

Snow

mean feat

Built entirely from frozen water every winter (and open only for three months before it melts in the spring!), the Ice Hotel in Quebec is a stunning structural achievement as well as a fascinating place to stay

Story by Ava Chisling



Jacques Desbois is a strange man. He's a giant igloo-maker who created 10-metre-high ice homes for winter carnivals. He also convinced tourists to wander into the frozen Quebec countryside to build and sleep in their own snow houses. Then Desbois opted to create the biggest, craziest 'igloo' of all: a massive ice hotel where people would come from the world over to sleep on slabs of frozen water. Desbois is the CEO of the Ice Hotel in Quebec, Canada, a huge undertaking that took years of learning, planning, pitching and finally, building, to bring the hotel into existence. 'First you need a foolish mind, and then you need the snow-how,' says Desbois of his project. But while it is easy to dream about an enchanting palace made of ice, it's a lot harder to convince people to pay for it.

'When I went to the banks for a loan, all I heard was the sound of my own voice bouncing off the walls,' says Desbois. He heard 'no thank you' for more than four years. Financial backers were afraid of his risky concept. And can you blame them? Debois' business plan was to build a hotel made entirely of ice. It would be located far from any major city in the middle of Nowheresville, Quebec, and it would only be open from January to April. The hotel rooms would have no electricity or bathrooms. And every year, the entire hotel would be demolished and a new one would be built on the same spot the following winter. Sign on the dotted line, please.

Eventually, someone did sign up and, for Desbois, it was a life-changing experience. In 2000, the Quebec Tourist Board, with financial backing from the unions, invited him to Montreal to pitch his idea. 'After about 45 minutes, we shook hands and I had a feeling the deal was done.'

He was right. Three days after the meeting, his fax machine rang with an offer and a resounding 'Yes!' 'On 1 October 2000, we opened our first bank account and opened the company. And 30 days after that, we held our first press conference.'

Desbois did not invent the ice hotel. He was intrigued with the original one in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden and went to see it. The impact of that visit is not hard to imagine. Desbois, a man long-obsessed with ice and snow, an igloo-maker and dreamer from Quebec, walked through the doors of the pinnacle of 'igloos' – the only one on Earth – and found a magnificent ice home in the guise of a working hotel. 'I went there many times over five years. I wanted to learn everything I could – how to build it, how to maintain it, everything.' Then he took his new-found knowledge and adapted the techniques to the Canadian winter.

Now he has his own ice hotel and this January will mark the seventh time he has built and run one. The Ice Hotel is a surreal fusion of art, architecture, nature and design. There is not only art on the walls, but art is etched into them as well. Intricate chandeliers and flower vases look like ▶

STRUCTURES

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glass but will melt if you hold them. Huge ice pillars reach up to the roof, holding tonnes of snow and ice away from you (and all the other guests). There are ice glasses and benches, archways and sculptures. Asked how he felt when he first walked into his own hotel, Desbois becomes emotional. 'Even though I was used to sleeping in igloos, entering the door of the Ice Hotel is an unexpected sensation. The size of it is majestic, with six-metre-high ceilings above you – you can feel the 15,000 tonnes of snow, the 500 tonnes of ice. Everything is pure white.'

The hotel was initially 1,000 square metres, but it has grown to three times that size. It takes approximately five weeks to build. There are 36 rooms and theme suites, hot tubs, saunas, two bars, a 400-person reception hall, art galleries, and fireplaces where you can defrost. The hotel attracts 55,000 day visitors who come to relax and, as Desbois says, to explore and jump on the ice beds in the rooms. Everything is open to the public, even your room, until 20.00, so day guests can experience all aspects of the complex. After that time, everything becomes private for overnight guests.



ADAD HANNAH, XAVIER DACHEZ, HOTEL DE GLACE





There is not only art on the walls, but art is etched into them as well. Intricate chandeliers and flower vases look like glass but will melt if you hold them and huge ice pillars reach up to the roof, holding tonnes of snow and ice

'My hotel is not Disneyland,' says Desbois. 'I don't want it to be an attraction on its own. We are a distinguished highlight of a country resort and we want it to be in harmony with everything around it. Our guests experience all kinds of activities from ice fishing and dog-sledding to shopping in Quebec City.' Some of his guests have never seen snow before. And some visitors come to get married.

The hotel will host 30 weddings this winter and if you don't bring any guests with you, Desbois will be happy to act as a witness. 'Half our wedding parties are from the United Kingdom, but we have also had brides and grooms from Hawaii and Australia.' He once covered a newly married couple's ice bed with mounds of emails and gifts from their family and friends from back home. Good service is extremely important to Desbois.



Hotel snow-how

The Ice Hotel has won numerous awards, including the Grand Prix du Tourisme Québécois, Best Attraction (for 100,000 visitors and less) in 2002 and 2006, and Best Recreational Tourism Enterprise 2006. Jacques Desbois won the Tourism Personality of the year in 2001.

When

The hotel will be open from 5 January to 1 April 2007.

Where

The hotel is located in Sainte-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier, Quebec. It is 30 minutes from Quebec City and is accessible by car or shuttle.

What

There is dog sledding, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, ice fishing, sliding, and skating. You can also get married.

For more information

Visit www.icehotel-canada.com, or call +1-418-875 4522; for Quebec Tourism log on to www.tourisme.gouv.qc.ca; for the Quebec City Tourism Board go to www.quebecregion.com

'Aside from the web, the vast majority of our visitors come to us because their friends told them to.'

Compared to the early years, when Desbois had to learn the ice techniques from scratch – both how to build the hotel and to maintain it – today, he is more relaxed. 'We now accommodate 3,000 overnight guests per season and we don't need to do anything more to accept 5,000. We are well developed so I will spend the next year-and-a-half reflecting and thinking about a new business plan. I am looking for new paths for the future, to add more art, architecture and ideas.'

While Desbois does not want his hotel to be the main attraction of the region, clearly it is. Where else will you find hotel staff scraping and watering instead of washing and cleaning? Sculptures are chiselled in front you and fresh snow is constantly added to the roof to keep it solid. And always, things are melting. As Desbois says, 'This is a living, breathing building. We have to be able to dance with it.' ■