

In **QUEBEC, QUEBEC CITY, ROAD TRIPS, ROMANTIC GETAWAYS**

Venturing to Old Quebec City to Renew a Life of Travel

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Quebec City's rue du Petit Champlain is a historic street that is among the most attractive spots in the beautiful provincial capital. (Vacay.ca file photo)

When COVID-19 shocked us into a locked-down world of masks, hand sanitizers, and Zoom, my husband and I mollified ourselves reading "Ten-Ways-to-Travel-Without-Leaving-Home" articles. We scrapped a long-anticipated trip to Morocco, [bought a tagine and a Moroccan cookbook](#) to discover the taste of the country, hoping we didn't have to go far away to feel far away.

As travel began to become a possibility, we dreamed about our first trip. "Where will we go when all this is over?" became a frequent dinner table conversation. The pragmatist in me said, "This should be a gentle adventure that doesn't require flying or involve jet lag." The foodie hungered for a culinary experience and the romantic longed for old-world charm with a generous dollop of pampering. My husband, endorsed all three.

We drew a circle on a map that represented a day's drive from our southern Ontario home. **Quebec City** jumped out at us, although we had visited it several times.



Located in Quebec City, Auberge Saint-Antoine is part of the Relais & Châteaux association of exceptional international luxury hotels. Overlooking the St. Lawrence River, the hotel is situated just steps from some of the city's most popular tourist sites. (Anna Hobbs photo for Vacay.ca)

Two weeks later, we checked into [Auberge Saint-Antoine](#), a family-owned member of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux group. My favourite boutique hotel in the province is steeped in a rich, historic setting in Old Quebec, fused with elegance and modern amenities, and managed by owners who have perfected the art of pampering.

Seventeenth-century buildings once lined the wharf on the site. Before the Auberge was built, an archaeological dig uncovered hundreds of artifacts that had been incorporated into the walls and displayed in cabinets throughout the public spaces and 95 guest rooms.

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We arrived in time for lunch at Le Jardin, a pop-up restaurant that opened during the pandemic. "We wanted to bring the outdoors in, both with the décor and ingredients from our own three-quarter-acre garden that are at the core of the tapas-style dishes," said Guy Lombard, the hotel's general manager. Scallops and crème fraîche served with lemon jam and fine herbs and creamy foie gras accompanied by orchard apple, late harvest wine jelly, wood sorrels and brioche were two of our favourites.

Because Quebec rewarded us with near-perfect summer weather, we decided to forego museums, art galleries, and indoor attractions in favour of a self-guided tour. We wandered the Old City's jumble of cobblestone streets and squares and climbed the hills within the fortified walls.

Even more than 400 years on, Old Quebec still exudes an intimacy, perhaps enhanced by its enclosures. The North American cradle of French civilization won [UNESCO World Heritage](#) status in 1985.

Early morning, a few sidewalk cafés were serving coffee and croissants, but the streets and alleys were deserted. By noon, they became a *joie de vivre* centre, overflowing with people wandering the quaint streets, shopping, filling the cafés, and enjoying the street musicians.

The sound of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" lured us to a corner of Place Royale where I hoped to find — and serendipitously did — pianist Marc Lavigne. On a previous visit I bought his CD of romantic songs, which became an all-time favourite, until one day, it disappeared. Lavigne has been making music in the street for 40 years. "The city is very good to street musicians," he told me. As a group gathered to listen to him play "I Did It My Way," a passerby with a big voice, stopped and began to sing. In a moment, everyone chimed in. If it hadn't been for the cobblestones, we would have danced in the street.



Pianist Marc Lavigne playing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in the streets of Quebec City. (Anna Hobbs photo for Vacay.ca)

On the other side of the square, rue du Petit-Champlain, which claims to be the oldest commercial street in North America, hummed with bistros and boutiques featuring one-of-a-kind art, crafts, and fashion. Most of the population is Francophone, but the locals switch effortlessly between French and English. For this one-time Quebecer, hearing the lilting French voices once again delighted me.

We clambered up the Breakneck Stairs to get from Quartier du Petit-Champlain in Lower Town to the giddy heights of Upper Town. If you're not a fan of stairs, The Funicular will zip you to Dufferin Terrace, where a wide boardwalk overlooks the St. Lawrence River and wraps around Fairmont Le Château Frontenac. Canadian Pacific Railway built this grand, castle-like hotel in the 1800s. Today, it holds the Guinness World Record as the most photographed hotel in the world.



At the foot of the cliff below the Château Frontenac, rue du Petit Champlain offers the original character of the buildings. (Anna Hobbs photo for Vacay.ca)

Just steps away, La Citadelle is the oldest military building in the country and part of the city's fortification. It remains an active military installation as well as the second official residence of Queen Elizabeth II and the Governor General, when those dignitaries come to town.

You'll also find the Plains of Abraham, renowned as a colonial battlefield in 1759 and now as a park and the site of concerts and historical reenactments. The day we visited hundreds of people were basking in the sun, picnicking or out for a bike ride or stroll.



The Breakneck Stairs date to the beginning of the French colony in Quebec City. The 59 steps of the staircase connects côte de la Montagne to rue du Petit-Champplain. (Anna Hobbs photo for Vacay.ca)

When we couldn't walk anymore, we turned our thoughts to dinner at Chez Muffy, the Auberge's main dining room. It's in part of the building that once was a maritime warehouse. The original stone walls, planked wooden floors and low slung beams have created a warm, French-Canadian family-style atmosphere. The award-winning, four-diamond restaurant is renowned for its creative dishes featuring local produce. We knew to expect a fine-dining experience in a relaxed, intimate setting. We weren't disappointed. **[Read More: *A French Chef Brings Bistronomic Cuisine to Chez Muffy*]**

Once again, Old City Quebec spun its magic. If you've been, you know. For us, it rekindled the wonder of wandering. Merci, Quebec.

MORE ABOUT QUEBEC CITY

- For more information on must-see attractions and what's happening, year round, visit Quebec City Tourism, 399 rue Saint-Joseph or www.quebec-cite.com
- Quebec City Double Decker Express Tour, a one-hour introduction and great overview of the city. Adults \$26.99; youth \$18.99. Visit www.toursvieuxquebec.com
- For The Plains of Abraham's history that shaped the country and current attractions to appeal to the entire family, visit www.ccbn-nbc.gc.ca
- Auberge Saint-Antoine, 8 rue Saint-Antoine, 418-692-2211 www.saint-antoine.com

Quebec Tourism Website: www.bonjourquebec.com