

Le Baluchon, an Exciting Adventure...

It was on October 26, 1982 that the *Éco-plein air Le Baluchon* idea was born, the inspiration of seven brainstorming, adventure-seeking students, led at the time by Louis Lessard (a student in biology) and Yves Savard (a student in graphic design). With community support, **Le Baluchon** really only got going in December 1982, when Hydro-Québec gave **Le Baluchon** the rights of possession of the land at the old *Moulin Damphousse* (Damphousse mill). Over the succeeding months, the **Le Baluchon** Corporation increasingly gained credibility, successively acquiring the rights to use the *Chutes à Magnan* (Magnan falls), the *Chute aux trembles* (Aspen falls), the *Chute Damphousse* (Damphousse falls) as well as the *l'Archipel du sabot de la vierge* (Lady's-Slipper archipelago). The support the **Le Baluchon** project received exceeded all expectations, and this turn led to the idea of creating a multi-use tourist centre.

At the same time, Louis and Yves were joined by three individuals who have played a vital role in the success of this outstanding holiday centre, Céline Lessard, Gilles Lessard, and Jean Marc Gauthier. In 1986, a master plan for the future tourist centre was presented to all levels of government and many meetings were set up to lay out the details of the project. Two years later, governments confirmed their financial support, which meant **Le Baluchon** would benefit from an overall investment of \$2 million!

Construction began under the supervision of Louis Lessard et Yves Savard, who had both put aside their original career plans to completely devote themselves to **Le Baluchon**. A year later, on June 24, 1990, **Le Baluchon** officially opened its doors to the public with 12 rooms and 20 employees. The students' dream had indeed become reality.

Two years of operation saw **Le Baluchon** garnering several awards: "Innovation of the Year" in 1991 and the highest tourism award, the *Excellence touristique* ("Tourism Excellence" in English) in 1992 in the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois* competition; and "Services Enterprise of the Year" for 1991 awarded during the *Gala de l'entreprise de la MRC de Maskinongé*, which recognized excellence in service. And **Le Baluchon** kept expanding. May 15, 1992, **Le Baluchon** inaugurated a 24-room inn as well as one of the most modern spas around. The same year, it was awarded the "Lodging and Catering Business of the Year" prize as well as a special mention in the *Efforts marketing* ("Marketing Initiatives") category at the *MRC de Maskinongé* gala. In 1993, **Le Baluchon** was recognized as the business that best promoted the region through its marketing efforts, and was awarded the *Prix de la promotion touristique* (tourism promotion) prize at the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois* gala. **Le Baluchon** was also one of the three nominees for the national award in the same category.

The adventure continued in 1994, and during the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois* **Le Baluchon** won the highly coveted Gastronomy award, highlighting the refinement and excellence of its fine French and Québec cuisine. The **Le Baluchon** directors then decided to present an image more in keeping with a refined offering by changing its name to **Le Baluchon, Auberges et relais champêtres**. In November 1994, the MRC de Maskinongé awarded **Auberge Le Baluchon** its "Business of the Year" prize, which capped off a year of sustained business initiatives. During that same year, **Le Baluchon**, in collaboration with Innergex, developed and implemented an innovative project, *Le parc récréotouristique des chutes à Magnan*. This theme park features a micro-hydroelectric plant that is unique in Quebec, and organizes guided tours focusing on the protection of the Du Loup River environment.

In 1995, **Auberge Le Baluchon** doubled the area of its health spa by adding an indoor pool, a fitness room and several treatment rooms. Additionally, the dining room underwent major renovations, with guests now being welcomed in a most appealing country-style decor. That year as well, the **Le Baluchon** team was awarded the *Excellence touristique* prize during the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois*.

In 1997, that prize was once again awarded to **Le Baluchon**. In addition, the executive chef of the **Le Baluchon** dining room, Patrick Gérôme, was named the *Chef santé de l'année*, an award given by the *Société des Chefs, Cuisiniers, Pâtisseries du Québec* for his creativity and his efforts to ensure healthful gastronomic cuisine and with attention to impeccable culinary presentation. **Le Baluchon's** reputation grew every year along with the many prizes it received: in 1998, **Le Baluchon** really excelled at the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois* awards by virtue of the quality of its package deals and the excellence of its service, winning the prestigious *Accueil et service à la clientèle* and *Développement de la restauration québécoise* ("Hospitality and Customer Service" and "Québec Catering Development") awards.

Le Baluchon had another outstanding year in 1998, from a business-development standpoint. An investment of \$5.2 million investment added new locations and new activities in an unrivalled natural setting. They included a sugar shack, the *Érablière de l'Intendant*, which was transformed in turn into the *Table du Roy*, where 90 guests can celebrate any festive occasion. As **Le Baluchon's** outdoor and cultural activities nerve centre, *La Seigneurie de la Nouvelle-France* offered several types of holiday packages allowing its guests to discover the setting and the stage decors featured in the *Marguerite Volant* television series.

