

LIFESTYLE

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Driving Quebec's scenic St. Lawrence north shore



Monoliths at Mingan Archipelago National Park Reserve, Quebec.

PHOTO: ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

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Travelling the north shore of the St. Lawrence River ranks among Canada's top scenic drives. Our main destination was Mingan Archipelago National Park Reserve, about 850 kilometres north-east of Quebec City, though half the fun was just getting there. Highway 138 runs the entire distance, following the shoreline much of the way with vistas over rocky shores, forest and mountainous terrain.

Only 20 kilometres outside Quebec City, we come to the famous Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beau-pré. With origins dating back to 1658, it has evolved into a magnificent basilica, known for its elaborate architecture and extensive gardens, fountains and sculptures. Considered the oldest pilgrimage site in North America, a million visitors come each year, and many miracles have been claimed by the faithful.

At the wide mouth of the Saguenay Fjord, a free vehicle ferry makes the 10-minute crossing to the east shore. Past here, we continue to follow Highway 138, now known as the Whale Route since there's an excellent chance to encounter whales along the way. Thirteen species frequent these waters, including belugas, minke, humpbacks and even rare and massive blue whales. It's not unusual to spot whales right from shore.

One hot spot is Tadoussac at the mouth of the Saguenay Fjord, where Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park protects much of the coastline. The Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre provides an excellent orientation to the world of whales, with an impressive collection of immense skeletons. You can even walk inside the ribcage of a North Atlantic right whale.

We enjoyed Tadoussac's pleasant setting along our stroll on the raised boardwalk beside the beach and boat-filled harbour. History looms everywhere. A chapel built in 1747 is the oldest wooden church in North America and in 1600 this was the site of the first fur trade post in Canada.

Cap de Bon-Désir Interpretation and Observation Centre, just down the road, is a former lighthouse station now operated by Parks Canada. The buildings feature exhibits on the role of lighthouse keepers and marine life. Most visitors were spread out along the huge expanse of fairly flat rocky outcropping, watching for whales just offshore. Parks Canada interpreters were on hand to help with whale spotting and to answer questions.

As luck would have it, whales passed by just a few minutes before we arrived. But our luck changed dramatically later near Sept-Îles. We took a boat excursion through the archipelago of the city's namesake seven islands in what started as a general sightseeing tour but quickly changed focus as we encountered several minke and humpback whales. The evening was capped off with humpback whales breaching and landing with dramatic splashes. Sept-Îles and Baie-Comeau are the only sizeable cities on the route. We mostly passed through smaller communities, sometimes in picture-perfect seaside settings, such as at Longue-Rive where a waterfall empties into the St. Lawrence, and shoreline trails lead to a suspension bridge.

The route had several places to stop and explore nature reserves, walking trails and scenic viewpoints. Most impressive was Manitou Falls, where a series of steps descends into a deep canyon, and we look up at the imposing wall of water thundering down the 35-metre waterfall.

The high point of our trip was visiting Mingan Archipelago National

Park Reserve. The thousand or so small islands preserve a varied habitat of forest, rocky cliffs and marine life. But what immediately stands out is the largest concentration of monoliths in Canada. Millions of years of erosion have sculpted the limestone into giant pillars with bizarre shapes.

Many are on Quarry Island, easily reached on boat shuttles running from the mainland town of Havre-Saint-Pierre. Day tours also operate to Quarry and other nearby islands, but we decided to camp for a few days. The island has a regular campground to pitch a tent, plus six oTENT-Tiks, which are a cross between a frame tent and a small cabin.

We had to bring all our supplies, including bedding, food and drinking water. Having time to explore this magical landscape, some of it on longer hikes, plus taking a day trip to nearby Niapiskau Island with even bigger monoliths, was a summer highlight.

From the town of Longue-Pointe-de-Mingan, boat trips run to the western islands, the main one being Île aux Perroquets (Parrot Island). The treeless, rocky speck of land is home to a major seabird colony, the most famous residents being Atlantic puffins, sometimes nicknamed "parrots of the sea." It's an unparalleled place to get close to and photograph these endearing birds with their huge multicoloured bills.

Boat tours stop at the island for an hour or so, but we had arranged an overnight stay. The only buildings are the historic lighthouse and the lighthouse keepers' former residences, now operating as a small lodge. Package deals include transport and meals. Sleeping in a lighthouse on a remote island was an experience in itself but combining it with a wildlife hotspot made it unforgettable.

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Marine mammal museum. PHOTO: ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN



Sunset and boats in the harbour, Sept-Îles, Quebec. PHOTO: ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN



Manitou Falls, Lower North Shore, Quebec. PHOTO: ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN



Puffin, Île aux Perroquets, Quebec. PHOTO: ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN



Humpback whale. PHOTO: ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN