

# QUEBEC'S CAN'T-MISS LIST

10 things you must see and do during your visit to La Belle Province, **T4-5**

# TRAVEL



> QUEBEC



CINDY NADEAU/RELAIS NORDIK

The MV Bella Desgagnes transports people, cars and cargo along the St. Lawrence River between Rimouski and Blanc-Sablon on the Labrador border.

# Canada's most unusual cruise



## Touring St. Lawrence's Lower North Shore aboard a cargo ship offers rare opportunities

**TIM JOHNSON**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

To celebrate Canada's 150th birthday, we are exploring all 10 provinces and three territories. Today's issue is devoted to Quebec. Watch for our Saskatchewan coverage on Oct. 7.

ABOARD THE MV BELLA DESGAGNES, QUE.—The dusk grows deeper as we roll into Port-Menier, population 216. The lone village on huge, remote Anticosti Island, which sits right in the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, this was once the playground of French chocolate tycoon Henri Menier, who paid \$125,000 for the island in 1895.

He built a bustling but short-lived settlement here, complete with shops and a sawmill and his own extravagant chateau, where he hosted personal guests who ventured all this way for some amazing hunting and fishing.

But those sweet, heady days are long gone. Humans are now outnumbered—a thousand to one — by white-tailed deer,

and I disembark down the gangway to see just a few glowing lights at the end of the long pier.

Pausing for a moment to admire the well-choreographed off-loading of cargo — the crane built into the side of the ship swinging big, blue containers onto the dock, some of them filled with cars, or building materials, or ice cream, or pretty much anything — the hard-hatted crew works like clockwork, guiding everything into its perfect place.

And I see that I'm not alone here in the gloaming. Glancing over at a brown, extended-cab pickup truck that I had assumed was waiting to drop off something, or someone, a closer look reveals a family of four — mom, dad, and two young boys — taking in the show, as if they've parked at a drive-in movie, all of them snacking on big tubs of popcorn.

I'm spending a week cruising the St. Lawrence on board the MV Bella Desgagnes.

CARGO continued on T6



JEAN-PIERRE HUARD/LE QUÉBEC MARITIME

A sunny day in Harrington Harbour, where life moves by foot, sea and ATV.

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>> TRAVEL

# Ferry serves as key link between rural communities



CARGO from T1

More than a pleasure ship, the Bella is an essential service, an absolute lifeline that ferries freight, food and medicine — and people — up and down a distant, beautiful region known as the Lower North Shore.

I'm one of a couple dozen cruisers who occupy the 63 comfortable cabins on the upper decks, here to sail round-trip from Rimouski to Blanc-Sablon on the Labrador border, getting a look at a rarely seen part of Quebec.

As we make our way downriver, the complexion of the ship changes at each stage of the voyage. Until Kegashka — the end of Quebec Hwy. 138 — the majority of the passengers fall into the “cruiser” category (when there's a highway available, few will opt for a ferry).

Most are Quebecois who had, like me, signed on for a full weeklong round-trip, and the rest are Ontarians on a sort of circle tour, driving their cars into shipping containers and hitching a ride on the Desgagnes as far as Blanc-Sablon, where they'll catch the Labrador ferry to Newfoundland (finishing their trip by driving onto the ferry back to Nova Scotia).

After Kegashka, transit passengers start filling the ship, including a number of Innu riders, ferrying to (or from) Pakuashipi, where they were electing a new chief. Despite the fact that the ship is absent a casino, disco club or swimming pool, my days are spent doing activities similar to the other two dozen (or so) ocean, river and expedition cruises I've taken — namely, napping, relaxing with a book or iPad in the public lounges and, especially, eating (my ticket includes breakfast, plus three very good courses at lunch and dinner).

From the beginning, it's clear that the cargo is the Bella's No. 1 priority.

“Because there's no road, we are the road,” explains Francis Roy, president of Relais Nordik, which operates the ship.

“And that cargo is anything you can imagine, for a little village to live. When people see the vessel arrive in these villages, they say, ‘Oh, fresh fruit is coming!’”

The ship, which sails 2,200 kilometres and makes 22 stops each week, also serves as a vital transit link between communities, with many using it as a point-to-point ferry service.

