

# Nighty night on ice

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By ALISON GREGOR. Special to Newsday

It's the stuff romantic dreams are made of: A crystalline cavern of glittering ice looms over a softly glowing frosty bed blanketed in deer pelts - but would you actually want to sleep in it?

That's what we set out to discover as we headed to the ice hotel in Ste.-Catherine-de-la-Jacques Cartier, Canada, just west of Québec City, a rather unassuming, forested resort setting for one of North America's true spectacles.

First built in 2000, the Ice Hotel Québec has become an annual ritual, meticulously crafted each year by about 20 of the world's finest ice sculptors. It is typically open in early January through April - when the building starts to melt - offering about three dozen rooms to adventurous visitors.

We arrived with a battery of questions from friends curious about the hotel. Is it pitch black at night? Do the pipes freeze? What if, God forbid, you drool in bed? We quickly found out that the 30,000-square-foot structure, which includes a grand entrance hall, ice bar, cafe, art galleries and wedding chapel, all lighted to elegant and eerie effect, is stunning, but that logistics also make up a large part of one's stay. And being well-clothed is important.

There's a reason staff members, who conduct daily tours of the hotel from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., call sleeping in it a "once-in-a-lifetime experience."

With room temperatures hovering between 23 and 26.6 degrees, most visitors might choose not to do it twice.

One nice thing about the ice hotel: you can book a room for escape for minimal extra expense in a nearby non-ice hotel if things get too frigid, and you can shower there in the morning. And incorporated even closer by into the ice hotel structure itself are heated changing rooms and toilets - though no showers - where one desperately cold lodger spent the night during our stay.

The ice hotel is at the Station Touristique Duchesnay, which offers activities such as snowmobiling, skating, ice fishing and cross-country skiing, all of which are open to guests seeking the Arctic "mode de vie." After an invigorating dog-sled ride, we attended a required half-hour orientation at the ice hotel. We learned how to sleep in ice, from the type of clothing necessary to suggested pre-slumber activity to raise body temperature to how to assemble our sleeping bags, which are provided by the hotel and resist temperatures of -22 degrees. For those familiar with snow camping, this is nothing new. For neophytes, you might want to bring a notepad.

We then spent a good amount of time forgetting what we'd learned in the hotel's ice bar, where we each received a complimentary vodka cocktail in frost-caked mugs of ice and practically basked in chilliness, if that's possible. The bar, which holds 400, is lined by magnificently carved ice booths with pelt-strewn seats. Theatrically placed lights of shifting colors

illuminate the crystalline ice columns supporting the Gothic vaulted ceilings.

An ice chandelier, visible from the bar in the grand hall, weighs about 300 pounds and is illuminated by colorful fiber optics, which don't emanate heat.

Unfortunately, early in the season, weather depending, the entire hotel is often not finished. There were only about a dozen rooms carved during our stay, and creation of the wedding chapel, where about 30 nuptials are held each year, had not even begun.

After we'd had a hearty dinner at the nearby restaurant (not made of ice) and the day tourists had cleared out of the hotel, it was time to retire. The beds in each room are hollowed blocks of ice with spectacular lighting within, and a light switch conveniently located in the frame.

Our bedroom, one of three designed by local university students aspiring to be architects, had a flora theme of leaves and ferns frozen in cubes of ice.

All bedrooms are unique, and some have wood-burning stoves, specially designed to reduce heat emission. The bridal suite this year is embellished with a giant carved bear and has access to a private hot tub.

In all rooms, each bed has a thick mattress pad covered by pelts, and sleeping bags to unroll on top. In our room, frozen nightstands each had a candle burning in an ice holder when we arrived at 9 p.m. to begin the process of going to bed. This process demands a soak in one of three Jacuzzis incorporated into the ice hotel, followed by a sauna to dry off.



By morning, our candles had gone out and the ice holders had melted into jagged lumps. Our noses, the only body part exposed, were a little frosty, but we were in good humor after a night of deep sleep. We joked that the ice hotel is the only place where the maids show up with chain saws each day to prepare for new guests. But, in actuality, staff members show up with steaming mugs of hot chocolate or tea and coffee, to ease away the kinks of sleeping on ice all night.

#### A hot booking

Booking a night in the Ice Hotel Québec is easy, though for some of the more elaborate rooms, people do it a year in advance. In fact, those with extensive and intricate fantasies when it comes to their ice accommodations can even make advance requests.

"Everything is possible," said Nathaniel Bourbonnais, a tour guide in the hotel, "if you make the request early enough. "

For the average visitor, it is a good idea to make reservations before the season. We purchased the Winter Adventure package, which included dog sledding and a "theme" room. We ended up paying about \$505 each, when all was said and done, including taxes, for a Sunday night stay at the hotel.

Besides a bejeweled gem of a room, the package included dinner and breakfast, a cocktail, dog sledding, a breakfast beverage, and all accoutrements necessary to survive the night in an ice hotel. More information is available at [icehotel-canada.com](http://icehotel-canada.com) or 877-505-0423.