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Exploring the Magdalen Islands, Canada's Remote Foodie Paradise

Photo by Gabriela Herman

FOR MOUTHWATERING SEAFOOD, HEAD TO THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE.

By TYLER GRAHAM
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A hundred miles beyond Prince Edward Island, the emerald green, beach-and-cliff-ringed Îles de la Madeleine could pass for the type of tropical atoll usually found in the South Pacific. And like those wanderlust islands of childhood lore, the seven inhabited Magdalens, in English parlance, are largely populated by the descendants of shipwreck survivors. Getting there can feel like riding a nautical time machine: a five-hour ferry from Souris, PEI, on the deck of which is a neatly tied life preserver stenciled "Îles de la Madeleine" as if art directed by Wes Anderson; in the bar, a singer belts out Johnny Cash hits in French.

There's something distinctly European yet disorienting about the Maggies, six of which are conjoined by a two-lane paved road. Brightly painted houses dot the hills, more like County Cork than Cape Cod, while harp seals plop themselves onto the beach to sunbathe the day away and kiteboarders zip across shallow coves. Some of the coastal dunes reach epic proportions, like towering castles knocked over into sand.



Colorful houses along the coast.

Photo by Gabriela Herman



Lobster boats in the marina.

Photo by Gabriela Herman

Getting There:

From June through early September, nonstop flights take off from Montreal to the Magdalen Islands. Otherwise, a car ferry leaves Souris, on PEI, daily.

Where to Eat:

Near the ferry on Cap-aux-Meules, **Quai 360** does seasonal market-based menus. An institution with a top-notch tasting menu, **La Table des Roy** highlights local seafood.

Where to Stay:

The islands' website lists house rentals. Otherwise, there's an old stone convent, **Le Domaine du Vieux Couvent**, that's been converted into a cozy boutique inn.

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And Another

Thing... By the mid-1500s, Basque, Breton, and Norman fishermen had encountered the islands' native Mi'kmaq. Over time, the population grew, thanks in part to 400-plus shipwrecks.

But many of the winningest memories from here inevitably involve food: lobster tail fried on a stick; whelks expertly roasted in butter and chives; sweet and creamy scallop ceviche; and crisp, mineral oysters on the half shell everywhere. Which isn't surprising considering the dominant culture is Acadian, the same French diaspora that settled New Orleans. Around every bend in the road is someone turning the bounty of the islands into something edible: Smoked herring comes from the local **Fumoir d'Antan**. **Le Verger Poméloi** churns out excellent dry ciders and brandies. **À l'Abri de la Tempête** makes craft beers flavored with cranberries and an array of local flowers.

Of course, there's a catch: Fall drops early in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. By mid-September, stores have replaced beach towels and children's sand toys with ice hockey gear and snowblowers. ♦