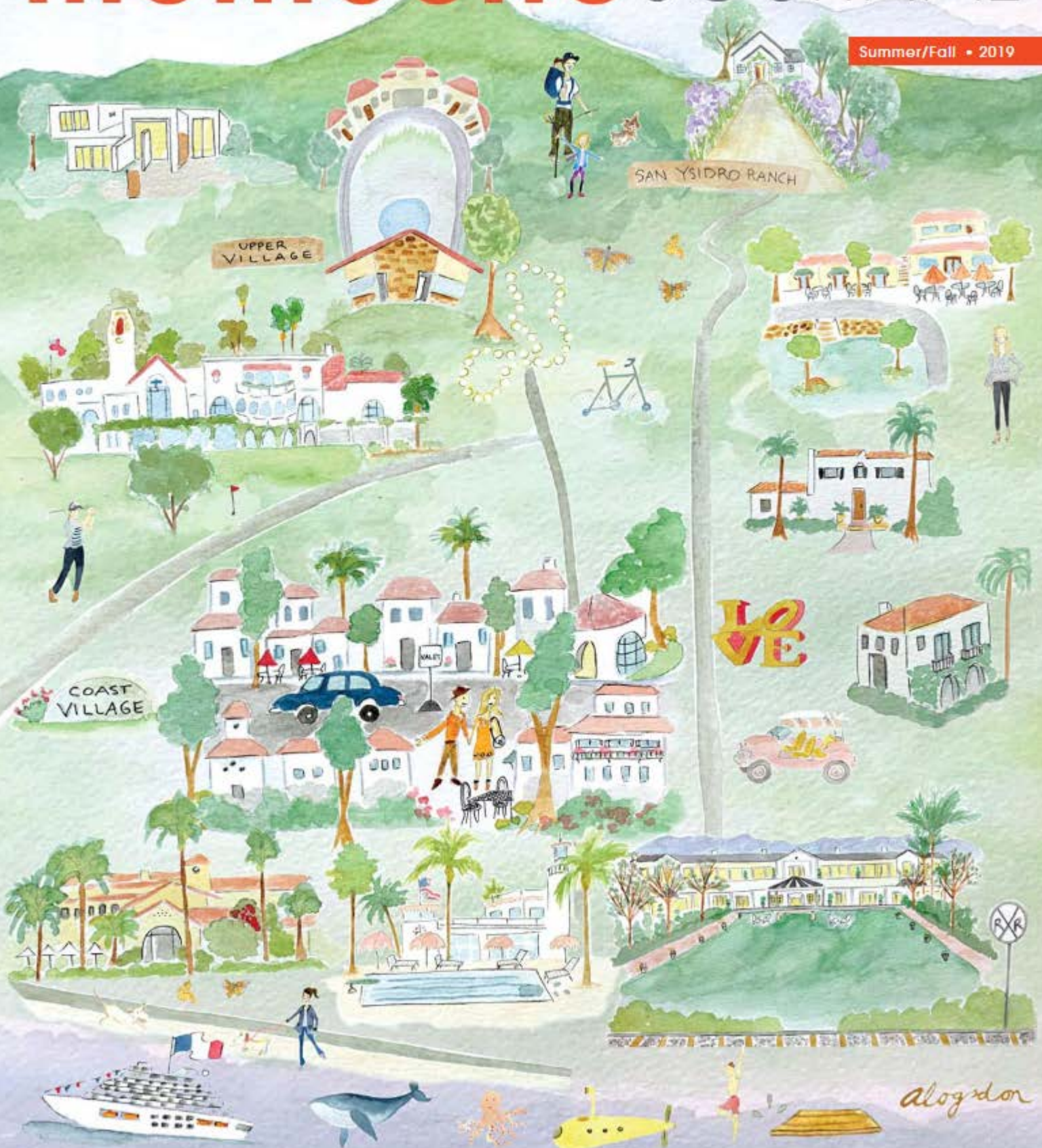


# montecito JOURNAL

Summer/Fall • 2019





# CURIOUS TRAVELER

by Jerry Camarillo Dunn, Jr.

