

# Pancakes for Breakfast, Crêpes for Lunch The Day We Put Quebec City on the Menu

by Amy Fish

My cousin's job requires mixing with all kinds of characters from around the world. She has a technique for getting to know people quickly: ask them to reveal something unexpected they've never done. Something surprising.

Like the very well-groomed woman with perfectly frosted hair who admits that she's never had a pedicure. Or the twenty-something who has never seen an episode of *LOST*.

Or the 44-year-old native Montrealer who is widely travelled yet has never been to Quebec City.

That's me.

At least, it was.

A family trip to Quebec City was my top priority last summer. As I prepared with trepidation and excitement, the trip took on a mythic quality in my mind.

I reviewed our schedules: two full-time working parents, one high schooler who plays the drums and needs to study really hard, one almost in high school who is on a swim team, in a running club and plays community football, and a grade three-er with dance, piano, basketball and tennis lessons. By the time I circled the ideal weekend in red on our family calendar, I was exhausted.

But not too exhausted to launch a preparation campaign worthy of the October Crisis. I picked up a couple of novels by Louise Penny who writes mysteries that stay for weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, including *Bury Your Dead*, set in Quebec City. I borrowed a few books about *la Nouvelle France*. My friend in Quebec City highlighted a route that included the best place ever to enter the city and told me where to leave the car. I yelp\*d a few

local restaurants for lunch and dinner.

I also listened to a wide range of helpful advice.

To get the most out of the trip, you probably should go without your kids, numerous people cautioned me (not in unison).

My kids are great travellers, I protested. I couldn't wait to show them the cannons in the Old City. Plus I had promised we could ride the *funiculaire*.

"The *funiculaire* is a glorified elevator ride that lasts about three seconds. And didn't you say your boys are in high school? Maybe your daughter will want to climb on some boring old war



monuments but the boys will probably be more interested in the animal skins at the Native Canadian store. That or the Starbucks".

"Amy – be sure to take the kids to the Christmas store. You will be able to get ornaments for your tree, and plates for your cookies and the best gifts for –"

On the second thought, maybe we don't need any advice.

This trip is about my person experience as a Jewish girl from Montreal going to Quebec City for the first time. Not about what you think or what my kids' travelling habits are. It's not about

the secular Christmas debate and it's certainly not about pancakes versus crêpes. Or is it?

My extended family was mainly preoccupied with where we were going to eat. Auntie Havie told me that her favorite eatery in Quebec was a chain called Marie Antoinette's where they have the best lemon meringue pie she's ever tasted. White fluff at least a mile high. I looked online and couldn't find a Marie Antoinette. "Oh maybe it was Albany," she said. Not the first time she's been vague on the details.

My 88-year-old great uncle, however, was not vague at all. "Quebec City. That's where I first tried broiled eel."

"Broiled eel?"

"Yup. We were in Quebec for a curling tournament. Invited us to a dinner. Served eel."

"You were in a *curling tournament*?" I asked.

Every family's history is constantly unfolding. Conversations like this one, around the Shabbat dinner table, offer an opportunity to learn more about previous generations, and, in this case, broiled eel.

Clearly, I was the only member of our family who had never been to Quebec City. Even my husband and kids went a few years ago, on a ski trip with his American brother and nephew. I almost joined them, but when I saw my husband making eyes at the Ice Hotel, I said No Thank You. Clear your browser history, honey.

The date drew near. I imagined that the minute we parked the car we would cross over into another dimension. I would immediately experience a thunderbolt of emotions heretofore unfelt about my culture, my heritage, the Anglo-French conflict. The weekend we budgeted for this adventure would be nothing short of a lightning strike.

Three weeks before departure, we got a call from Favorite Aunt and Uncle who live in Toronto. Great News. We're coming to visit. Guess which weekend. I searched around for an alternate date for our trip. Came up empty.

Too bad, I was so looking forward to a spiritual awakening, an intense family bonding experience and some authentic crêpes. Instead, I busied myself with getting ready for my houseguests. Roasting chickens, fluffing pillows.

Seventeen hours before their hastily planned arrival, Favourite Uncle got a cold, called to say they weren't coming.

"Sorry to hear that," I said, tucking the phone onto my shoulder and typing Hotels Quebec City Cheap as fast as I could. The trip to Quebec is back on.

Waiting till the last minute usually produces lower prices. Not this time. Hotels were fully booked or outrageously expensive. Looked into renting a ski chalet, found one affordable in the summer but requiring a detour of at least 45 minutes. Now we were going to Quebec City for the day.

