

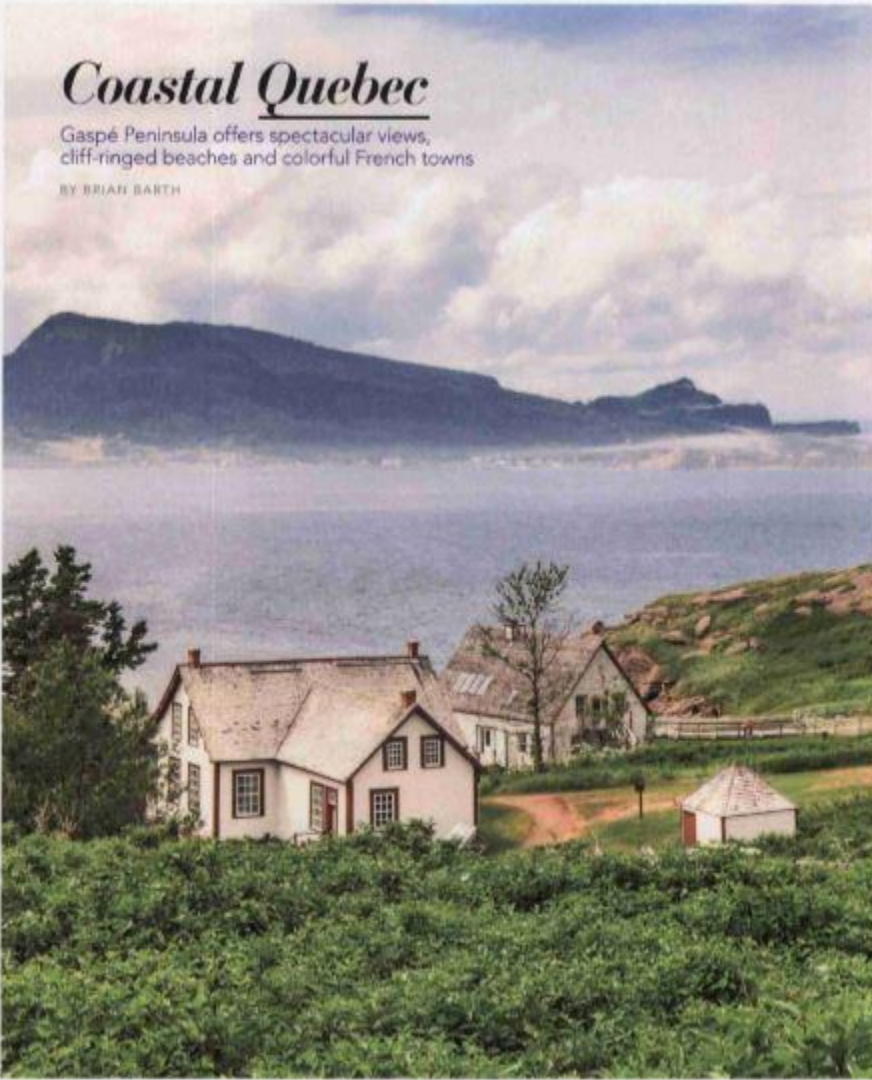
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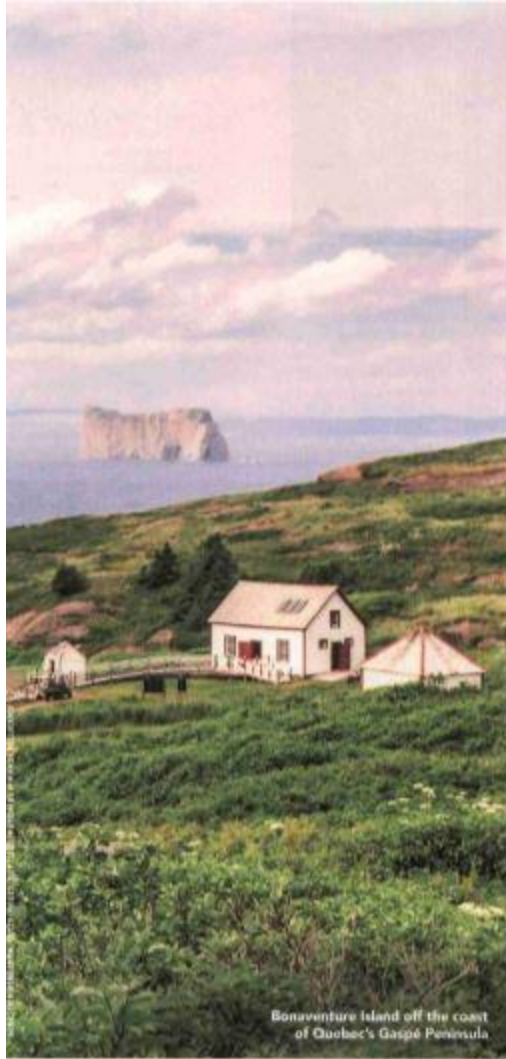
CANADA | QUEBEC

Coastal Quebec

Gaspé Peninsula offers spectacular views, cliff-ringed beaches and colorful French towns

