



TRAVEL

St. Lawrence is part tame river, part wild sea

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All it took was one instant and the moist silence of the forest gave way to what sounded like the frenzied clapping a crowd emits as it awaits a star. I ran toward the roar and stopped short: In front of my eyes, thousands of monumental birds, made even whiter by the indigo backdrop of the sea, croaked in unison as they flew, fluttered and flirted along the cliffs.

Every summer, a colony of northern gannets – this year the estimate was 110,000 birds – lands steps from where I stood on Bonaventure Island to nest and raise their young in this national park directly north of New Brunswick, off the tip of Canada’s Gaspé Peninsula, a maritime region shaped like a lobster claw.

This scene was the culmination of a four-day road trip spent exploring the northern coast of the peninsula along the St. Lawrence River.

I first dreamed of this mighty waterway, which originates in Kingston on Lake Ontario and flows 750 miles to the Atlantic Ocean, while listening to the ballads of French American crooner Joe Dassin, but as I stumbled out of the small propeller plane that brought me an hour and a half from Montreal to Mont-Joli, a salty, briny breeze engulfed me. I was confused. I came for a river but it was ocean that I breathed.

It only took a few minutes to drive to the village of Sainte-Flavie, where I stood on dark sand that was peppered with seashells. Even though the day was clear, it was impossible to make out the other side, nearly 40 miles away.

But nearby, dozens of life-size wooden and concrete figures, part of a striking art installation by local artist Marcel Gagnon called “Le Grand Rassemblement,” seemed to amble out of the water.

“Here, we call it simply the sea,” Gagnon said. “And I played with the tides to give life to the procession.” He explained that the salty swells of the Atlantic clash with the freshwater flow, creating deep and dangerous currents. Indeed, later on in Matane, the sound of the river waves lulled me to sleep.

The next morning, the road east first took me alongside fields of wildflowers. Soon, the landscape turned more oceanic, with cliffs hemmed by pine and leafy forests. Seals balanced on dark rocks, their white bellies exposed to the warm autumn sun. I was fascinated by the maritime environment – half tame river, half wild sea – so I headed to Sainte-Anne-des-Monts to meet Sandra Gauthier, the director of Exploramer, a museum and interactive center for marine sciences.

“Explorers rode the St. Lawrence into the North American continent,” she said, “Today, we need to preserve and celebrate its biodiversity.”

“Jump in!” she ordered, her eyes shiny with excitement as she handed me a massive pair of gray waders. Once I managed to wedge my body in, we joined a small group to explore the shoreline. The low tide revealed purple starfish and wriggly crabs, small fish and heaps of kelp, but I learned that, farther away, more than 20 different shark species meandered along the river.

In 2009, inspired by Ocean Wise, the seafood-conservation program started by the Vancouver Aquarium, Gauthier founded Fourchette Bleue (the company’s English-language name is Smarter Seafood), a similar endeavor designed to promote sustainable fishing and uncommon edible species in the St. Lawrence River.

“Today, we’ve certified 90 Quebec restaurants, shops and fisheries,” she said.

There’s nothing like two hours on the water surrounded by mollusks and crustaceans to make me hungry! In town, we stopped at Patisserie Marie 4 Poches for delicious artisanal breads and quiches before heading to Couleur Chocolat, the only Fourchette Bleue-certified chocolatier, where peninsula native Carl Pelletier has devised bonbons melding smooth chocolate with briny seaweed. Later that night, perched on the terrace of Auberge Château Lamontagne, I savored perfectly tender whelks in puff pastry, a new addition to the list.

The farther east I drove the next morning, the more the landscape reminded me of Scandinavia. Lighthouses sprouting in the haze, red wooden shacks in emerald green meadows and dramatically layered schist cliffs plunging into the water. A road sign for Le Bout du Monde (the end of the world) felt utterly appropriate.

The Gaspé Peninsula may have felt that way to some explorers, but starting in the 16th century it actually became the doorway to the New World, drawing European fishermen to its treasure trove of cod. Driven by the medieval church’s nearly 160 days of fasting, which at the time meant mostly no meat, the European demand for fish was acute. In “Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World,” author Mark Kurlansky relates the destiny of this fish and the men who went after it before and after 1534, when French explorer Jacques Cartier “planted a cross on the Gaspé Peninsula and claimed it all for France.”

It was humbling to reflect on the Vikings, the Basque, the Irish and the many others who made their mark on the area as I hiked some of the trails near the end of the Appalachian Range. I was on the lookout for a moose or lynx, but only a large porcupine foraging for food crossed my path.

The next day, back from my incredible encounter with the northern gannets on Bonaventure Island, I strolled on the lively seafront of Perce. Before the cod succumbed to overfishing, the port town was teeming with rickety tables covered with flattened fish drying in the sun.

But the Gaspé Peninsula and the St. Lawrence (whether you call it river, estuary or gulf), are no museum of past grandeur. At the end of my journey, on my way to Michel-Pouliot Gaspé Airport, I visited Gérard Mathar and Catherine Jacob, modern-day emigrants from Belgium who crossed the Atlantic in 2005 to build a home, a farm and a foraging business called Gaspésie Sauvage. With their three boys, the couple is not only almost self-sufficient but they have also harnessed a sustainable gourmet business from the very nature they came to seek.

This land, with its forests and mountains, marshes and meadows, still attracts men and birds. Now protected, the cod cannot be far behind.

