

Cruising Quebec

By Hilary Nangle | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | SEPTEMBER 21, 2013

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HILARY NANGLE

A view of the hiking trail over Monoliths at Mingan Archipelago National Park Reserve.

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I never understood the allure of cruising until I sailed from Quebec’s Magdalen Islands through the Gulf of St. Lawrence and up the St. Lawrence River to Quebec City in the glory of autumn. Cruising Quebec’s waters not only delivers the requisite scenery — endless water-meets-sky views ceding to color-trimmed mountains dropping to towns and villages folded into scalloped shorelines — but also provides access to the province’s remote outdoor playgrounds, places otherwise inaccessible without hours of driving.

MAGDALEN ISLANDS Windswept dunes, rolling hills, red sandstone cliffs, and more than 100 miles of white sand distinguish the remote Magdalen Islands, a crescent-shaped archipelago of a dozen dune-connected islands stretching 40 miles across the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Seriously, who needs a Caribbean beach when these gorgeous beaches deliver sand and sun without crowds? It's easy to find a private patch, if not a mile or more, of sand here, and the temptation to run madly down an isolated beach with a kite's string in hand is nearly irresistible.

Equally alluring is the Madelinot culture. Nearly 95 percent of the island's 13,062 inhabitants are French Acadians, and that heritage remains strong. Pride is evident in the ever-present Acadian flag, with its red, white, and blue stripes and gold star echoed in the chosen paint schemes of many houses. The other 5 percent are Anglophones, primarily of Scottish descent. About 100 reside on Entry Island, the only island not connected to the chain.

BONAVENTURE ISLAND After crossing the gulf, Percé Rock, a cliff-faced limestone stack rising out of the Atlantic, welcomed us to the Gaspé Peninsula. Measuring 279 feet high, 295 feet wide, and 1,411 feet wide, it houses one of the world's largest natural arches. Watching it come into view from sea is alone worth the trip, but Percé charms visitors with a handsome village, colorful general store, and Bonaventure Island, the largest migratory bird sanctuary in Quebec.

As many as 110,000 Northern gannets are among the more than 200,000 seabirds — gulls, kittiwakes, murres, razor-billed auks, cormorants, puffins — residing in noisy harmony on the cliff-faced island, part of a national park that includes Percé Rock. Getting to it required a short boat ride, a mostly uphill 45-minute hike over rough terrain through the boreal forest, and braving the acrid aroma, but even in September, when only about 65,000 gannets remain, it's an unrivaled adventure.

MINGAN ARCHIPELAGO NATIONAL PARK RESERVE An interpretation center in Harve-Saint-Pierre provides an introduction to the diverse and often rare flora and fauna as well as the giants guarding the shoreline of Mingan Archipelago National Park Reserve, a geological treasure comprising nearly 1,000 islands and islets strewn along roughly 95 miles of shoreline. I bundled on layers of fleece for a Zodiac raft departure to Niapisku Island, where Jennifer, a park ranger, met us for an island tour.

As we padded along the beach, woodland trails, and boardwalks, she explained the towering limestone monoliths that had their origins in a tropical sea nearly 500 million years ago. The sea receded, the continents shifted, and the eroding forces of wind and water combined with the freeze-thaw cycle created this almost mystical, other-worldly landscape sculptured with monoliths, caves, and arches, and sprinkled with fossils.

SAGUENAY-ST. LAWRENCE MARINE PARK Tadoussac, sited at the foot of a mountain at the confluence of the St. Lawrence and Saguenay rivers and at the mouth of the Saguenay Fiord, was home to Canada's first fur trading post, built in 1599. A replica stands near the historical Tadoussac Hotel, a long white clapboard building with a cupola-topped red roof that's an eye-grabber even from offshore. Adjacent to it is the oldest wooden church in North America, now a national historic site. Jesuits first celebrated Mass here in 1750.

Although sighting whales from the ship was a possibility all along the St. Lawrence, the waters around Tadoussac are renowned for them. The Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park, one of two national parks overlapping in Tadoussac, is considered one of the best places in the world for observing whales, with 13 species known to visit the region. I skedaddled from one side of the deck to the other, as the ship's on-board naturalist pointed out finbacks, humpbacks, minke, belugas, and blue whales.

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Determined to spy more whales as well as seabirds and other sea life, I hiked a shore-hugging interpretive trail rimming the park's Point de l'Islet, where the Saguenay flows into the St. Lawrence. The Marine Mammal Interpretation Center, at the trail's end, was an unexpected find. Entry is through the jawbone of a blue whale, and interactive displays explain everything one could want to know about cetaceans. Although mostly in French, English-speaking naturalists help with interpretation and explanations. The introductory film highlighting whale research is worth the \$12 admission.

SAGUENAY FIORD Cliffs rising up to nearly 1,150 feet flank Saguenay Fjord, a 65-mile-long seawater-filled, glacier-carved gorge and national park. Not only is it one of the world's longest fiords, it's also one of the few that flow into an estuary. As we cruised up the river, a pod of white beluga whales cavorted under Cap Trinité, one of the highest cliffs edging the fiord.

Overseeing the fiord is the 35-foot-tall, three-ton Our Lady of Saguenay statue. Charles-Napoléon Robitaille commissioned sculptor Louis Jobin to build this tribute to the Virgin Mary in 1878 as a thank you for saving him when his horse and sleigh broke through the ice. Built of white pine encased in lead, it had to be broken into 14 pieces to haul it to its lofty perch 590 feet above the water.

On a guided excursion in the park, I hiked toward the statue. Time didn't permit reaching it, but the foliage views from my not-as-lofty perch were worth the effort. I gazed over the fiord, winked toward Mary, gave thanks for the St. Lawrence, and began working my way back to the ship and, ultimately, home.

Hilary Nangle can be reached at hilarynangle.com.

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