The new De la Rivière Inn, inaugurated at the same time, allows **Le Baluchon** to offer 60 very comfortable rooms in a remarkable setting. With its charming country-style character, the De la Rivière chalet was an novelty that also added to the resort's charm. To put a finishing touch on the overall concept, the microbrewery *Les bières de la Nouvelle-France* offered country-style bistro menus, brewing three delicious beers that could be savoured onsite: the Ambrée de sarrasin, the Blonde d'épeautre and the Claire fontaine.

In March 1999, the executive chef of **Le Baluchon** was elected Regional Chef of the Year by the Mauricie chapter of the *Société des Chefs, Cuisiniers et Pâtissiers du Québec*.

Following this, the *Collège des anciens Chef de l'année de la SCCPQ* awarded Patrick Gêrôme the highly coveted prize of 1999 Quebec Chef of the Year. Also in March 1999, the regional jury for the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois* competition awarded the *Promotion touristique* prize to **Le Baluchon** for the quality of its promotional tools as well as for its efforts to promote the region as a tourist destination *par excellence*. At the national level, the jury emphasized the exceptional efforts of **Le Baluchon** to promote the region nationally as well as internationally by awarding it the bronze *Promotion touristique* prize. In July 1999, the Le Baluchon seignory launched the *Fêtes champêtres de la seigneurie de le Nouvelle-France*. To the surprise of its hosts, more than twice the number of expected visitors took in the event. An exciting program, shows, special entertainment evenings with themes and many activities, all steeped in authenticity, are the reasons for this event's success.

In January 2000, **Le Baluchon** received the "Gold" award for tourism during the *Gala des 2000*. This honour underlined the creation of 40 new jobs stemming from the many outdoor and cultural activities. Once again, the dining-room team was awarded the "Québec Catering Development" prize in March 2000 during the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois*.

Investing \$5.5 million in 2001, **Le Baluchon** added a new 30-room inn in order to meet an the increasing demand. In so doing, **Le Baluchon** ventured to its advantage into the corporate group market. That investment also produced a remodelling of the *Relais santé* (health spa), with the addition of 12 treatment rooms, among other things. The dining room was expanded to satisfy its new clients, and the Nouvelle-France dining room was inaugurated, accommodating up to 250 guests for all types of occasions. Regarding outdoor and cultural activities, guests also discovered several new features: magnificent gardens, a historical bridge, a country-style relay station as well as many innovative cultural activities promoting the creative talent of artists and craftsmen from the region.

Recognition by the community continued. In January 2002, **Le Baluchon** was awarded the "Job Creation" prize at the *Gala des 500*. Crowning its efforts made in the packaging and marketing of the Québec winter, **Le Baluchon** was awarded the regional prize in the "Lodgings, 50 – 149 rooms" category, during the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois*. In the same competition, this time at the national level in May 2002, **Le Baluchon** was awarded the gold medal, a true mark of quality given by tourist industry peers and a further motivation for attaining the summits of excellence.

In December 2002 **Le Baluchon** suffered a setback. The 12-room Damphousse Lodge, the first one opened in 1990, was destroyed by fire, and this marked a turning point for **Le Baluchon's** owners. Projects were already being planned, and reconstruction began immediately following the fire; the lodge was completed five months later in June 2003. In January of that year studies had shown that the Marguerite Volant TV miniseries' buildings and sets had been prematurely suffering the ravages of time, and therefore had to be removed from the Le Baluchon site. Management then undertook a new direction; from then on, cultural activities offering clients high-quality participatory experiences would characterize Le Baluchon's development.

Press reviews from 2003 saluted the cultural innovation represented by the “Theatre by the River.” A veritable trip down the La Mauricie memory lane and a unique theatrical treat, it concords fully with **Le Baluchon’s** tradition of authenticity. In fact, the cultural development embodied by this new theatre experience was behind **Le Baluchon** winning the top prize in 2004 in the Trois-Rivières *Grands prix culturels* competition, in the Culture and Education category.

In May 2004 Le Baluchon was again honoured for its pursuit of the highest standards of customer service excellence; for the second time in three years it was the national Gold laureate in the “Lodgings, 50 – 149 rooms” category, at the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois*

The honours did not stop there. In June 2004 **Le Baluchon** became one of the principal names to remember in the Québec business milieu, when it received a Mercure award for excellence in management and customer relations (*Gestion et relation avec la clientèle*) during the Mercuriades competition (organized annually by the Québec Chambers of Commerce Federation). And saluting **Auberge Le Baluchon’s** creativity and innovation in activities development, the jury of the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois* awarded the “Theatre by the River” the 2005 National Gold Award for tourist attractions involving less than 50 000 visitors.

In July 2005, **Le Baluchon** took another major step in officially becoming a smoke-free environment. This followed naturally from **Le Baluchon’s** objective of putting its clients’ well-being foremost.