BY BRIAN BARTH





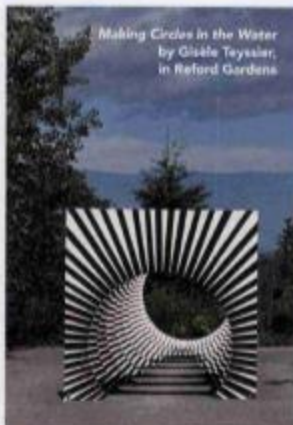
Bonaventure Island off the coast of Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula



Ask Americans about their favorite road trips, and you will inevitably hear about such classics as Highway 1 along the California coast and Route 66 through the deserts of the Southwest. Ask a group of Canadians, and you're bound to hear a few epic stories about Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula, a rugged finger of land that pokes out from the northern tip of Maine into the wild Atlantic. It's a short flight from any eastern metropolis, but between its Francophone culture and rugged environment, La Gaspésie, as the locals refer to the region, feels like a world away.

The 16-hour loop around the peninsula starts and ends in Quebec City, one of the oldest European settlements in North America. Known for its walled Old Quebec district, established in 1608, it exudes the charm of a historic French hill town with its cobbled streets and stone buildings. With more than a half million people, a thriving arts scene and international airport, Quebec City is a cosmopolitan exclamation point at the gateway to the sparsely inhabited, laid-back peninsula. (If you love things like foie gras and escargot, I highly recommend Restaurant Légende on Rue Saint-Paul — if you don't, steer clear, as almost every menu item contains some form of liver, snail or other ingredient that not all North Americans enjoy.)

Some 400 miles to the east lies the quaint seaside village of Gaspé and Forillon National Park, where moose roam the land and whales often surface offshore. Here, the Appalachian Mountains finally tumble into the sea (yes, those Appalachians, the ones Americans think end in Maine), leaving a landscape of towering cliffs and cove beaches. It's a dramatic ▶



Making Circles in the Water
by Gisèle Teyssier,
in Reford Gardens



Blue poppy

end-of-the-world kind of place.

If you're short on time, there's no need to drive the full eight hours out to the tip of the peninsula to Gaspé. The road hugs the coast every bit of the way, and every curve seems to hold another jaw-dropping view and another charming village, where you'll inevitably find a homely little restaurant serving local smoked salmon, lobster and a special variety of shrimp native to the North Atlantic.

My wife and I recently stayed in the beach hamlet of Sainte-Luce, roughly at the halfway point between Quebec City and Gaspé. The window of our room at the elegantly simple Gîte le Moulin Banal, a converted stone millhouse dating from 1848, opened directly onto the water. The ocean air felt luxurious while soaking in the en suite clawfoot tub; the price, around \$80 (U.S.) per night, did not.

The gîte (French for furnished home available for rent), which contained three guest rooms plus a family-style dining room, is emblematic of the region: affordable, unpretentious and all about *joie de vivre*. "We don't like to work too hard," says our host, Gervais Sirotis, a lifelong Gaspe-

sian, who became our de facto tour guide.

Near Sainte-Luce is the Jardins de Métila (or, as anglophones refer to it, Reford Gardens), perhaps the top attraction on the peninsula, other than the landscape itself. Nearly a century ago, the eccentric niece of a Canadian railroad magnate, Elsie Reford, began converting a swath of northern forest on the family estate into what is now a world-renowned botanical garden. Since 2000, Elsie's great-grandson, Alexander Reford, has curated the International Garden Festival, which runs from late June through early October, at the site.

The festival is not an event per se, so much as a series of outdoor art installations by globally renowned artists, architects and garden designers that spring up across the property. Some are kid-friendly and interactive; many are surreal, such as the triangular glass room in a grove of birch trees with walls that are both semi-transparent and semi-reflective. Located on a hillside just above the water, the gardens are an Alice-in-Wonderland sort of place.

Did I mention the blue poppies? These rare plants from the Tibetan Himalayas are one of the garden's star attractions, drawing horticulturists from all over the world. "They are very temperamental to grow if you live in New York or Boston, but we happen to have the ideal climate," explains Reford. "Like Tibet, they are mysterious and magical." Maybe that's another reason they grow so well along the tumbling slopes of the Gaspé. ■

Quebec City is a cosmopolitan exclamation point at the gateway to the sparsely inhabited, laid-back Gaspé Peninsula.

IF YOU GO



Seasonal Canadian cuisine awaits at **Restaurant Légende** on Rue Saint-Paul. The menu consists of shareable dishes; diners can choose two to three per person for \$15 to \$24.

255 Saint-Paul St.
418-614-2558;
restaurantlegende.com



Stay in quaint and nostalgic surroundings at **Gîte le Moulin Banal**, which has three rooms, each with a queen bed, bathroom and ocean views.

150 West River Road, 418-739-3076;
gitemoulinbanal.com



Get a complete outdoors experience at **Forillon National Park**. Take a stroll along the beach, go snorkeling or hiking or hop on a whale-watching cruise offered by Croisières Baie de Gaspé Inc.

baiebaieforillon.com
1238 Boul de Forillon, 418-368-5505;
pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/qq/forillon