

TRAVEL | GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE

Northern excursion gets seal of approval

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Clouds of snow swirl around us like a blizzard as the five helicopters rev up their engines. We lift off into the clear sky, rising above the red cliffs of Quebec's Magdalen Islands before heading out to sea.

We soon lose sight of land as we fly above the icy Gulf of St. Lawrence. Below us lies nothing but water and ice, the floes artistically arranged in an abstract seascape of white and blue.

Forty minutes after takeoff, we swoop over a mass of pack ice a half kilometre across and glimpse what visitors from around the world come to see: resplendent white, newborn harp seal pups perfectly camouflaged among the chunks of snow and ice, their soft fur and black saucer-like eyes now an international symbol for cuteness.

Summering near the eastern Arctic islands, harps are among the more abundant seals in the world, with more than five million in Canadian waters alone.

Come September, they begin migrating southward, with one large herd staying near Newfoundland

and the other heading into the Gulf of St. Lawrence near the Magdalen Islands, just north of Prince Edward Island. They give birth here around the end of February and early March.

Outside the helicopter, we strap crampons on our boots to minimize slipping and grip ski poles for stability as we carefully pick our way across this exotic frozen world in the middle of the sea.

Walking among the mothers and babies, we spy pups nursing, though many have been left on their own while their moms are away feeding.

Most pups are quiet, but across the ice floe we hear constant, plaintive, high-pitched cries of "maaaa, maaaa" that sound part human and part bleating lamb.

Now and then a mother seal pops its head up through an air hole in the ice, takes a quick look around and then dives back in.

While photographing one baby seal, we're startled as its mother suddenly shoots up from an air hole and thumps across the ice behind us with frightening speed. It goes straight to its baby without bothering us, but it becomes apparent that getting close to a mother is not a good idea.

This mothering instinct is fleeting among harp seals, and the pups are expected to grow up quickly. Their distinctive white coats last less than two weeks. During this time, they nurse on milk that is 10 times richer than that of cows.

Twelve to 14 days after giving birth to 10-kilogram pups, the mothers abandon these seemingly helpless



Arlene Karpan pets a baby harp seal. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

balls of fluff and swim off to mate with waiting males on nearby floes.

The highlight is getting right up to the pups, which, for the most part, are either inquisitive or completely ignore us. One rolls over like a dog. A couple of pups play by repeatedly dragging themselves up an icy ridge and then sliding down.

One pup resembles a plump, pure white roll of fuzz with black eyes,

nose and a few whiskers stuck on one end. It appears relaxed as it looks up at us with those enormous eyes and allows us to touch its soft fur.

We can't help thinking that when it comes to getting close to wildlife, this ranks right up there with great wild-life excursions anywhere in the world, but with one big difference. On most trips the rule is, "look but don't touch."

Here, we can not only approach the baby white coats but also touch and pet them. Biologists say petting the baby seals does them no harm.

Guided tours to see the seals operate from late February to mid-March. For more information, see www.hotelsilesdelamadeleine.com.

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