IF YOU GO

Where to stay

Riôtel Matane: 250, Ave. du Phare Est., Matane; 1-418-566-2651; riotel.com/en/hotels/matane. The Riôtel mini-chain of boutique-style hotels offers contemporary rustic design, warm service and good value but in Matane (and Perce), their stunning waterfront locations attract many travelers. Book early. Rooms from \$75.

La Seigneurie des Monts: 21 1ère Ave. E., Sainte-Anne-des-Monts; 1-418-763-5308, bonjourgaspesie.com/en. Dating from 1864, this romantic inn, originally a private mansion, faces the water. Inside, wood-paneling and charming artifacts speak of a long-gone era while the bar setup reminds the traveler that it used the first local post office. Rooms from \$99.

Auberge sous les Arbres: 146 Rue de la Reine, Gaspé; 1-418-360-0060, aubergesouslesarbres.com. In the funky town of Gaspé, this small hotel feels like a home with 12 unique bedrooms, some with sloped ceilings and posh wallpaper, a wraparound porch and elegant sitting rooms. Rooms from \$88.

Where to eat

Cargo Restaurant: 250 Ave. du Phare E., Matane; 1-418-566-2651, restocargo.com/en. There is no bad table at Cargo, a restaurant within the Riôtel Matane, right on the water. Decorated in a rustic/industrial style, the eatery features a welcoming lounge set around a transparent fireplace and offers a variety of basic fare but also local seafood, from small, sweet shrimp to maple-infused salmon cubes. Dinner entrees starting at \$20.

Pâtisserie Marie 4 Poches: 111, Blvd. Sainte-Anne O., Sainte-Anne-des-Monts; 1-418-763-4775. This simple bakery and pastry shop hides a fabulous baker (named Marie-Andrée) who devises such goodies as multigrain loaves, baguettes and cheesy bacon rolls. For lunch, quiches, soups and salads, all made with wholesome ingredients, are truly a notch above. A slice of quiche is \$4.40.

Couleur Chocolat: 36, 2e Rue Ouest, Sainte-Anne-des-Monts; 1-418-763-7535, couleurchocolat.ca. The only chocolatier member of La Fourchette Bleue, Chef Carl Pelletier, who was born in this town, offers chocolate bonbons with local seaweed but also a wide array of foraged plants and flowers. Chocolate bars start at \$4.

Auberge Chateau Lamontagne: 170 1ère Ave. E., Sainte-Anne-des-Monts; 1-418-763-7666, chateaulamontagne.com. Perched on a promontory above the town, this elegant restaurant, also a Fourchette Bleue member, offers sophisticated international fare such as veal sweetbreads, seafood linguine and Thai soup. Dinner entrees starting at \$20.

La Maison du Pêcheur: 157 Rue 132 Ouest, Perce; 1-418-782-5331. It's mostly seafood at this classy and bustling eatery on the harbor, but foie gras and steak have their place here as well. Don't skip the sugar pie! Dinner entrees start at \$12.

What to do

Centre d'art Marcel Gagnon: 564 Route de la Mer, Sainte-Flavie; 1-418-775-2829, centredart.net. Near "Le Grand Rassemblement," the group of figures built out of concrete that seem to amble in and out of the waves, local artist Marcel Gagnon and his family have built an art gallery as well as a seasonal inn and restaurant. Free.

La Martre Lighthouse: 10 Ave. du Phare, La Martre; 1-418-288-5698, museedesphares.org. La Martre Lighthouse is one of the best examples of the lighthouses of the past. Even though it is fully automated, it runs mechanically during the day, so visitors can admire the ancient mechanism. It was impeccably cared for by its last keeper and is now a Recognized Federal Heritage Building. The tower and museum are open from June through early September between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Free.

Exploramer: 1, Rue du Quai, Sainte-Anne-des-Monts; 1-418-763-2500, exploramer.qc.ca/en. There are many options for the whole family at this interactive marine science museum. Start with an excursion along the shore or on the water to haul whelks or crabs, then follow with a tour of the shark exhibit and end with the aquarium and touch tanks experience. Open daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., from early June to early October. Adults about \$12; students, \$10; ages 6-17, about \$7.50; younger, free.

Forillon National Park: Via Route 132, Gaspé; 1-418-368-5505, pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/qc/forillon. At the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula, this park offers several magnificent hikes, from easy walks to more strenuous paths. Overnight camping, kayaking, whale-watching, and stand-up paddling are only a few of the activities offered but the park is also home to bears, moose, lynx and at least one fat porcupine. Open daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., from early June to early October. Free.

Parc National de l'Île-Bonaventure-et-du-Rocher-Perce: 4, Rue du Quai, Perce; 1-418-782-2240, sepaq.com/pq/bon. Hop on one of the boats waiting at the dock in Perce to cross to this unique park where a massive gathering of northern gannets lands every year to raise their young. An easy trail leads to the rocks where, this year, biologists counted about 110,000 birds. Open daily, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., from mid-May to mid-October. Free.

Croisieres Baies de Gaspé: Access through the Forillon National Park, Gaspé; 1-418-892-5500, baleines-forillon.com/en. In this area, the sound of the whales blowing air at the surface of the water may be all you hear once aboard a vessel, but you will most probably see the towering beasts' backs or tails as they come up to breathe. Whale-watching cruises are available from early June to mid-October. Adults, \$60; students and seniors, \$56; ages 5-15, \$32; younger, free.

Gaspésie Sauvage: 34 Ave. Rooney, Douglastown; 1-418-368-2296, gaspesiesauvage.com. Make an appointment to see how the owners dry the mushrooms, plants and herbs before they mix them into portable delicacies. Products starting at \$4.

Information: quebecmaritime.ca/en