

TRAVEL

An ice hotel, a First Nation immersion and centuries of the picturesque city’s history

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I had a Ski-Doo Accident shortly before I bedded down in a spectacular subzero spaceship made entirely of ice and snow. That’s the cold truth.

Actually, I wrapped my mittened hands around the Ski-Doo Accident, which is the snappy name of a gin cocktail served over carved ice in the neon-glowing ice bar of Hotel de Glace in Quebec. I needed the bone-warmer because I’d soon fight with my arctic sleeping bag inside my fantastical, frigid, Jules Verne-themed room in North America’s only ice hotel.

The wintry, whimsical Hotel de Glace (Ice Hotel in French) knocked my thermal socks off with its creativity, but it was just part of my superb stay in and around enchanting Quebec City. Another evening, about 20 minutes from the polar palace, I crafted a “talking stick” with a First Nation elder, then curled up again in a heavy sleeping bag to spend a night alone in a traditional Indigenous longhouse after being regaled with tribal myths. A couple of days earlier, I explored the 400-year-old cobblestone streets and ramparts of European-style Old Quebec, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that includes a castlelike hotel where you can snooze in the Princess Grace of Monaco Suite beside her plastic-rimmed eyeglasses and size 6 ½ white Hermes gloves.

Oui! Oui! I highly recommend my Quebec journey, which combined history, culture, glamour, thrills (you’ll shriek zipping down a toboggan slide from 1884) and French Canadian pizzazz (everyone I met also spoke English and, merci beaucoup, was extremely helpful).

Baby, it’s cold inside

Frozen, ancient deities — including Nyx, Greek goddess of the night, and Morpheus, Greek god of dreams — icily stared at me alongside crystalline Ionic columns in the ethereal, Hellenic-motif lobby of Hotel de Glace. Were they cursing me with insomnia? From there, I clomped in my snow boots through a colorfully lit chamber of inanimate Parisian revelers; high-kicking can-can girls danced on the rose-hued wall leading to the chill bar and lounge.

Every brrrrr-eathtaking inch is sculpted ice or snow in this astounding, 46,000-square-foot hotel, annually open from early January to mid-March; wear your puffy parka because the inside air hovers around a nippy 23 degrees. Now in its 23rd year, the architectural marvel is rebuilt from scratch in late winter (always debuting new décor) and demolished in spring. This season features 30 bedrooms, 22 themed.

Although day visitors can tour the entire property (passes are about \$22 U.S.), braver folks hunker down until morning. Ice accommodations start at \$298 and include a regular heated room across the way at Hotel Valcartier for luggage, showers and potentially bailing out. Along with fellow guests, I attended a “mandatory training session” — the crucial fashion tip was no cotton, and wear thin layers so you don’t perspire, which makes you cold in your sleeping bag. (Note: I wasn’t a total newbie — years ago I survived a night in an ice hotel in Finland.)

My stellar Jules Verne suite was a glacial galaxy, bathed in red and blue mood lights and emulating the 19th-century French author who wrote about wild travels to the moon. I was both inside an extraterrestrial vessel and another world, surrounded by illuminated moon craters, coral-like flora, planets, a rocket, three astronauts and portholes peering out at stars and Saturn. There was pin-drop silence.

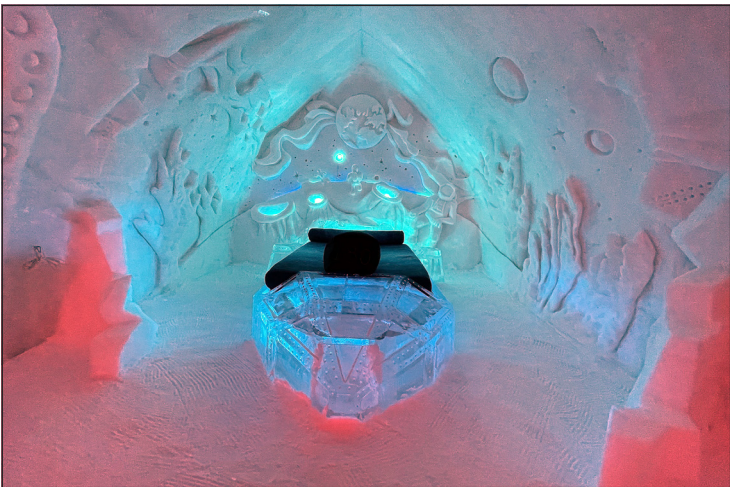
To prep for bed, I sat on my (damp) covered mattress, which was atop an ice spaceship, and reached to put my phone on the end table before I clumsily stuck my foot to the frostbiting floor while changing into nonsweaty clean socks. Then I lay out flat, wiggled accidentally backwards into the hooded fleece mummy bag and after that squirmed into a cocooning North Face sleeping bag I next futilely tussled with because (brain freeze) I had the hood, neck velcro and zipper turned around. Somehow I stripped to my thermals and beanie and then nearly fell off the bed in my body bags while leaning over to stuff my weighty clothes in a sack on the ground.