I consoled myself. We'll still be able to have an authentic Old World experience. We will be able to visit all the important heritage sites in my guidebook. We will walk together arm in arm down cobblestone streets pausing to gaze admirably at the street art.

The big day finally arrived.

Our first stop would obviously be Tim Horton's, just after the tunnel. Efficient, Canadian and extra large coffees. Double doubles for us, throw a few muffins at the kids and save enough time to stop at the prison in Trois-Rivières (Part of being a Quebec Anglophone is that we call some cities and streets by their French names and others by their original English, a choice that correlates with the decade in which you were born. I've never heard anyone under ninety mention Three Rivers.)

We go through the Louis H. Lafontaine tunnel and my Husband takes the Tim Horton's exit, exactly as planned. But instead of parking, he pulls up in front of an adjacent diner.

"Surprise!"

I don't want a surprise. I want to down a quick coffee and get back on the road to Quebec. I want to light a candle in the Notre Dame des Victoires church. My mom was raised in part by a French Canadian housekeeper named Leda who

was rarely given Sundays off. Mom therefore grew up lighting candles in church and encouraged my sister and me to do the same. We like to continue the tradition in her memory.

Husband's face is beaming. He is so excited to have discovered a modern diner with lime green vinyl booths and screaming orange walls. He thinks this will be good news. And I want him to feel part of the whole Quebec City experience. I want him to know his vote counts. When it comes to Quebec, we Anglos are sensitive about being sure our votes count.

We sit down to an extensive menu. Coffee cups are not extra large.

I pull out the guidebook and began reading out loud about what sights we will see that day.

For example, the Plains of Abraham.

"Oh, right, the Plains of Abraham, who won that again?" Ezra wants to know. He's 13.

"You just finished Grade Eight, don't you know anything?" asks recent Grade Six graduate, Benji. "The English won."

"No, France won. That's why Quebec is French. And now we have to take French in school, which is so unfair. Right Mom? Isn't that unfair? Didn't the French win?" Ezra persists.

For one brief moment, his question has me. I'm sure the English won, but the kids are making some decent points. They are also arguing at the top of their lungs. Am I going to have another historical battle on my hands?

Slipping my phone out of my purse, I frantically Google for a hint, keeping my hands under the table, hoping they wouldn't notice. No wonder the Quebec Government is considering a mandatory Quebec history class for all CEGEP students.

"I thought you were prepared for this trip," says my Husband, looking up from the *Montreal Gazette*. "Who the heck is Abraham? And why is he flying a plane?"

Of course I prepared. I interviewed my Quebec City-loving colleague. I bought an illustrated travel guide. I borrowed three books on the Battle of 1759. I read half of two Louise Penny novels. That constitutes a whole, right? Heck, for six weeks, I slept beside a stack of relevant books. I'll admit I probably should have read them. I also should be moisturizing my cuticles. I never claimed to be perfect.

"Here it is, Mom, on Wikipedia. The English won. That's why the rest of Canada is English," declares Benji triumphantly.

Eight-year-old Liberty dissents: "That makes no sense, Mommy. If the English won, why do I have to take French math?"

Good question.

I have a few more.

Why do bilingual schools in Quebec only start teaching English in Grade Three? Why can't the kosher bakery have Hebrew letters on its sign? Why does the Quebec government offer free French classes? Why don't free French classes offer free babysitting?

Why have I been to France three times, Italy four times, Israel five times and this is my first trip to Quebec City? And why have I always felt a little insecure about my Quebeckiness? When I go East of Boulevard Saint Laurent, why am I instantly recognizable as a knitter with not *pur* enough *laine*?

The actual visit to the city of my dreams would turn out to be little more than a quick walk through cobblestone streets, \$89 for a round of French onion soup and a few crêpes, and some, er, innovative street performers. We were in and out in three and a half hours.

In retrospect, this conversation in a non-descript diner, miles from our destination, would turn out to be the epicenter of the experience. A day circled in red. I probably should have used blue. Politics are everywhere.

I don't want to go into all this angst right now. I want my children to feel connected to Quebec – both the province and the city. I want them to be seamlessly bilingual and travel safely along the 40 East to the capital without a second thought.

Like so many mothers before me, I protect my family the only way I know how. With food. I open the menu and smile bravely.

"Oh, look," I exclaim. "They have pancakes."

Maybe we should have started with the crêpes.

*Amy Fish's first book The Art of Complaining Effectively was published in March 2013. Amy blogs regularly at [www.complaintdepartmentblog.blogspot.com](http://www.complaintdepartmentblog.blogspot.com).*