

The walled city has always been a happening town. Now, it's pulling out all the stops for its **400TH ANNIVERSARY**

Because Québec City is so terrific, it doesn't really need roaming costumed opera singers, fireworks, a floating dance floor the size of Kansas, an 1,800-foot-long multimedia screen, more fireworks, the World Hockey Championships, parades of giant characters and a custom-made grand finale brought to you by the fabulously curious minds behind Cirque du Soleil.

It already had poutine and the Winter Carnival.

But 2008 is Québec City's 400th birthday. They had to do something...

Meanwhile, Sam de Champlain is off his pedestal.

Instead of standing heroically in the shadow of the iconic Château Frontenac, the statue of the Frenchman who dropped anchor here on July 3, 1608, and founded what would become Québec City, is in the shop for a touch-up. And le Château is getting a tuck.

There's a lot of that going around.

"You might have noticed," said Roxanne St-Pierre, party spokeswoman, "the whole city is under construction right now?" A mischievous grin.

In all of North America, even when nothing's planned, there's no place quite like Québec City, mainly because there is no place in North America that can pass for European as genuinely as Québec City. Streets properly twist and confuse. Back streets invite exploration. Its clapping horse-buggies seem appropriate, even if tour bus fumes clash with horse fumes. Shops and inns look as if they've been here for centuries, and some of them have.

It's a city of galleries and churches and a colorful farmer's market, of street singers (many startlingly wonderful) and enough authentic restaurants to satisfy anyone's culinary curiosi-

Festival, others — for years have provided added visitor incentive, along with the odd Picasso exhibition at the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec.

And there have been big parties here before.

Québecers remember 1984, when the 450th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's exploration of the St. Lawrence River triumphantly lured a parade of Tall Ships here from far reaches.

That party was a pooper.

"People from all over the world were scared to come to Québec City because we told them it was going to be so crowd-

ed and full in every hotel," said Francois Bedard, rooms division manager at the city's Hotel Manoir Victoria. "So nobody came."

Which brings us to plans for Québec City's 400th Anniversary. Québecer Danny Pelchat is executive producer of a succession of special events that, through Oct. 19, will mark the birthday. Pelchat was a founding member of Cirque du Soleil and its general manager for 17 years before leaving the company in 2001.

If you have never seen a Cirque show, suffice to say it is a mostly gentle, but sometimes not, assault on the senses, a mix

of light, sound, color, acrobatics and whimsy. This won't be all Cirque. What Pelchat intends to do is bring spectacle to Québec City, and for that, he'll draw from sources that range from Cirque to European street theater to whatever tells the story best in a walled city on the St. Lawrence River. Some attractions will be anchored in a new, many-purpose venue called Espace 400e; much will be all over town.

"There are two ways to do show business," he said. "You take risks, or you don't take risks. If you don't take risks, you do middle-of-the-road shows. Which works. That's

Night night on ice

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

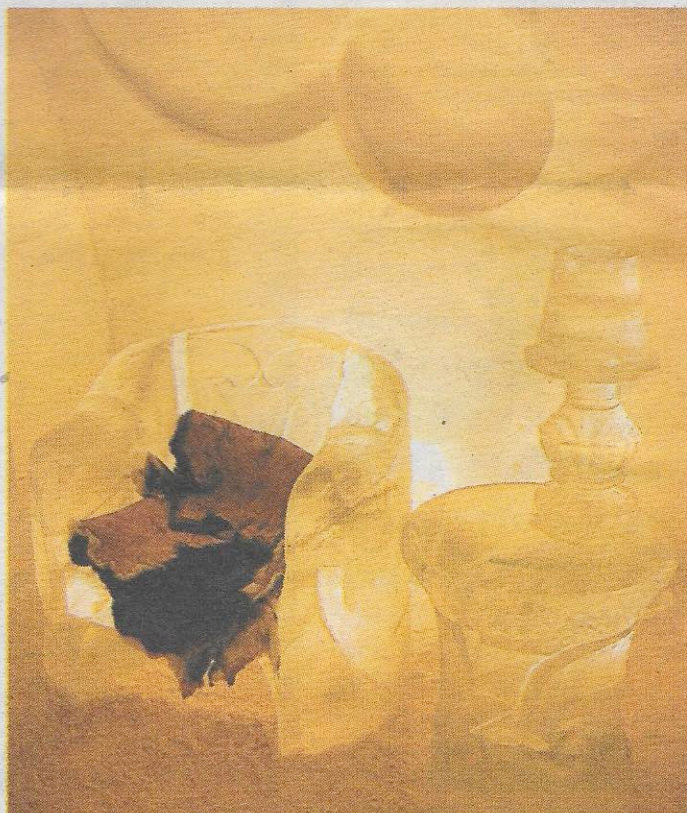


PHOTO BY ALISON GREGOR

At the Ice Hotel Québec, room temperatures usually hover between 23 and 26.6 degrees.

ON THE COVER

Fireworks light up the sky to open Québec City's 400th anniversary celebration at midnight on New Year's Eve.

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.

See ICE HOTEL on D8

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ty, at least for a long, self-indulgent weekend.

In fact, Québec City, in a scaled-down sort of way, is Paris and haute cuisine without the haughtiness. It's this so-near-yet-so-foreignness that has long made the town a popular tourist draw. Its annual celebrations — the Winter Carnival, the Summer

Ice hotel provides cold comfort

ICE HOTEL from D6

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-sleep 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

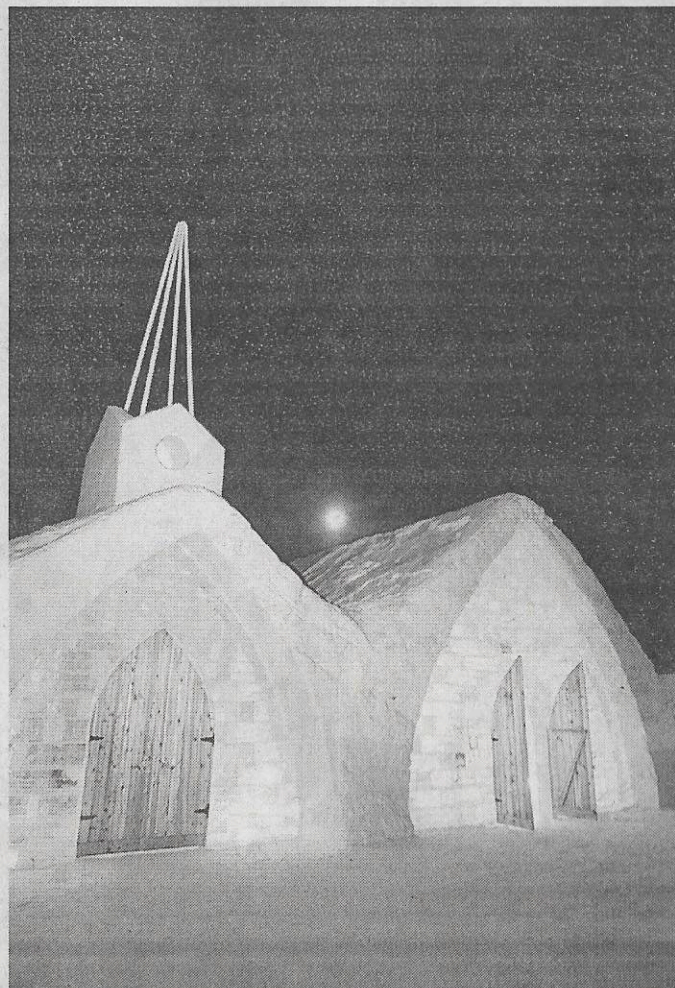


PHOTO BY XAVIER DACHEZ / WWW.XDACHEZ.COM

Staying in the Ice Hotel Québec can be a chilling experience. Pictured is the hotel's exterior.

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

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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.

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