## OLD QUÉBEC LIKE FRANCE, BUT CLOSER!

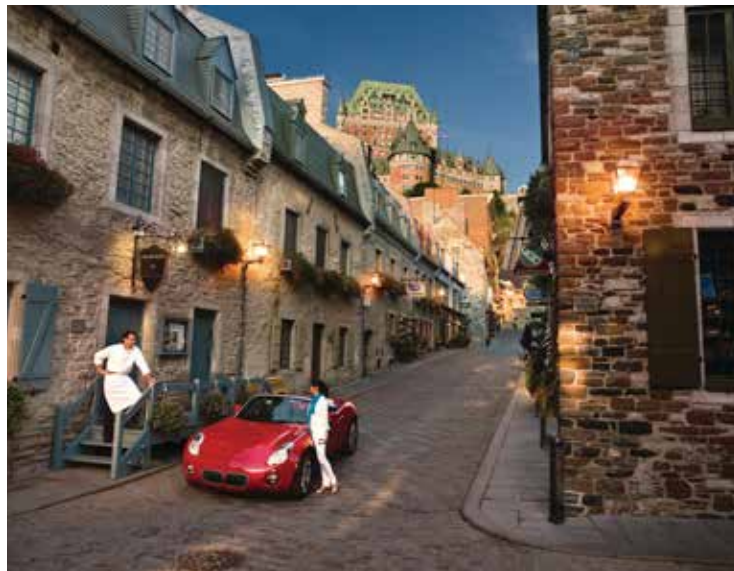
### A TRAVELOGUE

I'm in eastern Canada, where people speak French (and I don't).

Join me, *s'il vous plait*, on a *petit tour du Vieux-Québec*. (Thank you, Google Translate.)

Old Québec is an almost ridiculously romantic place. It looks more French than France.

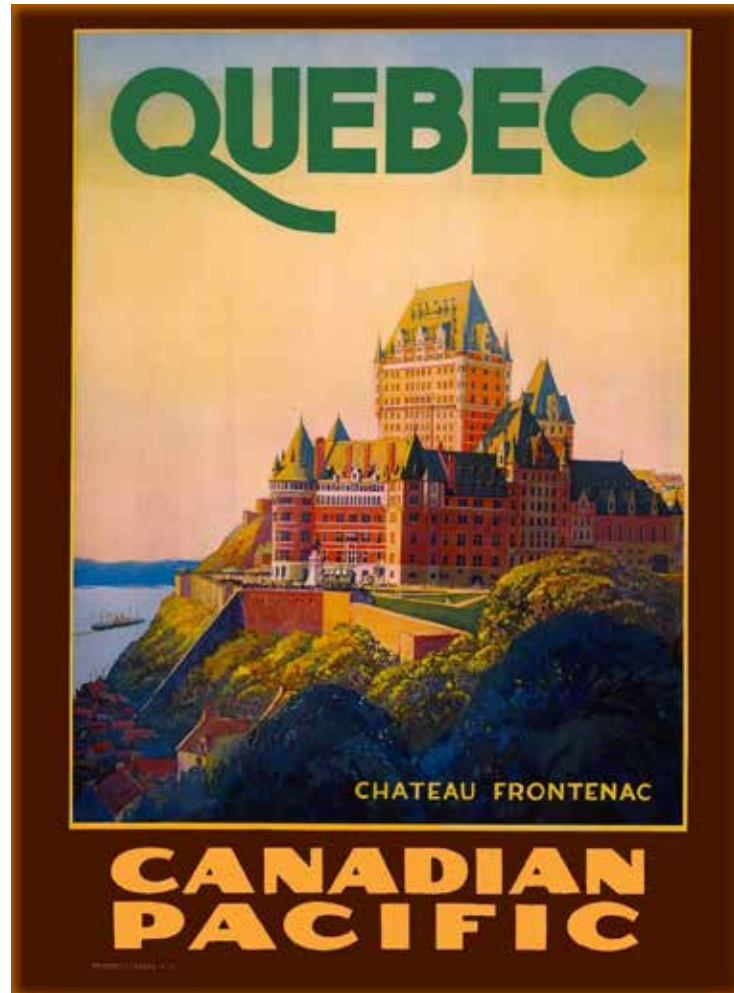
That castle-looking building on high is the world-famous Le Château Frontenac hotel, built during the 19th-century Romantic movement that was inspired by the Renaissance and Middle Ages.





Architect Bruce Price dreamed up a design both elegant and refined. (Not incidentally, he was the father of American etiquette expert Emily Post.)

Commercially speaking, the grand hotel was intended to attract railroad passengers for luxury stopovers.



Today the Château Frontenac is said to be the most photographed hotel in the world. My wife, Merry, and I dutifully did our part.



Before arriving, I had done a background check on Old Québec. Its name sounds quintessentially French but actually comes from a Native word, “kebec,” which means “narrowing of the river.” (French Canadians are much nicer than Parisians when you make a hash of their language, but here’s a tip: The first syllable of Québec is pronounced like “kay” in “Okay.”)



