

Auberge Saint-Antoine

Sitting cross-legged on the floor in an alcove of Cafe-Bar Artefact I'm mentally making home decorating notes. Brightly coloured plump cushions are scattered around, soft throws casually drape the lounges and flames flicker in the fireplace. The mellow live music drifting from the lounge matches my mood as I sip on the house speciality - Panache Kir made with Chambord liqueur, sparkling wine, sour cherry eau de vie and maple syrup. Although Quebec City's Auberge Saint-Antoine is the ultimate in chic, it's far more than a 5 star boutique hotel with a string of awards. With a 400 year history, it's also an archaeological site, museum, art gallery and above all it feels like 'coming home'.

When the highly respected Quebecois Price family purchased a series of derelict historical buildings in 1988 they ignored local scepticism and set about building their dream hotel. Soon after excavation began, the site became a treasure trove of rare artefacts spanning four centuries of the city. Recognised as a find of mammoth proportions, the Prices happily delayed construction plans for several years collaborating with archaeologists to unearth and preserve 5000 pieces including French glass flasks, brass lock escutcheons, snuff bottles, porcelain, coins and cannon

balls. In 1992 the Saint-Antoine opened with 23 guest rooms and a further 72 rooms by 2003.

Today more than 700 artefacts are lovingly displayed in glass cabinets throughout the hotel. Arranged according to object, colouration or era, the lighting within each cabinet changes regularly from soft pinks through to vibrant blues giving a different perspective to the pieces. It's difficult to pass by any cabinet without becoming engrossed. Who smoked the decorative three-headed clay pipe? How did the owner of the layered leather soled shoes walk in the snow? What lay behind the door the big iron key opened?

With names such as: Secrets, Dreams, Amber, Autumn Colours and Mother Goose, each guest room is also designed around an artefact. The precious fragment sits proudly in a small glass box to fit in with the style of the room and a replica is on the outside beside the room number. Named after a pressed glass dish, my boudoir, the Amethyst Room has all the expected luxuries and is also full of surprising 'cocoon like' intimate spaces. The piece de resistance is stepping through the arched French doors onto a balcony with views of both the St Lawrence River and the skyline of this chocolate box UNESCO listed village. Blending the outside

with the in, the old with the new is the signature of this beautiful hotel. Nowhere is this more spectacular than the Panache restaurant.

Exposed beams, stone walls, central fireplace – Panache, like everything else, has been restored with style. Light streams through the French windows overlooking the river, a pretty wrought iron staircase winds up to the mezzanine floor and the plush dining chairs are made for lingering. With impeccable service, ingredients from local producers and their own garden on the nearby idyllic Ile d'Orleans, the menu is seasonal and highly creative. After delicacies such as French toast with apple butter and poached pears for breakfast, the finest foie gras with grapes for lunch and baked halibut with lentils and orange sauce for dinner, it's lucky 'Le Gym' is onsite.

Leaving Saint-Antoine is difficult. Clutching the parting 'surprise' bag of home made cookies and sweets I envy a small group of friends checking in. Seeing the excitement on their faces as the desk staff welcomes them 'home', I know exactly how they are feeling. •

[@] <http://www.saint-antoine.com>

Author Jocelyn Pride was a guest of Canadian Tourist Commission.

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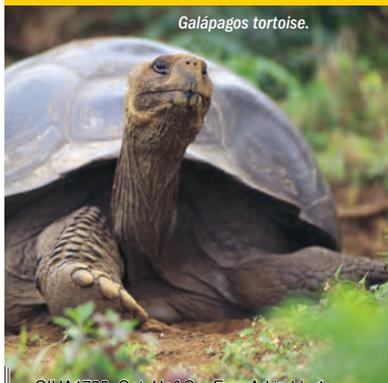
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