

QUEBEC by the sea

Whales, islands, and lighthouses are part of life along the St. Lawrence River



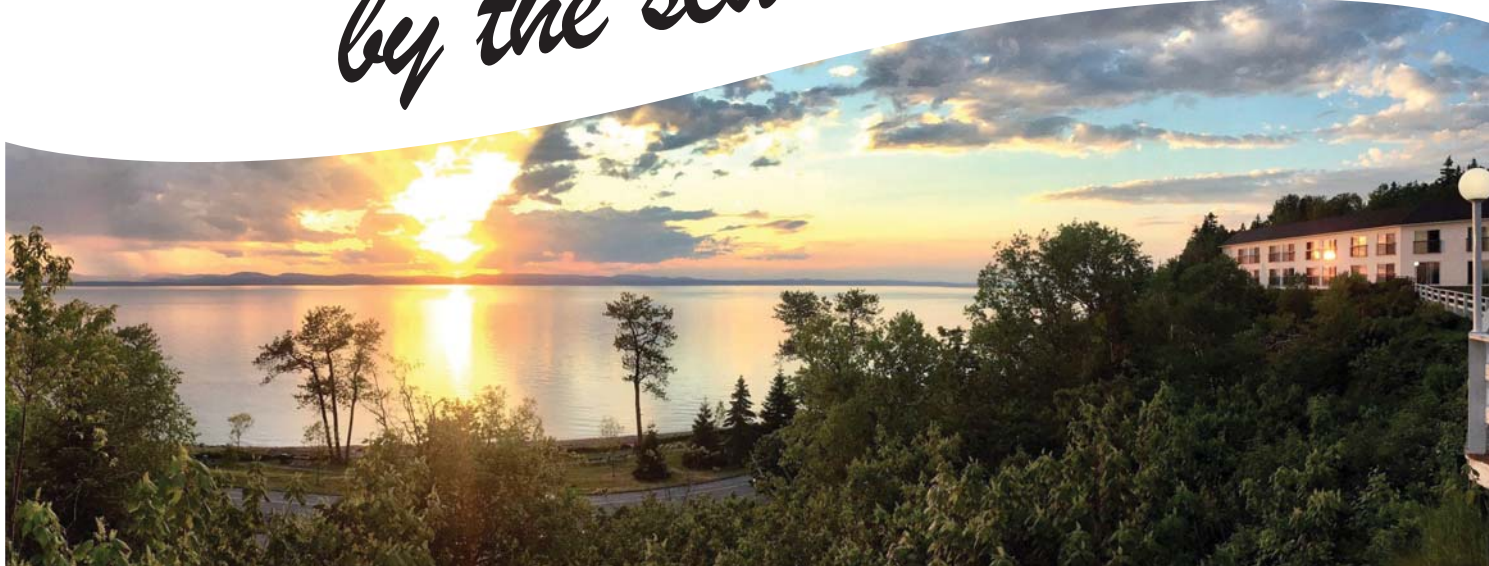
The Marine Environment Discovery Centre in Tadoussac.



The lighthouse on Île Verte is now a B&B with 9 rooms.



Musée du squelette on Île Verte boasts 300 animal skeletons.



PHOTOS BY JANNA GRABER



Whale watching on the St. Lawrence River.



Historic Hôtel Tadoussac on the Saguenay Fjord.

▲ The Rivière-du-Loup region is known for its breathtaking sunsets.

By Janna Graber

“Look ahead,” says Captain Julie. “We might be coming up on a small pod of belugas.”

We're in Quebec on a yellow zodiac, zooming across the St. Lawrence River in search of whales. Captain Julie has taken us into the heart of the Saguenay-St Lawrence Marine Park, a protected region so rich with whales that marine researchers come here from around the world.

Sure enough, beluga whales appear up ahead, their white backs reflecting in the sunshine as they surface.