Le Baluchon’s management practices were once again highlighted in October 2005. **Auberge Le Baluchon** was named as one of three finalists in the Canadian Tourism Industry Association’s National Awards for Tourism Excellence competition, presented by Canada’s The Globe and Mail, in the “CTHRC Award for Excellence in Human Resources Development – Single Unit Business” category. For a second year running, the *Mouvement québécois de la qualité* highlighted **Auberge Le Baluchon’s** program for improving service through effective complaint-management among visitors to its *Salon des meilleures pratiques d’affaires* (Best Business Practices Salon). As well, **Le Baluchon** won the *Prix Desjardins Performance financière et sociale*, which recognizes the accomplishments of businesspeople who stand out by virtue of their managerial achievements, effective business governance and responsible leadership

In November 2006, the *Les bières de la Nouvelle-France* withdrew its installations from the Le Baluchon site. This meant a new challenge for summer 2007: how to offer innovative activities while maintaining the historical characteristics established in 1998 with the launch of the Nouvelle France sector, and capitalize on the secrets of **Le Baluchon’s** success, its product and service quality. Le Baluchon’s Café-Bistro opened in December 2006, as ideas were fomenting for again developing unique site offerings to surprise clients in summer 2007.

January 2007 witnessed a new vision for tourism marketing in the Mauricie region. The *Auberge du Lac-à-l’eau-claire* and the Lac Blanc Outfitters teamed up with Le Baluchon to create a completely new brand, *Les Auberges distinctives de La Mauricie* (“Unique La Mauricie Inns”). The group’s mission is founded on the principle that in developing new markets “strength lays in numbers.”

Le Baluchon gained recognition of all kinds in 2007, thanks to management’s unceasing efforts at innovative product offerings and management concepts. The prizes were many. At the regional gala for the *Grands Prix du tourisme québécois*, Ms. Line Béland received the “Human Resources – Supervisor” prize, and Louis Lessard was honoured with the title of “La Mauricie Tourism Personality.” At the *Gala des Sommets de la Chambre de commerce et de l’industrie de la MRC de Maskinongé*, Line Béland won the *Épine Dorsale* (literally “The Backbone”) prize, which honours the employee of the year. **Le Baluchon** also won the prize for *Formation, création d’emplois et qualité de vie au travail* (“Training, Job Creation and Workplace Quality”).

In gastronomy, Véronique Levasseur won the “*Patissière de l’année en Mauricie*” award from the *Société des chefs, cuisiniers et pâtisseries du Québec*. She was also a winner at the *Salon Rest-Hôte*, where she represented Le Baluchon and took the silver award for pastry. In the *Le Chef* magazine’s *Tapis rouge pour nappes blanches* competition, Le Baluchon was selected in the “French Cooking” category, receiving the highly valued *Nappes d’Argent* prize, the public’s choice award.

In May 2007 Louis Lessard's 25-year passion was rewarded with the highest possible recognition, when he received from Quebec's Minister of Tourism Raymond Bachand the award of Quebec Tourism Personality of the Year. The selection jury noted: "Biologist and forerunner of sustainable tourism, Louis Lessard has been true to his passion, **Auberge Le Baluchon**, since 1990. A visionary and a key player in the development of health tourism and regional gastronomy, he has valorized the Quebec winter, made the Theatre by the River a showcase for La Mauricie culture, and created the *Auberges Distinctives de la Mauricie*. The keys to his success are client satisfaction, employee happiness, and a concern for authenticity."

In summer of 2007, Le Baluchon's history took a "green" turn with a major \$1 million investment in sewage treatment via the *Le Roseau Épurateur* concept (a system of filtration using marsh vegetation). Many other daily activities support this important stage in the protection of the environment: the use of biodegradable products, infrastructure construction for collecting recyclable paper and glass, etc.).

With much pomp, in July 2007 the *Éco-café Au bout du monde* opened its doors, after 6 months spent in preparing a unique product. Mission accomplished! The *Éco-café*'s atmosphere is exceptional, giving guests the ultimate sensory experience. The *Éco-café* subscribes to the eco-gastronomy movement, promoting local foods and maintaining culinary traditions. A gustatory showcase for regional products, the *Éco-café* favours natural, organic production methods. There, too, guests can mingle with particular figures that have marked the Du Loup River's history, while being regaled at one's table with historical flavours of the region. It's another great way to bring together history and regional gastronomy.

Currently reputed as a high-end resort *par excellence*, **Le Baluchon** features an unconstrained focus on the **real-life experiences** its guests enjoy. It is a privately run operation, owned by shareholders and employees, most of who are inhabitants of the surrounding region. **Le Baluchon** owes its remarkable growth, focused on client satisfaction, to its 195 employees. And its success is assured by participative management, a practice wherein each department manager is actively responsible for his/her own department by serving on a management round table.

Every member of the **Le Baluchon** team strives to offer an original and high-quality product to its guests, while doing so in a natural setting whose beauty is truly remarkable.

The future is decidedly promising for **Auberge Le Baluchon**...