Québec dates back more than 400 years to a settlement founded by Samuel de Champlain. (Amazingly, this French navigator, cartographer, soldier, and diplomat made as many as 29 Atlantic crossings – in the early 1600s!) He struck a deal with the local Algonquin people that allowed him to build a small fort and trading post. This tiny enterprise was the seed of New France.

Today the site of Champlain’s settlement is occupied by the houses and shops of Place Royale. On the very spot where the city began stands Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, the oldest stone church in North America, built in 1688.

This general area is known as the Lower Town, because it’s down below the Upper Town (doh!). Just as Paris lies on the Seine, Old Québec lies on the St. Lawrence River. This historic waterway,



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sparkling in summer, choked by ice in winter, was a navigation route for early explorers like Jacques Cartier in 1535 – as, of course, we all remember (?) from sixth-grade geography.

French charm surrounded us everywhere, especially in the Quartier Petit-Champlain, the heart of the Lower Town.

But not everything in Old Québec is Old World. On a leafy street we came across a piece of contemporary public art.



A replica of the Canadian satellite Alouette appeared to have crash-landed on a parked sedan. A placard said that the piece is “a metaphor for the unfulfilled promise of scientific advancement once heralded by modernism” and that the satellite “evokes a modern-day Icarus whose blind faith in technology led to his swift demise, sending him falling back to earth.”

Right. Or maybe it’s just a really funny idea.

**THAT PIECE**, by artist Brandon Vickard, prompted us to seek out more Canadian creativity. At Québec’s Museum of Fine Arts, we discovered Jean Paul Lemieux’s masterful minimalist painting, *The Express Train* (1968).



Exploring the museum, we saw that snow and ice are common themes in this far northern land. One example: the Inuit art collection. Our favorite sculpture was a polar bear standing on its own reflection in the ice.



In the end, we came to see Old Québec itself as a work of art, particularly in the rain.

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At night, the town lights itself up in an imaginative way.

**A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE**, Old Québec is the only walled city north of Mexico. Nearly three miles of stone ramparts surround the historic core and separate it from larger, newer Québec City. The walls are pierced by strategically placed gates.



During the 18th century, the English and French fought over this part of the New World. Although the Brits won the territory in 1759, the French carried the day in important ways – language, culture, and cuisine. (Otherwise, Québec restaurants today would be serving kippers and mushy peas.)

Old Québec is now a top destination for great food, both French

Canadian and contemporary, with more than one hundred restaurants.

Whenever we dined out, our language skills served us well.

Waiter: “Madame has ordered a stuffed couch. *Oui?*”

Our first goal was to try a Québécois specialty called poutine: French fries, cheese curds, and hot gravy. A local resident, raising her eyebrows, had warned us: “Poutine is like something you eat when you’re drunk, at three in the morning!”



take pictures of their food.

Another regional dish, *pouding chômeur* or “poor man’s pudding” (literally, “unemployed pudding”), isn’t actually pudding. It is white cake layered with cream and brown sugar sauce and baked. Mine was accompanied with vanilla ice cream, thus including all the healthy major food groups.

Omnivores in Old Québec can try exotic meats from local livestock farmers, including boar, caribou, and even emu. Being

But we discovered that Old Québec offers less artery-clogging variations. At an innovative fast-food spot called Le Chic Shack, we ordered Poutine Forestière, made with roasted Yukon Gold potatoes, wild mushroom ragout, parmesan, shallots, cheese curds, and fresh herbs. A knockout for about \$10 American. I also ordered a salted maple caramel milkshake.

Like some Jekyll and Hyde character, I transformed into one of those pitiable creatures who

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vegetarian/pescatarian types, we welcomed Québec’s wild salmon and organic vegetables, creatively presented at fine restaurants such as Legende and Chez Muffy.

At contemporary Chez Boulay we split two entrees: Atlantic cod poached in vermouth, and pearl barley croquette with herbs – both accompanied by green vegetables with sweetgale (a bog shrub with fragrant leaves), pea purée, and *sauce vierge* (olive oil, lemon juice, chopped tomato, and basil). Shamelessly, we mopped up the sauce with pieces of French bread. “Your plate,” Merry observed at the end, “looks like it had no food on it, ever.”

Dessert was a profiterole ball with caramel, spice ice cream, and maple. “I just want one bite,” Merry said before I ordered. “Let me write that down,” I replied, “and have you sign it.”

**NOT SURPRISINGLY**, given its cuisine, beauty, and historic charm, Québec City is a major tourist destination. The Upper Town’s main square, the Place d’Armes, was jammed during our visit, like Disneyland on a summer day. Over a long holiday weekend, cruise ships disgorged an astonishing 56,000 passengers into the narrow streets. (Tip for travelers: Time your visit; summer and winter are busiest.)

