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Maritime QUEST



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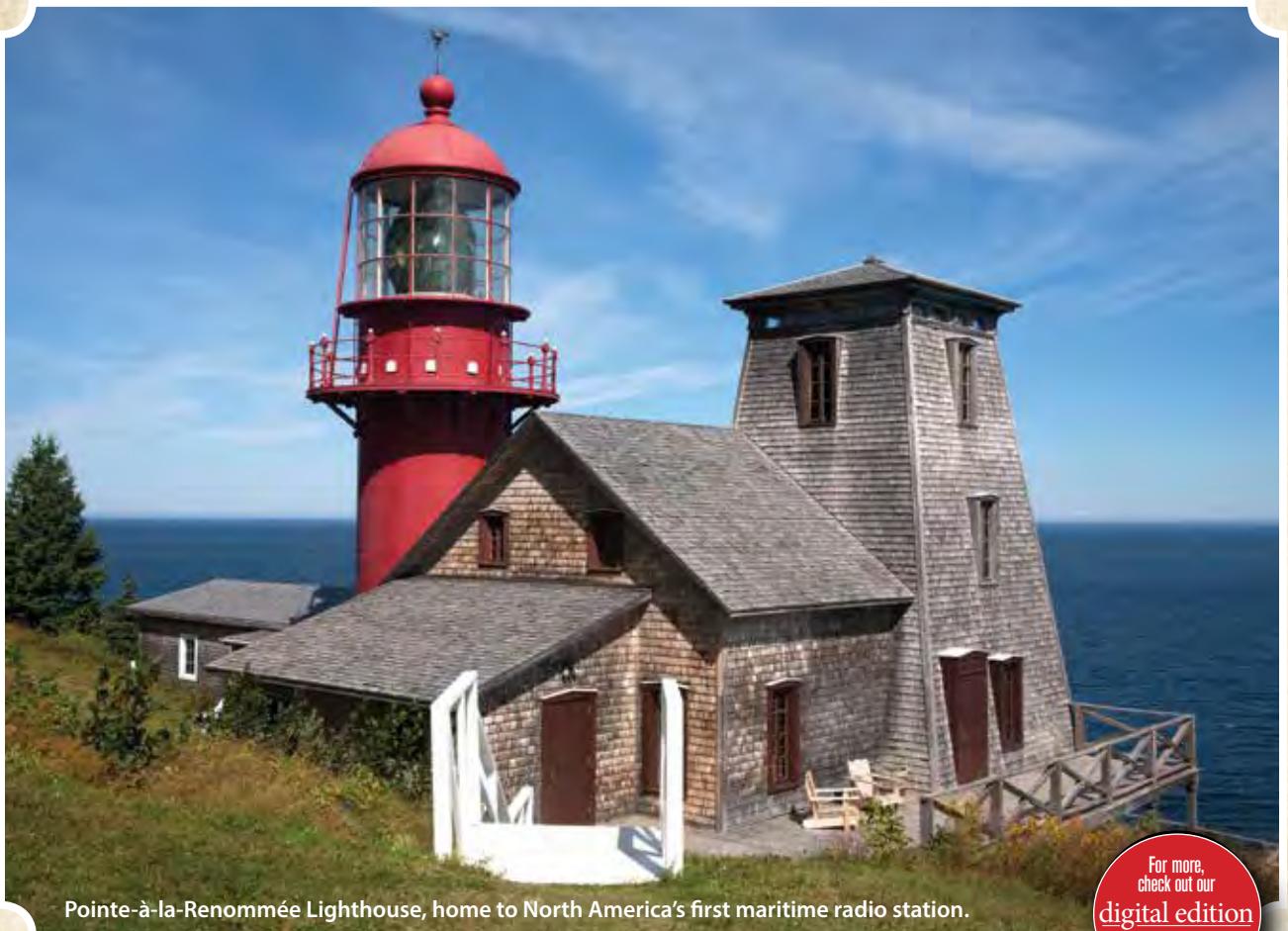
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Maritime Quest

Québec maritime's Lighthouse Trail is a beacon for travelers in search of nautical history, diverse culture and abundant wildlife.

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Pointe-à-la-Renommée Lighthouse, home to North America's first maritime radio station.



A summer road trip along the 1,260-mile Lighthouse Trail in Canada's Québec maritime region—composed of Îles de la Madeleine, Côte-Nord, Gaspésie and Bas-Saint-Laurent—has a way of fostering an appreciation for provincial proclivities. It only takes a few clicks of the odometer to realize, for example, that Québec by the Sea is a Francophile's fantasy transposed to a land dominated by nature. For that French connection, you can partly thank explorer Jacques Cartier, who reportedly claimed the land for France's King Francis I in 1534 after landing at Gaspé Bay. Today's French-speaking *Québécois* are the majority here and Canadian at heart, yet "*bonjour*" and "*merci*" pleasantries add a distinctive *je ne sais quoi* to the ever-present backdrop of evergreen forests and endless blue sea.

