

TRAVEL



TOURISME QUÉBEC



A Getaway To The
Treasures Of Tadoussac,
A 400-Year-Old Village

By DENIS HORGAN | COURANT STAFF WRITER

Quebec's Little Kingdom



TADOUSSAC, Quebec— Who ever heard of whales in a river? Well, they have them in Tadoussac. There are lots of whales in the St. Lawrence River. Big whales and little whales. Blue whales and white whales. No, not Moby Dick but belugas, which we consider silly looking without much wondering what they might think of us.



without much wondering what they might think of us.

Of course the St. Lawrence is 15 miles wide here, so wide it seems almost more like a bay than a river, and the water is cold and actually salty. So it has whales.

Who knew?

Lots of people know and most of them speak French, as do most of the people in the beautiful region. The area is a popular resort and vacation center for Canadians. There seemed to be more boats watching the whales than there are whales to be watched from the boats, but, for better or worse, oddly nearly no one on the tour boat I was on or any of others we mingled with seemed to be from the United States.

Odd because this wonderful place is an ideal long weekend's getaway trip from the Northeast; it is easy to find and easy to negotiate; it is very beautiful in the way that so much of this grand country is beautiful; it is just up the road from Quebec City, the nifty walled-in museum of Canada's past and present; it is rich in diverse and cheery things to do and, if you try at all, folks will meet you more than halfway on the language.

Red-roofed Tadoussac sits at the water's edge of the St. Lawrence and Saguenay rivers, just northeast of the fjord. Yes, fjord. Not content to dazzle the stranger with whales, they also have a fjord here. (A fjord is defined as a deep, steep-walled, U-shaped valley formed by erosion by a glacier and submerged with seawater.)

Whales like these waters because the flow from the Saguenay brings in food in abundance, stirred in crisp waters exactly to the whales' lip-smacking taste. Visitors ship aboard great big double-decker boats and smaller vessels and rubber Zodiac rafts to greet the leviathans in the maritime estuary. Finding them is easy: by ancient whale rules, whales will always be on the opposite side of the boat than you are on. Ahoy.

Tadoussac, which is celebrating its 400th



RUBBER ZODIAC FAILS TO GREAT THE REVIATHANS IN THE maritime estuary. Finding them is easy: by ancient whale rules, whales will always be on the opposite side of the boat than you are on. Ahoy.

Tadoussac, which is celebrating its 400th anniversary this year, is only a two- or three-hour drive from Quebec City if you are in a mad rush. If so, slow down. The 120-mile drive

PLEASE SEE **AN UNCLUTTERED**, PAGE F5

THE TINY CHAPELLE DE TADOUSSAC, left, is Canada's oldest wooden church, built in 1747. Above left and right, the natural beauty of the Charlevoix and Saguenay fjord regions have attracted artists and visitors for four centuries.

DENIS HORGAN / THE HARTFORD COURANT

An Uncluttered Freshness In The Kingdom of Saguenay

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THE FAMOUS HOTEL TADOUSSAC, built in 1864 and a regional landmark, was used in the movie, "Hotel New Hampshire."

lore.

The Charlevoix area was shaped by a 15-billion-ton meteorite that slammed into here some 350 million years ago. If you are the nervous sort, these things seldom hit on the same spot — even with 350 million years to refine their aim.

Tadoussac is formally in the "Kingdom of Saguenay," a mythical nickname for a quite real bit of treasure. The Saguenay fjord is so wide you need to take a ferry across to continue on Route 138; from the fast moving vessel we saw our first whales, Ivory-soap-white belugas.

("Tadoussac" comes from an Algonquin word for "breasts," a thought supposedly inspired in those folks by the surrounding hills. The winters can be long and they didn't get out much.)

The small town is full of galleries and restaurants and hotels. The country's oldest wooden church, the Chapelle de Tadoussac, is here looking like a toy. There is an excellent maritime center which briefs you about the whales and their lifestyle and is a required stop — or ought to be — for anyone wanting to know about those big lunks out there in the water.

Whale watches usually run for

the unearthly white of the belugas.

The whales watched, we drove a long loop through the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region — east along the north side of the fjord and river for 60 miles on Route 172 to Chicoutimi (the only place the river is bridged) and back along 170 (past the Baie des Ha! Ha! with its large pyramid, built to commemorate having survived the great flood of 1996) on the south side.

The entire region is a Canadian marine park, protected, sheltered and beautiful. The loop, a long day's drive, offered amazing diversions, beaches, overlooks,

de-Tableau and Sainte-Rose-du-Nord. At Cap Sainte-Marguerite, reached by a brisk walk through the woods on wide and easy trails, belugas roll around in the fjord, eating, one imagines. If you're in the area, don't miss this walk and vista.

Crossing the Saguenay at Chicoutimi, the ride back on the Fjord Route is equally as beautiful and fascinating. Lovely parks and river beaches at Anse-Saint-Jean and Baie Eternité offer neat views of the landscapes, less rocky on this side.

At Anse-Saint-Jean, you can pay your respects to King Denys. The local artist and personality was voted king of the community in 1997 when it decided to establish itself as a municipal monarchy; the state and national governments seem not to pay any attention. At least see the great covered bridge there.

For a wonderful place so close to the population centers of Quebec and the United States, the Charlevoix and Saguenay regions has retained a freshness and uncluttered sense of themselves. There are farmers and fisherfolk and industrial workers of all sorts yet the areas seem comfortable with the flow of visitors to their natural blessings. Hotels and shops abound.

The whales, protected by the Canadian government, seem not to care whether we visit. Tourists themselves — the darker critters from the Atlantic and the belugas from the Arctic — they, like us, know a good thing when they find it.

Helpful websites include

major English-language newspaper in the region but from Montreal you can check www.canada.com/montreal/montrealgazette/index.html. You can try your hand in French with lesoleil.cyberpresse.ca. (If you see a headline like "Le grand météor est retournée!" or something like that, pay attention.)

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areas. The rich used to come here, and still may be around. Out of sight.

The region is home to ski resorts, golf courses and family recreation centers, and a terrain noted for its hiking, bicycling, snowmobiling and dog sledding. There are cliffs, islands, parks, little villages and artists colonies ga-

from the fast moving vessel we saw our first whales, Ivory-soap-white belugas.

Tadoussac, whose 1864-built hotel of the same name is a famed landmark, is a port and crossroads and cultural and historic center. There are many whale watching outfits, kayak rentals and other ways to visit the water.

for anyone wanting to know about those big lunks out there in the water.

Whale watches usually run for about four hours, morning and afternoon. Bring binoculars, sunscreen and warm clothes. It is quite brisk out there. The boats skitter from here to there, spotting the spray of the blue whales,

marine park, protected, sheltered and beautiful. The loop, a long day's drive, offered amazing diversions, beaches, overlooks, abounding in attractions and breathtaking panoramic views.

On the north shore, the Upper Saguenay, you can take pleasant trips down to the river's edge at Anse-de-Roche and Saint-Basile-

from the Arctic — they, like us, know a good thing when they find it.

Helpful websites include www.canadatourism.com; www.whales-online.net; www.canadatourism.ca; www.quebecweb.com/tourisme/introang.html; www.bonjourquebec.com/anglais/index.html. There is no

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