

Quebec City's old town

By Emily McAuliffe





If you find the persistent hustle of big-city travel exhausting, pull out your walking shoes and slow the pace in Quebec City's picturesque old town. Brimming with history, this Canadian gem combines European elegance with fairytale-like romance, and it's likely to steal your heart.

Walking beneath the arch of the famous walls that enclose Quebec City's World Heritage-listed old town, you quickly notice how unified everything looks. It's as though every building, lamppost and cobblestone has been carefully positioned to ensure that nothing is jarring on the eye – even the shop signs are coordinated.

This is a place proud of its European roots – it was once a part of New France – and French remains Quebec's official language. Despite hoteliers in nearby Montreal often warning that Québécois are not always obliging to non-French speaking tourists, the people are nothing but hospitable, and are most willing to switch to English after a friendly greeting of 'bonjour'.

As wait staff stocks the shelves of boutique cafés with fresh baguettes and croissants, you could easily believe that you're in France, but maple leaves fluttering to the ground serve as a gentle reminder of the city's location. This is a unique part of Canada, and it's this uniqueness that will have you hooked.

A rich history

Quebec City played a key role in the European settlement of the Americas, and remains the only fortified city in North America. It was founded by French explorer Samuel de Champlain in 1608, who named the city the capital of New France – it succumbed to British rule in 1759.

Major sites of historical interest are scattered within walking distance throughout the old city, and the Citadel of Quebec is one of the most prominent. This star-shaped military structure forms part of the city's fortification, and its high vantage point on the hill overlooking the city served as a strategic means of defending the city from invasion in the 1700s. As you gaze up from the deep-cut bitumen roads at the cannons aimed downriver, it's easy to appreciate the structure's tumultuous past.

Back in town, a comprehensive overview of Quebec City's military history is offered at Musée du Fort. This small museum includes a model of the city and its surrounds, and runs a 30-minute multimedia show to explain the battles fought in Quebec.

But even if you don't set foot in a museum, the past is so cleverly embedded throughout the city by way of plaques, statues and historical remnants that it's near

impossible to leave without appreciating Quebec City's old tale.

A wanderer's dream

Strolling the streets of old Quebec is easily the best way to experience the city's gentle hum. The old region is divided into the upper and lower towns: the Upper Town is where you'll find relics of defensive works, including the Citadel, while the Lower Town includes the Place Royale – a public area characterised by elegant stone architecture, and Quebec City's harbour.

A funicular connects the upper and lower parts of the town, but if you need to work off a few croissants, you can tackle the L'Escalier Casse-Cou, or 'breakneck steps'. As the name suggests, it's a steep descent, but once you reach the quaint streets below there are plenty of places to catch your breath.

Upper town near Citadel and Plains of Abraham.
Image courtesy Emily McAuliffe





Governors' Walkway – Promenade.
Image courtesy Emily McAuliffe

This includes the cafés along Petit Champlain, the oldest commercial street in North America, which was rated Canada's top street to visit in 2013. Madame Gigi's is known for its macarons, so it's worthwhile pulling up a chair here and watching the crowds pass by. With a perfect balance between timeless European style and an energetic contemporary vibe, the street is deserving of its number one ranking.

After a pit stop, you can browse the shops and pick up authentic souvenirs at Galerie d'Art Petit Champlain, and for something different, indulge in donkey milk skincare products at Shamâne.

The Upper Town is also good for retail therapy, particularly along Rue De Buade. Here, boutique shops line the street, including the upscale fashion store La Maison Darlington, which is renowned for its fine woollen garments and is one of the oldest boutiques in Quebec. And the nearby Quebec Christmas Boutique keeps the festive spirit alive all year round with its ornate decorations and nativity scenes.

Further along Rue de Buade is the Cathedral Basilica of Notre-Dame de Quebec, which is worth a look despite its fairly nondescript exterior. Stepping

through its doors, you are struck by the church's elaborate archways and intricately decorated walls, while natural light filtering through the high stained-glass windows illuminates the red-carpeted altar and gold statues that encircle it.

You can also admire beauty outdoors by heading towards the river from the Upper Town, and strolling along the wide wooden Governors' Walkway. The promenade stretches 655 metres alongside the Saint Lawrence River, and offers spectacular views across the blue-grey water. The boardwalk is lined with gazebos where Canadian flags flap proudly from the spires, and green wrought-iron detail matches the tiled roof of the Chateau Frontenac – arguably Quebec City's most recognisable building.

The recently renovated Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac opened in 1893, and with its grand stature and turrets, it looks fit to house a Disney princess. Even if you're not staying at the hotel, it's worthwhile visiting for its opulent gold foyer and high-class retail outlets.

Foodie delights

The province of Quebec is celebrated for its produce, and Quebec's old city is a gastronome's heaven. For breakfast, head to the slightly tucked away Chez Temporal, which is touted as one of the best coffee spots in the city, and serves warm croissants to a stream of locals who linger over the morning paper before setting off for the day.

A visit to the Canadian Maple Delights Gourmet Bistro and Shoppe is also a must, because this is Canada, after all. Along with a broad range of maple products, including vinegars, chocolates and spreads, you'll find a museum that explains the history of maple production in Quebec through signage and historical photos pinned to tree-shaped pillars.

A block down from the maple store is Le Patriarche, one of three Quebec City restaurants given a prestigious five-diamond rating under a classification scheme that recognises high-end restaurants across Canada and the United States.

In a building constructed in 1827, Le Patriarche prides itself on its use of local products, with around 80 per cent of its produce sourced from the province of Quebec.

The restaurant's signature style is in presenting dishes as a trio. This means that each dish focuses on a key ingredient, such as partridge or halibut, which is then served three ways. With a glass of expertly matched wine poured proudly by the wait staff, Le Patriarche certainly knows how to create a memorable fine-dining experience.

If you're interested in having a professional guide talk you through the city's top foodie spots, Le Patriarche and Canadian Maple Delights are both visited as part of the Tours Voir Quebec food tour.

And after all that food, you'll be ready to experience the endless joy of just ambling through the narrow streets and soaking it all in. As locals dart in and out of shops around you with a nonchalance that suggests the beauty of their surrounds is all but a way of life, you realise this place can engulf you with its charm – and we'd advise you to let it do just that. ●

Further information:

- Citadel de Quebec – 418 694 2815
- Musée du Fort – 10 Rue Sainte-Anne; 418 692 2175; www.museedufort.com
- Madame Gigi Confiserie – 84 Rue du Petit-Champlain; 418 694 2269
- Galerie d'Art du Petit-Champlain – 88 Rue du Petit-Champlain; 418 692 2113
- Shamâne – 70 Boulevard Champlain; 418 638 1264; www.sharmanecosmetiques.com
- La Darlington Maison – 7 Rue de Buade Quebec Christmas Boutique – 47 Rue de Buade; 418 692 2457
- Cathedral Basilica of Notre-Dame de Quebec – 20 Rue de Baude
- Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac – 1 Rue des Carrières; 418 692 3861 www.fairmont.com/frontenac-quebec
- Chez Temporal – 25 Rue Couillard
- Canadian Maple Delights Gourmet Bistro and Shoppe – 1044 Rue Saint-Jean; 418 692 3245; www.mapledelights.com
- Le Patriarche – 17 Rue Saint Stanislas; 418 692 5488; www.lepatriarche.com
- Tours Voir Quebec – 1 866 694-2001; www.toursvoirquebec.com/en/our-tours-the-food-tour