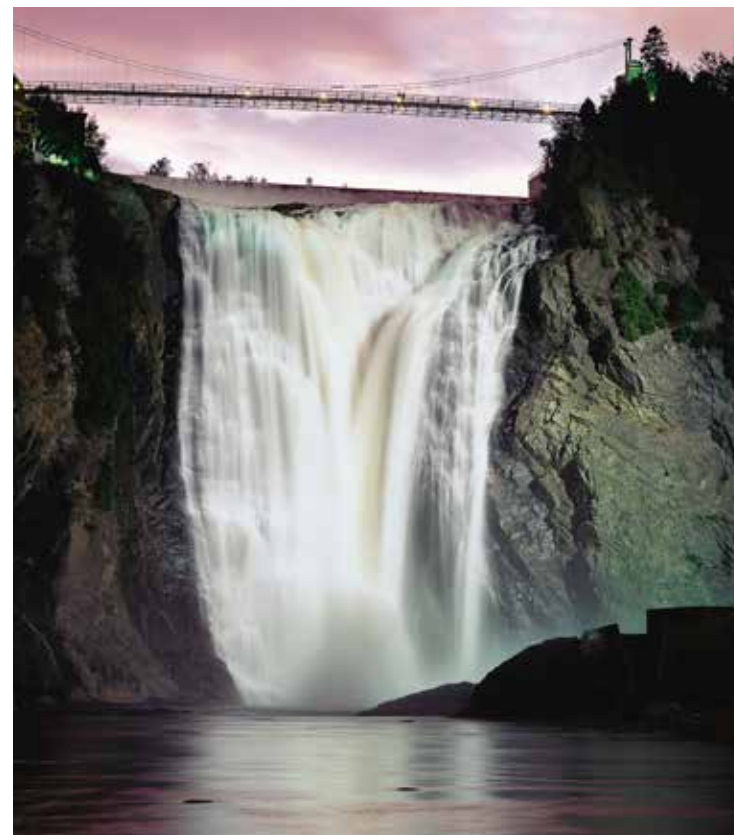
On the plus side, shops sell some excellent tourist tee shirts.



We also spotted a talented caricature artist working the sidewalk.



**ONLY EIGHT MILES** from town awaited a natural wonderland – *Parc de la Chute-Montmorency*, a waterfall that’s higher than Niagara by more than one hundred feet. We walked above the thundering cataract on a suspension bridge.



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At the bottom, locals create fleeting graffiti using logs that spill over the falls.



And in winter, experienced ice climbers find the cascade transformed into a mountain of frozen white.



In fact, winter is a huge deal in Old Québec. The *Hôtel de Glace*, made entirely of ice and snow, is the only one of its kind in North America. You can sip a cocktail in a bar at minus 5°C, sleep in a room made entirely of ice, and tie the knot in a frost-covered chapel. There's even an ice crystal chandelier.



Winter visitors to Old Québec can hurtle down a toboggan slide, 800 feet long and 200 feet high, near the Château Frontenac – turning the deep-freeze weather into fun.

Resolved: Merry and I will have to come back to Old Québec during snow season. February brings Winter Carnival, where we might visit an ice palace, watch canoes race across the frigid river, and skate amidst the twinkling magic of the old town.



## COMPASS POINTS

### STAY

**FAIRMONT LE CHÂTEAU FRONTENAC:** 1 Rue des Carrières, (418) 692-3861, reservations (866) 540-4460, <https://www.fairmont.com/frontenac-quebec>. In Upper Town, with 611 rooms and suites; famous guests from Queen Elizabeth to Paul McCartney. Spa, indoor pool, casual and gourmet dining. Rooms CAN\$189-\$599, suites CAN\$450-\$3,000.

In our tower room, my name was printed on the amenities bottles, making me feel like a prestige guest. On the TV's welcome screen, I noticed that my name was slightly jumbled, but hey, I don't speak French so good either.



In 1952, the Château Frontenac appeared as a looming noir presence in Alfred Hitchcock's highly miss-able movie *I Confess*, starring Montgomery Clift and Anne Baxter. In one scene, the two stars meet on a dock below the hotel.

To show the scale of the Château Frontenac, there are 7.5 miles of corridors and nearly 2,000 windows. (A plus: All room windows open for fresh air.) The hotel hosted crucial wartime strategy meetings in 1943 and 1944 between Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and the Canadian prime minister.

**AUBERGE SAINT-ANTOINE:** 8 Rue Saint Antoine, (418) 692-2211, [www.saint-antoine.com](http://www.saint-antoine.com). Artistic boutique hotel in the Lower Town;

95 individually designed rooms and suites, some with river views. Spa, yoga studio, Chez Muffy restaurant, archaeological artifacts displayed. Rooms CAN\$259-489, suites CAN\$560-1450.