Whale watching

Quebec may be known for its rich culture, unique history, and excellent food, but it's also one of the best places in North America for whale watching. Thirteen species of whales, including blue, fin, and humpbacks, can be found in the Estuary and Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The mighty St. Lawrence, one of the world's longest rivers, bisects southeastern Quebec. Maritime Quebec has more than 3000 km of coastline, 40 lighthouses, 10 national parks, and dozens of small towns and cities.

Life here is centered on the river. Though the whales are what drew me to this region of Quebec, my travels here have been just as pleasant.

After flying into Mont-Joli Airport, my friends and I drove 140 km to Rivière-du-Loup. Our base was Auberge de la Pointe, a beautiful riverside hotel that has been in the same family since 1957. Many

visit the hotel just to eat at L'Espadon, the popular onsite restaurant, or to enjoy the view from the terrace. This region is known for its beautiful sunsets.

The lighthouse is located on a stunning stretch of beach with unlimited views in both directions.

Île Verte

Well rested, we headed to the tiny isle of Île Verte, home to 45 people. The island ferry was out for repairs, so we climbed aboard a zodiac for the 15-minute ride to the island.

Life on Île Verte moves at its own pace. There are no schools or big businesses and very few cars. Our taxi driver, Guy Langelier, drove us about on a stretch golf cart. A rock hunter by trade, Guy spends his summers ferrying guests around the island. The Île Verte tour package includes access to three attractions on the island: the Musée du squelette, a unique museum filled with 300 animal skeletons; a stop at École Michaud (the Old Schoolhouse and now a local museum); and a visit to the island's well-known lighthouse, now a B&B called Les Maisons du Phare de l'Île Verte.

The lighthouse is located on a stunning stretch of beach with unlimited views in both directions, and has nine rooms available from mid-June to mid-September.

Just 13 km long, Île Verte is easy to explore. We stopped for a drink at the tiny Café D'Alphe, and then visited stained glass artist France Lalancette at her studio. For dinner, we had called ahead to Café de l'Échouerie, a tiny home kitchen run by Michèle Dionne. With advance notice, she will make you a delicious seafood dinner. All we had to do was bring the wine.

Kamouraska

After ferrying across the river the next morning, we drove to Kamouraska. The town's art galleries, chocolate factory, and other shops are popular with vacationers. My favourite stop was at Café du Clocher for coffee, where we were entertained by a chubby cat named Garfield.

In Rivière-du-Loup we boarded the Rivière-du-Loup to Saint-Siméon ferry. Ferries are a part of everyday life here along the St. Lawrence; this one carries more than 700 cars a day. It has a restaurant and shops, and the 65-minute ride was quite comfortable.

Tadoussac

From Saint-Siméon, it was a 40 km drive (including one more ferry crossing) to Tadoussac, our final destination. With an enviable location on the bay, Tadoussac is at the heart of the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park. Whales can often be seen from shore.

While many come to Tadoussac to see whales, the town is a rightful destination all its own. We found a comfortable base at Auberge La Galouine, a boutique hotel in the heart of town. It was just a five-minute walk to local restaurants and to the Marine Environment Discovery Centre, a small but informative centre dedicated to whales and marine life. Whale researchers work from the centre, and a marine biologist shared his insight as we toured the facility. The goal is to educate. One fun exhibit even offered a whale-singing course.

Whale watching tours are offered next door with Croisières AML. Tours operate from April to the end of October.

Our whale watching experience was the highlight of the trip. Out on the water, Captain Julie pointed out three minke whales on the right. From my perch on the zodiac, they were so close that I could hear them breathe. The sound was loud and powerful, and I was awed by the experience. My eyes followed them as they swam in the distance, eventually disappearing into the depths of the St. Lawrence River.

MORE INFORMATION:

www.quebecmaritime.ca

Janna Graber has covered travel in more than 45 countries. She is the editor of three travel anthologies, including "A Pink Suitcase: 22 Tales of Women's Travel," and is the managing editor of Go World Travel Magazine (www.goworldtravel.com)



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