And who doesn't love lighthouse lore? The Québec maritime region's nearly 2,000 convoluted shoreline miles are cleaved by the Saint Lawrence Seaway and peppered with rocky islets and reefs feared by even the most skilled of seafarers. With many historic shipwreck disasters and maritime commerce at stake, it's no surprise that the roughly 40 lighthouses built after Canadian independence played pivotal roles and, today, have become revered sentinels throughout the region.



Percé Rock is one of the world's largest natural arches.



Hyman & Sons general store and warehouse museum, Forillon National Park

Yet it's not all lighthouses and legends, shipwrecks and sailors, European colonists and Canadian history. Take a week or more to explore the route, and you might see up to 13 types of whales as well as scores of bird species, seals and otters along the rocky coast and in several of 10 densely wooded national parks touching the sea. And if there's one vestige of the French-Canadian unity that deserves a try, consider *poutine*, a regional dish of French fries topped with cheese curds and slathered in brown gravy that provided me a parting gift of a couple extra pounds on my recent visit.

HITTING THE TRAIL

North, south, clockwise or not, there's no particular starting point for a road tour of the Lighthouse Trail, so I began on the Gaspé Peninsula in the tourist haven of Percé. Leave it to the early French explorers to colonize a pretty place. Since the fishing hamlet was established in 1672, the cozy seasonal community sitting on

a point jutting into the Gulf of Saint Lawrence has graced innumerable tourism brochures. A new wooden boardwalk, restaurants serving fresh-daily seafood, nautical galleries and assorted shops cater to anyone willing to linger, breathe the salty sea air and produce credit cards.

But Percé also has a couple other things going for it. The iconic massif offshore, Percé Rock, might be the most recognizable feature in all of Québec. It's one of the planet's largest natural arches, and from a distance, it appears like a sailing ship—sort of. Its imposing size was more apparent during my ferry excursion to the other must-see here: Bonaventure Island, just 2.2 miles out and renowned in birding circles for 293 recorded species. The marquee attractions, however, are the estimated 54,000 mating pairs of northern gannets.

We first circled Bonaventure and observed barking adult grey seals and pups sunning on the rocks—an animated spectacle that can

entertain for hours. But keeping to our schedule soon had us ashore, where I visited the recently restored Le Boutillier House, known as a retreat for famous painters, writers and poets who spent summers here for artistic inspiration. Le Boutillier House is also the last stop to pick up water and snacks for the nearly six-mile roundtrip hike across the island's 450-foot hump to where a raucous spectacle awaits.

Nothing prepares you for the sight of more than 100,000 northern gannets crying, preening, diving, jousting and tending their young (not to mention the considerable "aroma"). The spacious viewing area atop a grassy plateau overlooking roily surf lets the hundred or so visitors wield tripods with big camera lenses while the birds go about their business. But you're so close that even modest photo gear and phone cameras can grab shots that will nicely document why this is among the most important birding colonies in the Atlantic.



Cape Madeleine Lighthouse

Bonaventure Island, home to one of the world's largest gannet bird colonies



PARKING IT

Rounding the Gaspé Peninsula northward the next day on Route 132 delivered me to another famed natural area: Forillon National Park. The word “Gaspé” means “Land’s end” in the native Mi’kmaq language, and nowhere on the peninsula is this description more evident. Forillon is poised on a dramatic sub-peninsula where the Appalachian mountain chain dissolves into the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Catch the sun just right to see the 600-foot cliffs that rose from the sea 400 million years ago glow crimson while thousands of seabirds come and go from their precipitous nests.

The human element is also striking in Forillon. Early settlers carved a tenuous existence out of the dark boreal forest and storm-lashed coastline, with lumber and giant cod being the main items for export. The park’s historic settlement is a

testament to those early days and includes Hyman & Sons general store, the Blanchette house and the Dolbel-Roberts house, all meticulously restored and outfitted with period furnishings. For my money (under a \$5 entry fee), the most provocative window into the past was the Hyman warehouse, where decades of processing cod liver oil left an indelible scent that evokes thoughts of 19th-century life.

Forillon is also home to the Cap-des-Rosiers and Cap Gaspé lighthouses. Rosiers was my pick to visit for its notoriety: it marks the turning point from the Gulf into the Saint Lawrence River, and after being placed in operation in 1858, the 112-foot-high Rosiers could cast a beam stretching 16 miles. But the sea here is especially cruel, and the lighthouse witnessed more shipwrecks than any other location

along the Gaspé’s 560-mile perimeter. That includes the 1847 shipwreck of the *Carricks* that carried impoverished Irish families to America and sank with 187 passengers; 100 survived. Another noted maritime event occurred in 1942 when the lighthouse keeper spotted a German U-boat and immediately dispatched word to authorities.

