

# HOTELLIER

THE MAGAZINE FOR HOTEL EXECUTIVES / SEPTEMBER 2014 \$20

## LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

*Robert Mercure of Quebec's Château Frontenac  
settles in for a new era of glamour at the revamped hotel*

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# LA MODE

QUEBEC CITY'S  
**CHATEAU FRONTENAC**  
GETS A FACELIFT AND  
SHOWCASES  
ITS HERITAGE IN A  
WHOLE NEW LIGHT

BY HELEN CATELLIER

**AS ANY HOTELIER KNOWS**, running a hotel business is a challenging endeavour at the best of times. But, add a multimillion-dollar renovation to the mix, and suddenly there's an entire new dimension of stress to overcome. Just ask Robert Mercure. For the past three years, the affable GM of Le Château Frontenac has been directing the impressive, top-to-bottom renovation of Quebec City's iconic hotel.





*A STORIED PAST* Le Château Frontenac's majestic summit setting (above) features postcard views of Old Quebec and the St. Lawrence River; Le Sam bistro (right) pays a nod to traditional rail cars and harkens back to the days of the CP Railway; meticulous care and craftsmanship breathed new life into the lobby's historic features (below)

The goal of the \$75-million project, which began in spring 2013 (the copper roof on the main tower was replaced in 2012) and completed this past June, was to refresh and modernize the heritage property with contemporary finishes while preserving its historic charm. "The renovated Château tells the story of a celebrated hotel from the past meeting the contemporary luxury design of today," says Greg Keffer, principal and studio leader at Rockwell Group in New York City, the firm tasked with transforming the

lobby, restaurants and bar. "It embraces the modern-traditional juxtaposition by maintaining many of the original architectural features and mixing in contemporary furnishings and finishes."

All of the hotel's 611 guestrooms were updated, and nearly 330 were completely overhauled with contemporary decor, furnishings and bathrooms. In the process, a third, mid-range room category called Deluxe was born. The more classical colours and bold prints of the old design were replaced with muted

tones and clean lines. And the traditional and heavy furniture pieces, such as the canopy headboards, were swapped with clean looks for a quiet yet luxurious setting. Starting at \$239 during low season, these rooms are scattered throughout the hotel and come in a variety of sizes.

Fairmont Gold, the boutique hotel within the Château, was modernized and expanded from 46 rooms to 60, while the Gold lounge grew by 33 per cent, giving guests additional space to unwind. The transformation was influenced by the glamour, fashion and nostalgia of French design,



## A NUMBERS GAME

STATS AND FACTS FROM THE TOP-TO-TOE RENO AT LE CHATEAU FRONTENAC

**\$75** million spent on renovations | **\$6.5** million spent on new copper roof | **611** guestrooms renovated | **330** guestrooms overhauled | **14** guestrooms added to Fairmont Gold | Fairmont Gold lounge expanded by **33** per cent | **4** treatment rooms added to spa | Fitness centre expanding **100** per cent | **400**-year-old artifacts prominently displayed | **15,000** sq. ft. of meeting space added, accommodating **2,000** for cocktail receptions | **3** new F&B concepts





at Wilson Associates. "As with all historical buildings, there were a lot of unforeseen 'extras' that can't be found in the drawings, but have to be discovered by walking into every room and then redesigned to adapt to the odd flying beam or stray corbel on the wall. We respect the history of the building and integrated all of its quirks and charms into our design, as opposed to removing them."

The Spa du Château — operated by Amerispa — and the Club Frontenac fitness centre were also enhanced to further stimulate the leisure market. A few of the rooms next to the pool were captured to enlarge the spa, increasing the number of treatment rooms from three to seven. And a new extension will be added to the gym this fall, doubling its size.

The renovation was tackled in rotating phases and didn't come without challenges. "Trying to make something modern and relevant from years of reorganization, additions and updated designs proved challenging but a rewarding finish," says Rockwell's Keffer. For example, removing 16 century-old chandeliers from the lobby, cleaning every crystal and arm, rewiring the electrical and draping them with mixed-metal chains for a modern interpretation was a labour of love that required meticulous attention to detail. The same level of care and craftsmanship revived other features such as the copper roof, quarter-sawn oak wall panelling, mouldings, gilding and the

*MODERN MASTERS* Centuries-old artifacts excavated from the property surrounding Le Château Frontenac are proudly displayed in museum-quality showcases (above); the new guestrooms reflect muted tones and clean lines for a quiet yet luxurious setting (below)

particularly the style of Coco Chanel. It's reflected in the furniture and the two-tone contrast in some of the details, including the black-and-white panelling on the walls, bathroom floors and vanities. Starting at \$369 during low season, Fairmont Gold is the priciest room category.

The remaining and most basic guestrooms, known simply as Fairmont, were renovated in 2007 and, this time around, received soft-goods updates. They're inspired by traditional royal tones of blues and golds but in more subtle palettes. They give the rooms a sophisticated and timeless feel. White marble, polished chrome fixtures, glass doors and painted walls make the bathrooms brighter and cleaner. In

some instances, where soaking tubs existed as part of the bedroom, walls were moved to enclose the entire space and enlarge the bathroom. These rooms start at \$219 in the hotel's low season.