A bonus was my room had a



Beware of sleepwalking in Quebec’s wintry Hotel de Glace — all kinds of creatures await in its hallways fancifully carved from ice.

Quebec, THROUGH TIME AND TEMP



The elaborate ice carvings of the Hotel de Glace extend to rooms like this one, with its Jules Verne theme and arctic-grade sleeping bag.



A teenage storyteller sings and recounts legends of the Indigenous Wendat tribe before it’s bedtime in a traditional longhouse.



Quebec City’s old quarter is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a charming, European-style destination in Canada.



Fun-seekers still zoom down the wooden toboggan run built in 1884 on Dufferin Terrace in Old Quebec.

briefly kindled fireplace for looks but not warmth (it would melt my luxury igloo), so I blissfully watched the flickering flames and savored how extraordinary it was being in this once-in-a-lifetime icy cosmos. Eventually I drifted off, feeling wonderfully toasty. I swear, it was the best sleep I’d had in months!

Immersed with the Huron-Wendat Nation

Funny that I love to gab because a patient Indigenous woman, Francine, was teaching me to make a talking stick, still used after thousands of years in tribal councils. Whoever holds the adorned branch is the only one who can speak and must be respected. The first symbol wrapped around the stick, a swath of deer leather, represented the Deer Clan, known for diplomacy. Wood beads I strung were the four colors of the medicine wheel. As I tied on a tiny tobacco pouch, Francine noted that smoking gave men intuition that women already had.

The Huron-Wendat are First Nation people and I was delving into their rich culture at a unique complex: the Hotel-Musee Premieres Nation on the banks of the Akiawenrahk River. Under one roof is

a contemporary-earthly, 55-room lodge (adorned with dreamcatchers and Indigenous artwork), an impressive museum, storytelling sessions, craft workshops and a fine-dining restaurant. I admit I was slightly taken aback when I saw coyote pelts, with legs and faces, draped over the lobby couches. Centuries ago, the Wendats were savvy fur traders; the pelts also kept them alive during brutal winters.

After dark, I walked in a dazzling forest. A short drive from the hotel is Onhwa’ Lumina, a multimedia, hourlong amble through woods and Wendat culture.

When I returned to the hotel, it was almost my bedtime in the adjacent, isolated Ekionkiestha’ National Longhouse, a replica of the rustic Wendat dwellings in pre-colonial days before 1534. (If you can’t tough it out, a longhouse stay comes with a Premieres Nation hotel room, from \$370 per person including some meals and perks.)

The dirt-floored longhouse was 60 feet in length, its rudimentary interior constructed from ash and cedar trees, with three fires for heat and about 20 coyote and black bear pelts laid across 12 shelf-like bunks accessible by small ladders, and potentially sleeping 30 people. I had

the place all to myself.

As I sat on a log, 17-year-old Diego, a drum-beating, traditionally dressed Turtle Clan storyteller, theatrically recounted myths and legends about grandmas, constellations and the Sky World. Lastly, he sang a Wendat lullaby. Then I had him remove the bearskin from my cubicle before I climbed into my sleeping bag atop a reed mat, and amazingly traveled back 1,000 years.

The birthplace of French North America

My first view of Old Quebec was from my seventh-floor room in the storied Le Capitole Hotel. Below, the historic district of Quebec City looked like a tabletop Christmas village of quaint, European, snowy-roofed buildings.

Old Quebec is the most intact fortified town north of Mexico, encircled by defensive stone walls from its 1608 French founding and the 18th-century takeover by the British. Totally walkable, it’s got cannons; a cliffside funicular; 400-year-old, picturesque, boutique-lined lanes; and more. I lingered outside the Catholic church in the oldest plaza, a cin-

ematic stand-in for France when Tom Hanks arrested Leonardo DiCaprio at the end of “Catch Me if You Can.”

One morning, I felt oddly serene touring the Augustinian Monastery, which was North America’s first hospital, started in 1639 by trailblazing French nuns. The excellent museum displays 1,000 of the sisters’ artifacts, even their centuries-old surgical tools.

By far, the show-stopping landmark is Fairmont’s Le Chateau Frontenac, a 610-room, iconic hotel that opened in 1893 and resembles an exquisite, medieval fairy tale castle. If only the turreted towers could talk. During World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt and Britain’s Winston Churchill met there to plan the D-Day invasion. Some classy suites are themed for illustrious prior guests, such as Queen Elizabeth II. I peeked at the late Princess Grace’s hideaway — overnighting subjects can sit in her high-backed, gold velvet chair, sleep under the leaf collages she made, and ogle her encased personal belongings, such as three pairs of eyeglasses.

Now you know why Quebec had me at “Bonjour.”