LIGHTING THE WAY

Of the 40-odd lighthouses in the region, 18 represent the core of the Lighthouse Trail. Most are renovated and open to the public. Some carry historic designation; others are privately owned and have morphed into bed-and-breakfasts. But in all their variations, a lighthouse is a joy to see.

For pure scenic and historic value, Pointe-à-la-Remommée Lighthouse, between Le Grand-Étang and L’Anse-à-Valleau, is hard to beat.

Gray seals are a common site in the St. Lawrence River



La Martre Lighthouse Museum



This handsome red sentry sitting on Fame Point was home to North America's first maritime radio station, installed by Guglielmo Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company in 1904. Just three years prior, Marconi, the inventor of wireless telegraphy (forerunner of radio), received the first transatlantic transmission in Newfoundland from England. This technology was unparalleled at the time, allowing lighthouse tenders to communicate critical information to passing ships.

Renommée ceased operations in 1975, but local funding efforts have restored the grounds and maintain the historic Marconi station museum, lightkeeper's house and retail shop. Make a point of watching the audiovisual presentation to gain a wonderful appreciation of the diligence, hardships and rewards

associated with this famous guardian and the operator families who lived and died here.

As the road curves west, Cape Madeleine Lighthouse rears as an elegant red-domed lookout on the southern mouth of the mighty Saint Lawrence River. The original hexagonal wooden structure here stood 54 feet to its lantern, which became operative in 1871 and was laboriously tended for years by Philip Savage, who ran up and down narrow, steep stairs every evening to maintain the flame and fuel, earning an annual salary of \$300. The current lighthouse, a cylindrical, reinforced-concrete tower painted white and topped by a red lantern and weather vane, was built in 1906–1908, after which the old lighthouse was demolished. The marvel here, I learned, is the revolving catoptric

lighting apparatus that utilizes two faces with dual burner lamps and 20-inch reflectors that produced alternating red and white flashes. The gist of this then-expensive lens that relied on gas flames was a flash that could be seen 20 miles away.

Further west, I visited La Martre Lighthouse Museum, a hulking red structure that today is fully automated and considered by some to be the crown jewel of Gaspé lighthouses. To the delight of tourists like me, it's the only light in Québec that operates manually during the day, allowing its impressive ornate Fresnel lens to be seen.

Another 130 miles landed me at Pointe-au-Père Maritime Historic Site in Rimouski. Here, you'll find 200 years of maritime history alongside Canada's only submarine open to the public: the 300-foot HMCS



Albéric Gallant

Onondaga. Boarding the vessel, you're surrounded by a maze of pipes, levers, tubes and mechanical doodads that 70 men operated for months at a time. Of course, the actual lighthouse, built in 1909, is not to be missed. If you're lucky, as I was, you'll have a personal tour with maritime guide, historian and thespian Albéric Gallant, who'll dramatically detail historic Saint Lawrence navigational events, including the tragic sinking in 1914 of the *Empress of Ireland*, which killed 1,012 passengers.

TOURING TADOUSSAC

With more lighthouses checked off my itinerary, I took the one-hour ferry crossing the Saint Lawrence River from Rimouski to Forestville—my entry into the Côte-Nord region—then headed southwest along coastal Route 138 to the alluring town of Tadoussac, a former Innu settlement that became France's first trading post on the mainland of New France. By the 17th century, it was a significant trading outpost and now ranks as the oldest continuously inhabited European settlement in Canada.

Located at the confluence of the Saint Lawrence and towering Saguenay Fjord, the tourist-savvy town beckons you



Le Boutillier House on Bonaventure Island

to stay a few days to play—which I did. Guided sea kayaking along the rocky promontory of Pointe-de-l'Islet is a requisite activity in which your boat can glide along tidal waters teeming with marine life, including playful sea otters fishing for sea urchins. Or you can simply hike the half-mile trail to the point and see migrating minke and humpback whales as well as resident beluga whales, their signature bright-white skin contrasting with the blue waters. On an early morning hike, I heard breaching whales but never actually saw the leviathans due to fog—a loss I vowed to remedy.

Short of law, it's mandatory for Tadoussac visitors to embark on a Zodiac whale-watching trip. I wasn't about to break tradition, so I signed up with Essipit Cruises. Through a thick fog, we honed in on breaching whales and caught gauzy glimpses of the superstar belugas, with their "smiles" that woo audiences. I'm no exception. Anthropomorphize? Absolutely.

A week's worth of maritime curiosities, history, outdoor exploits and whale sightings. It's a Canadian quest any road adventurer can envy. To modify a phrase once rallied in France, "*Vive le Québec maritime!*"

For more information, including a map of the Lighthouse Trail, visit Le Québec Maritime Tourism at quebecmaritime.ca/en.