New York City-based Wilson Associates was commissioned to redesign the guestrooms, in addition to the corridors and meeting rooms. The goal was to blend modern design with the Château's medieval- and Renaissance-inspired architecture. But the individuality of the guestrooms made space planning a challenge. "It required us to be very selective of the furniture and materials to ensure it would scale properly and function within each space," says Joanne Yong, SVP, principal

PHOTOGRAPH, BOTTOM RIGHT, BY RENAUD PHILIPPE; ALL OTHERS BY DIGITALDIRECT.CA







## PROFILE

### DID YOU KNOW?

In late September, visitors can take a virtual jaunt around the hotel with the new app tour. Combining video and historic images, it guides users throughout the property without leaving the hotel lobby. The app is free for download on both Google Play and iTunes

original fresco ceiling.

Original artifacts were given a new sense of importance in museum-quality display cases that now line the corridors of the lower level. An archaeological dig around the property uncovered thousands of heirlooms. Near 400-year-old cannonballs, glassware and china are prominently displayed along with antiques from the original hotel itself, such as furniture from the 1920s designed by the Maxwell brothers (the architects responsible for the hotel's expansion in the 1920s), a room key from the early 1900s and silverware engraved with the hotel logo.

Quebec's natural landscape inspired several design elements, including the main lobby, which features large, Italian, blue-onyx backlit panels reminiscent of the St. Lawrence River. A custom-made, 15-ft.-tall chandelier in the grand stairway is made from thin pieces of glass

open layout. For the check-in area, Rockwell Group created custom desks covered in antique mirror and added custom rugs and ombré draperies. Most of the furnishings were acquired locally from Canada and fabrics were sourced from Italy, France and the U.S.

But apart from updating the look, one of the biggest catalysts for the renovation was the need to increase meeting space. In the past, groups were turned away. "We were losing pretty good opportunities in the past because ... we could not accommodate larger groups or we could not accommodate many groups at the same time," explains Sylvain Fortier, EVP, Residential, Hotels and Real Estate Investment Funds for Ivanhoé Cambridge in Montreal, which owns the Frontenac.

In addition to renovations of the grand ballroom, 15,000 sq. ft. of meeting and banquet space was added

arranged in a spiral pattern to mirror the icicles that form during the cold winters. The space was also reorganized to create a more

— a 75-per-cent increase in capacity — making it the second-largest meeting space in town, after the convention centre. The hotel now offers 23 multipurpose meeting rooms and accommodates 2,000 people for receptions. The look is inspired by a wealthy businessman's wardrobe with pinstriped wallpaper, light fixtures reminiscent of cufflinks, leather drapes, horned button details and accents of Hermès orange.

A new group check-in on the lower level accommodates larger parties that request a private welcome area. The new separate entrance provides guests with another sense of arrival and makes it even easier for business clients to attend functions.

There's been tremendous interest in the revamped space. "We've had an explosive growth of backlog," says Mercure. "In fact, we're 14,000 room nights ahead of pace. It's the strongest backlog of confirmed conventions in the 120-year history of the hotel," he adds.

On the foodservice front, the Château boasts three new culinary concepts. Seating 150, Le Champlain is the signature dining room featuring local cuisine and tasting menus. Design was inspired by an English manor house with luxurious, highly textured materials such as leather, brass and walnut. Le 1608 wine and cheese bar is open to the lobby where guests can sample cheese, wines and accompanying condiments. The city's winters served as a design inspiration for the icy tones of grey, silver, platinum and blue. And Le Sam bistro, built in a large veranda overlooking the river, pays a nod to traditional rail cars and harkens back to the days of the CP Railway. It features an open kitchen and serves cocktails and casual gourmet fare.

Management is confident the new F&B offerings, combined with the increased capacity, will maximize the hotel's group business — traditionally stronger in the fall and spring — during the summer months.



"Quebec [City] is very dynamic in the summer," Mercure says.

"So the whole destination offer, combined with the new capacity, is an interesting and new element that wasn't available to people before."

Fortier also believes the new dining options will attract locals and solo travellers, too. The local market is important in soft-selling the hotel to others, he explains. "If, as a ... guest of the hotel, you see a lot of buzz, a lot of energy and a lot of people in the restaurant or at the bar ... you feel like you're at the right place. It's very important in creating the guest experience."

Though the local and domestic market is solid, Mercure sees an upswing in U.S. visitors, since the exchange rate has become more favourable, and there's a renewed interest in leaving the country. "A big part of our market is the northeast corridor or the West Coast," he explains. "We sell ourselves ... as an alternative to Europe without the jet lag and without the huge expense." To target this growing market, a dedicated, full-time sales person was added.

A combination of word of mouth and marketing is key to recouping the costs of this tremendous investment. And, though Ivanhoé Cambridge is unloading many of its hotel assets, there are no plans to sell the Quebec City landmark. "We want to concentrate on office, retail and multi-res going forward, but this is the exception to the rule," discloses Fortier. "[The Château Frontenac] is a significant asset for Quebec and Quebecers. It has a long history, is very visible and is the picture you have in mind when you think about Quebec City. It's our postcard asset in Quebec." ♦

# UNIQUE

## BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

NEW HOTEL AT THE SUMMIT OF THE  
MONTMORENCY WATERFALL

INVITATION FOR PROPOSALS - QUÉBEC CITY REGION



The Société des établissements de plein air du Québec is seeking a promoter interested in designing, financing, building, and operating a hotel at the Parc de la Chute-Montmorency, the second most visited tourist site in the Québec City region. Combining the operation of the Manoir Montmorency, an elegant villa with a long history, overlooking the western cliff of a waterfall that is 83 metres in height, the future hotel will feature a unique site for its clients, which is also a marvel due to its natural environment and its unobstructed view of Québec City, the Island of Orleans and the St. Lawrence River.

For more details about this unique business opportunity, contact  
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Proposals will be accepted until  
**OCTOBRE 10, 2014 AT 3:00 PM (EST)**