Harrington Harbour is a prime example. Used as a stand-in for the sunny, fictional village of Ste-Marie-la-Mauderne in *La Grand Séduction*, which won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, Harrington's 300 denizens walk on wooden boardwalks instead of streets and ATVs zoom by us, headed for the ship.

As we pass a white-steepled church and hardy-looking homes painted in warm colours nestled into the impenetrable Canadian Shield, guide Monica Anderson tells our small group that times have changed dramatically in the last half-century, since the days when dog teams and fishing boats formed the only transportation in and out of town.

With no road, Harrington depends heavily on a long-distance snowmobile trail called the Route Blanche in winter, and especially on the Bella. The snow crab fished here, and processed at their fish plant (which employs about 50 people) is loaded onto the ship; from there, it makes its way all over Canada and the United States.

The tour finishes in a handsome, Cape Cod-style home that's been converted into the town museum,



TIM JOHNSON

Tim Johnson enjoyed three-course meals on the cruise, including this seafood dinner.

## > WHEN YOU GO

**Do this trip:** Sailing round-trip from Rimouski to Blanc-Sablon, the MS Bella Desgagnes calls at 11 different ports, twice each. Shore excursions are led by local guides and can be purchased on board (they average around \$25 per person for a two-hour, no-frills tour). Not a traditional cruise, guests are informed upfront that the primary purpose of the voyage is to deliver cargo and thus delays are always possible. Superior cabins are very comfortable, equipped with two beds, ensuite bathroom, satellite television and picture window, and are priced in the autumn regular season at \$1,768 (round-trip, per person, based on double occupancy, including all meals).

**Details:** relaisnordik.com.

**Get there:** Rimouski is served by Mont-Joli Airport, about 30 minutes away, which welcomes a daily flight on Air Canada Express from Montreal.

where a man named Keith Boswell tells me that this used to be his home. A school teacher, he also owns one of two local general stores.

“The Bella brings in all of our freight. That ship is essential to our survival here,” he explains.

It's a story that's told, time and again, as we sail to villages that are not only isolated from the outside world, but from each other.

Accordingly, while separated by relatively small distances, each place has its own unique character, from La Romaine, a French-speaking Innu community, to Tête-à-la-Baleine, an English-speaking fishing village settled by Newfoundlanders, who retain their distinct accent, to Blanc-Sablon, at the end of the line, on the Labrador border, where French Canada meets Atlantic Canada at the gateway to the Far North.

As we move from port to port, I grow evermore fascinated with the cargo and want to know more.

Guillaume Séguin, the Bella's young captain, says “90 per cent of everything in the world is carried by ship, and here you can get close and see how it works. At all the big ports, things happen behind closed doors. Here, we open those doors.”

And then I pull back the curtain, meeting with the Tetris-master himself, Chief Mate Corey Deveau, who organizes the cargo. He uses the experience he gained during years of working on both tall ships and tankers in his current position and says preparation is key.

Noting that he gets the manifest via email a few hours before arrival in port, Deveau must take into account both weight and order when slotting



JEAN-PIERRE HUARD/LE QUÉBEC MARITIME

Harrington Harbour is one of the many isolated villages served by the MV Bella Desgagnes. “That ship is essential to our survival,” says one local resident.



TIM JOHNSON

The Labrador ferry steams out of Blanc-Sablon and toward Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula.

the 120 shipping containers (for example, the heaviest containers and those destined for the last ports on the voyage go on the bottom).

He keeps an eye on both ballast and stability, tracked by computer systems he shows to me on two flat-screen monitors, and with all this information, he creates an Excel spreadsheet mapping out the cargo deck.

But items don't have to fit into a container to be carried — these “special cases,” as Deveau calls them, have, in the past, been as big as a tractor, or even a whole house.

When in port, the crew's movements are co-ordinated through microphones and earpieces, but even with the best preparation, you can't plan for everything.

“Here on the Lower North Shore, there's always a few surprises on the dock,” Deveau smiles.

Soon, we've arrived at our final port of call.

I don't spot any special cases, but as I lug my bag toward a taxi, I can hear the crane whirring into action, al-

ready swinging a big, blue container up from the shore onto the ship, freight destined for villages down the coast, the Bella at the ready to deliver

it all, once again. Tim Johnson was a guest of Quebec Maritime, which didn't review or approve this story.

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