

# Quebec City's Archaeological Hotel Digs History



Quebec City's historic center has two levels: the upper plateau first selected for settlement by the French military in the early 17th century for its strategic defense overlooking the St Lawrence River. Following the British takeover of the colony of Québec in 1759, merchants moved in and gradually built warehouses, business headquarters and port facilities to support flourishing trade along the river. In the 19th century, Quebec City became one of the five most important shipping ports in the world, the gateway to North America's interior, with the lower level or Le Vieux-Port (The Old Port) the main focus of activity.

Fast forward to the past two decades where Le Vieux-Port has transformed into a mecca for vacationers with the birth of thematic museums, quaint churches, colorful public markets, and European-style indoor/outdoor restaurants. These features complement an intriguing range of historic accommodations, some originally designed as simple hostels or inns, a few recently transformed from bygone warehouses and business buildings into distinctive family-owned and managed auberges.



[Auberge Saint-Antoine](#) with 95 rooms and luxury suites is a thematically elegant part of Le Vieux-Port with guests embarking on an historic adventure just by choosing to stay there. Built on one of Québec City's richest archaeological sites, the inn integrates three heritage buildings of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as a former wharf and defense structure dating from the late 17th century. It is owned by the Price family who has their own impressive merchant association with Québec City proudly spanning nearly 200 years and six generations. They have certainly captured the inn's atmosphere with the adopted phrase, *Passé plus que parfait .... Past Perfect!*

Walk through the front entrance and the reception desk is framed with weathered oak planks from the original dock, buried and perfectly preserved under mud for centuries. Spacious public areas are flanked with museum-quality recessed showcases of artefacts labelled by occupation level, assembling intriguing collections of discarded or lost pipes, military hardware, eyeglasses and fragments of fine table china or brilliantly-colored glass. Each guest room has an adopted artefact for its theme. My room, 504, was La Chambre du Tailleur, announced by an excavated button in a framed lightbox, telling the story of a tailor who worked in a shop there in the mid-1800s. The experience is all the more vivid because each

of the 700-plus artefacts displayed throughout the inn was retrieved right there!



Always with a vision of creating a luxury archaeological hotel, the Price family patiently waited for years while archaeologists combed the vast site to retrieve four centuries of treasures before beginning construction and restoration of buildings. Partnering with the Québec Ministry of Culture and the city government, the family donated all artefacts to the city which in turn loans them back to Auberge Saint-Antoine on a permanent basis.

Purchased in 1990 as an adjacent abandoned maritime warehouse, the inn's award-winning Panache Restaurant overlooking the St Lawrence River features centuries-old knotted pine floors, original brick walls and massive wood beams meticulously restored to preserve another piece of Québec's heritage. Continuing the heritage theme, the menu also features traditional French Canadian cuisine, and even the table china is a re-creation of designs excavated from the site.



A more casual eatery and bar in the inn, Café Artefact, needs no paintings to decorate its walls. Colorfully-arranged displays of archaeological finds from different centuries complement my own favorite treasure set into its own cave-like café wall. It is a small, heavily-worn Pierrier cannon, one of only two original French cannons still in Québec City. In a city where cannons are everywhere, almost all are British, two are Russian, and this one of only two remaining French cannons was excavated right under the Saint-Antoine!

In the November 2008 issue of Condé Nast Traveler magazine, Auberge Saint-Antoine, a Relais & Châteaux property, was ranked by readers as the 2nd best hotel in Canada. In the 2009 edition of Expedia Insiders' Select List travelers rated it 35th best hotel in the world out of 30,000 properties.

**Quebec City: The Third Best Destination**

There are only three urban centers in North America that have been designated as UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Sites: San Juan, Puerto Rico; Lunenburg, Nova Scotia; and Québec City which has the further distinction of being the only present-day fortified city north of Mexico. By North American standards it is one of the continent's oldest European settlements with many layers and styles of occupation telling tales of 400 years of occupation. In 2009, the readers of elite US travel magazine, Travel + Leisure, voted Quebec City as the 3rd best tourist destination in North America.

By **Alison Gardner**

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