

Elegance in exploration of Quebec



Le Manoir Richelieu in La Malbaie, in the heart of Quebec's Charlevoix region.

By Jerry Soverinsky

“The usual?” the bartender asked as I ambled up to the bar in the afternoon.

It was my second day at Le Manoir Richelieu in La Malbaie, an assuming yet accomplished tourist destination two hours east of Quebec City in the heart of the province's Charlevoix region (www.fairmont.com/richelieu-charlevoix).

I had not spent my first day wading through bottles of the locally brewed Dominus Vobiscum Blanche (a tasty Belgian-style ale); I had ordered exactly one drink the previous day, a generic draft beer.

The bartender's recollection underscores the level of intimacy and attention to detail at this nearly century-old French castle hotel, despite having more than 400 rooms.

Set atop a cliff overlooking the St. Lawrence River, the five-star hotel has amenities that offer both a fully self-contained visit and the perfect base from which to explore the regional landscape that has inspired countless painters and writers as well as U.S. President William Howard Taft, who maintained a summer residence nearby and christened the resort's award-winning golf course in 1925.

Over the past decade, the Fairmont-owned property has spent roughly \$175 million in upgrades, ensuring its facilities are all first-rate. Foodies will be spoiled for choice, with executive chef Patrick Turcot incorporating the area's finest organic products into his dishes.

For a smaller-scale alternative nearby, the L'Auberge des Falaises (www.auberge-desfalaises.com) is a cozy, family-run inn with 42 rooms divided between a main house and adjacent pavilion. Insist on a room in the pavilion, with a fireplace and balcony that offers panoramic views of the St. Lawrence. A pool and new spa house offer relaxation after a day hiking in the nearby hills. The restaurant serves savory dishes prepared with mostly local ingredients.

For uncompromising service and refinement in a boutique property, go to La Pin-

sonniere, an 18-room Relais & Chateaux hotel that delivers luxury, comfort and splendid river views (www.lapinsonniere.com). An on-site sommelier guides guests through a mesmerizing collection of more than 750 labels, a complement to the inn's sophisticated cuisine. Rooms are smartly decorated — think W Hotels meets country inn — while a tennis court, indoor pool, spa and art gallery round out the facilities. Savor a glass of port by the stone fireplace in the public living room, gazing at the hills over flowered terraces.

A tourism ringmaster

La Malbaie is also a train ride away via new, high-end rail service by way of Baie-Saint-Paul, an artist's village and birthplace of Daniel Gauthier, co-founder of Cirque du Soleil.

Gauthier has played an integral role developing tourism infrastructure in Charlevoix, especially in Baie-Saint-Paul. His Hotel La Ferme is an impeccable property combining both rural and chic in a full-service hotel (www.lemassif.com). La Ferme's five pavilions offer distinct decor and ambience in 145 rooms and lofts, a restaurant showcasing Charlevoix products, a bar-lounge, spa and gym. A multifunction venue will no doubt lure ambitious entertainment productions, with its cavernous, open-canvas design. An on-site bicycle taxi service, Charlevoix Ecomobilite, offers the opportunity to explore the town while gaining thoughtful insights from an experienced guide (www.charlevoixecomobilite.com).

Seeking a convenient link between Baie-Saint-Paul and Quebec City, Gauthier also renovated the local rail station. It now offers daily, high-speed service that hugs the coastline. The avant-garde train cars, with loft-style architecture, define luxury travel. With the help of Le Manoir Richelieu's Turcot, the train offers a peerless gastronomic experience.

Rounding out Eastern Quebec

For those visiting Charlevoix in summer, Sunday brunch hits a high note at Domaine Forget, a historical enclave located

in the coastal village of Saint-Irenee, where musicians have been performing for more than 30 years (www.domaineforget.com).

No visit to Charlevoix is complete without a whale-watching excursion, and family-run AML Cruises is the area's most experienced operator (www.croisieresaml.com). Daily departures from Baie-Sainte-Catherine take guests for up-close views of blue whales, belugas and other marine life on boats accommodating 12 to 1,000 guests.

Just 15 minutes northwest of Baie-Saint-Paul lies Emu Charlevoix, Canada's largest emu eco-farm (emeucharlevoix.com). Its shop sells pure, hydrating emu oil among a range of exclusive body products.

Capital ideas

A visit to Quebec City is essential. The city harmoniously incorporates the old and new, with a European-inspired center surrounded by a progressive city. When it comes to upscale lodging and amenities, the city sets a high bar.

Fairmont le Chateau Frontenac is

Right, a room at the Hotel Le Germain-Dominion in Quebec City's Old Port district. Below, the Auberge Saint-Antoine's Panache restaurant. The eatery had been a riverside warehouse in the 19th century.

the city's iconic property, a 618-room urban resort high atop a bluff in the historical Old City (www.fairmont.com/frontenac-quebec). Delivering elegance and comfort at every turn, Frontenac rooms offer every convenience and amenity. Several floors are reserved for Fairmont Gold members, offering enhanced amenities and services. The hotel's Le Champlain restaurant serves French and Continental dishes, while Le Cafe de la Terrasse dishes out seasonally inspired creations by Jean Soulard, the chef for Team Canada's Olympic squad in London this year.

Hotel Le Germain-Dominion is a boutique property delivering homey elegance in each of its 60 rooms (www.germain-dominion.com). The intimate, city-center property is comfortable and refined, integrating the early 20th century with the modern. A cozy lounge with a fireplace greets guests in the hotel's main level and serves a complimentary breakfast and espresso drinks. A terrace with bar service opens during summer.

Auberge Saint-Antoine, a Relais & Chateaux property, is an architectural delight carved out of the ruins — literally — of the Old City (www.saint-antoine.com). Rooms are of the highest comfort, while the Panache restaurant delivers masterful creations in a visually stunning space that formerly housed a 19th century riverside warehouse. No detail has been overlooked at this hotel-museum concept, where centuries-old artifacts from the hotel's site have been unearthed, with a unique piece gracing each room's entryway. A business center, cinema, spa and fitness room featuring weekly yoga classes round out the services at this property.

