junior suite with a working fireplace, a kitchenette, a queen bed and a private, outdoor whirlpool tub on the balcony.

Restaurant Toast! is marking 10 years as one of Old Quebec's most successful eateries, specializing in French-style dishes such as bison tartar, stuffed quail, foie gras, roast piglet and sweetbreads. It's a cosy space, with caramel leather seats and stone walls. In summer, the large courtyard dining area is a gorgeous and supremely romantic garden space.



A private room at HI-Auberge Internationale de Québec has charm and history for a great price. *HI-AUBERGE INTERNATIONALE DE QUÉBEC*

Posh passion

Auberge Saint-Antoine offers a big-spenders' take on romance.

The Auberge, a 95-room Relais & Châteaux and one of the top boutique hotels in Canada, is an appealing model of a new style of contemporary luxury. A marriage of rare New France artifacts and superbly designed contemporary interiors, it is a purveyor of the best of everything curated by two Clefs d'Or concierges and general manager Jean-Louis Souman.

Hey, is that the sound of Champagne popping — privately imported Champagne?

My fantasy starts in the Pan-

orama Suite (a favourite of Paul McCartney), which is prized for its mystical view of the frozen St. Lawrence River, chic and lustrous furnishings and a posh marble bathroom with indulgences such as a soaking tub and heated floors.

The hotel's gourmet dining room, Panache, embraces the warmth of a central fireplace, the aged beams of a vintage maritime warehouse and an exciting new design by two of the hotel's owners, Martha Bate-Price and her daughter, Lucy Price, who used fabrics by Pierre Frey of France.

"It's more farmhouse than fancy, more denim than velvet,"

IF YOU GO

HI-Auberge Internationale de Québec: 866-694-0950, 418-694-0755, www.aubergeinternationaledequebec.com; 19 rue Sainte-Ursule, Quebec City; dorms, \$25-\$35; private rooms, \$80-\$106, incl. tax, breakfast, Wi-Fi, TV lounge, kitchen, extensive group activities.

Hôtel Le Priori: 800-351-3992, 418-692-3992, hotel-lepriori.com; 15 rue Sault-au-Matlot, Quebec City; rooms, \$139-\$219; duplex junior suite, \$249; full suites cost more; incl. Wi-Fi, buffet breakfast. Restaurant Toast! 418-692-1334, restaurant-toast.com; from 6 nightly.

Auberge Saint-Antoine: 888-692-2211, saint-antoine.com; 8 rue Saint-Antoine, Quebec City. Pet-friendly, \$35 a day. Rooms, \$189-\$369, for two; and suites, \$499-\$1,200, including Wi-Fi, Wed. cocktail reception, jazz on Thurs.-Fri.-Sat. Prices higher May-Oct. Extras: valet parking, massages. Panache: breakfast and dinner daily; lunch on Mon.-Fri.; Sat.-Sun. brunch. Quebec City tourism: 877-783-1608, quebecregion.com.

Lucy Bate-Price said. "We mixed our signature deep red with blues and naturals. It's a youthful vibe, to match the chef's vision — he is all about simplicity."

Executive chef Louis Paquelin is only 25 and he has already wowed the critics with his French-Quebec fancies. If the way to your lover's heart is through gastronomy, consider this seductive menu: foie gras marinated in maple wine and venison with berries. Pastry chef Yves-Marie-Rolland has created Saint-Antoine's signature Paris-Brest-Québec, a rich but delicate pouf of pecan praline, maple mousse, cider-glazed apples and shortbread.

I think I'm in love.
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