### EAT

**CHEZ MUFFY:** 8 Rue Saint Antoine, (418) 692-1022, [www.saint-antoine.com/chez-muffy](http://www.saint-antoine.com/chez-muffy). Farm-to-fork restaurant where classical French meets Canadian cuisine in dishes such as caramelized Cipollini tart, grass-fed ribeye, Gaspé Peninsula lobster. Occupies an 1822 maritime warehouse.



**LEGENDE:** 255 Rue Saint-Paul, (418) 614-2555, <http://restaurantlegende.com/restaurant-legende-quebec-city>. Boreal (northern) cuisine; tasting menu of creative small dishes (e.g., smoked arctic char, seared venison, asparagus-carrot-goat cheese salad) with wine pairings. Cocktail menu features mix-and-match gins/vodkas and tonics.

**LE CHIC SHACK:** 15 Rue du Fort, (418) 692-1485, [lechicshack.ca/en](http://lechicshack.ca/en). Burgers, poutines, salads, shakes, homemade sodas.

**CHEZ BOULAY BISTRO:** 1110 Rue Saint-Jean, (418) 380-8166, [chezboulay.com/en](http://chezboulay.com/en). Nordic cuisine – e.g., elk, trout, vegetables, with such flavorings as elderberry flower, Labrador tea.

**PAILLARD:** 1097 Rue Saint-Jean, (418) 692-1221, <https://www.paillard.ca>. Marble-counter boulangerie, great for breakfast coffee and pastries; try Fougasse (chewy bread stuffed with olives and feta).



## DO

**GETTING THERE:** Air Canada offers one-stop service to Québec City from Los Angeles.

**VISITOR INFORMATION:** [www.quebecregion.com/en](http://www.quebecregion.com/en). Visitor center: 12 Rue Sainte-Anne.

**MUSEE NATIONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS DU QUÉBEC** (*Fine Arts Museum*): 179 Grande Allée Ouest, (418) 643-2150, [www.mnbaq.org](http://www.mnbaq.org). Historical, contemporary, Inuit, decorative arts.

## SIDE TRIP: CHARLEVOIX

On the St. Lawrence River north of Québec City lies the Charlevoix region, Canada's first resort area, with fjords, maple and birch forests, tidal flats, and bays. Its green valleys produce a gourmet's dream of foods for agritourism, ranging from cheeses and meats to a unique tomato wine (oddly, white).

We drove an hour to our first stop, the tiny village of Baie-Saint-Paul, with its arts and crafts galleries and cafés. (Recommended: Café des Artistes for La Grande Bleu pizza: bleu cheese, Grenoble walnuts, spinach.) We overnighted at Hôtel & Spa Le Germain Charlevoix, a striking collection of contemporary buildings set on farmland.

Then we headed to La Malbaie, a popular vacation spot since the 1800s, where Americans including President Howard Taft built summer



homes. Outside town we visited Champignons Charlevoix; friendly mushroom wrangler Danielle Ricard showed us how they grow oyster mushrooms (*pleurotes* in French) in a mixture of sawdust, coffee grounds, straw, and grain. We bought packets of dried mushrooms to take home for pasta and soup.

That night we stayed at Le Manoir Richelieu, a grand 1929 hotel.

With its décor of browns and dark wood, the hotel reminded me of a gentlemen's club of the last century. Before breakfast I walked a trail through the woods. Fall leaves lit the way, and below me the river rolled by – neatly summing up the lovely, rugged Charlevoix region.

## IF YOU GO

**TRAVEL INFORMATION:** [tourisme-charlevoix.com/en](http://tourisme-charlevoix.com/en).

Hôtel & Spa Le Germain Charlevoix: <https://www.legermainhotels.com/en/charlevoix>, (418) 240-4100. Urban feel in the countryside. Spa, pools, in-house dining (tip: book the breakfast package). Rooms and suites CAN\$199-\$445.

From mid-June through October, the adjacent depot is a stop for the tourist Train de Charlevoix (<http://traindecharlevoix.com>), running from Québec City to La Malbaie.

Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu (left): [fairmont.com/richelieu-charlevoix](http://fairmont.com/richelieu-charlevoix), (418) 665-3703. Elegant château hotel overlooking the St. Lawrence River, with 405 rooms and suites, 27-hole championship golf course, heated pools, casino, health club and spa, fine dining, winter sports and carriage rides. The G7 summit of world leaders was held here in 2018. Rooms and suites CAN\$250-\$2,000.



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