

QUEBEC

St. Lawrence: Part tame river, part sea

Maritime region rich in both history, cuisine

BY SYLVIE BIGAR

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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 pep-

pered 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."

In 2009, inspired by Ocean Wise, the seafood-conservation program started by the Vancouver Aquarium, Gauthier founded Four-

chette Bleue (the company's English-language name is Smarter Seafood), a similar endeavor designed to promote sustainable fishing and

SEE **QUEBEC**, PAGE D5

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. 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 over-fishing, 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.

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The old La Martre Lighthouse, now fully automated, is one of the best examples of the many scattered along the coast.

(SYLVIE BIGAR / THE WASHINGTON POST)