

Quebec's Gaspé is (great) for the birds



Bonaventure Island is home to one of the most accessible northern gannet colonies in the world (above). Whales such as humpbacks (left) can be spotted in the waters around Forillon National Park.

Amazing birding, whale watching and coastal vistas await in this beautiful destination



BY MEL BORINS

A visit to Quebec to see Percé Rock, whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the nesting place of 120,000 northern gannets was on my bucket list. Last summer I got to check this off when I visited “where the land ends”—the fabulous Gaspé Peninsula.

Flying into the Gaspé airport rather than driving the 350 kilometres from Quebec City was a good idea. At the airport I picked up a rental car and drove the 100 kilometres on Route 132 to Percé Rock, starting my vacation off with an amazing view of this monolith.

Percé Rock

Seeing this natural rock arch at sunrise, in the rain, close up by boat and from different sides never satiated my appetite to gaze at it. At every angle it was spectacular. It rises out of the water like a huge barge across from the village of Percé; it is about half a kilometre long, 90 metres wide and about 90 metres tall at its highest point. The name comes from the 15-metre-tall arched hole (or “piercing”) in this massive

limestone stack. I was so enamoured of the spectacular Percé Rock that I took shot after shot, and eventually had to force myself to put my camera away.

Bird refuge

Bonaventure Island and Percé Rock National Park is home to one of the largest migratory bird refuges in North America. There are few places in the world where you can observe a colony of 120,000 birds from so close and under such good conditions.

I signed up for a boat tour with Croisières Julien Cloutier at the dock in the town of Percé. The 45-minute ride passed the famous rock's huge cliffs, where thousands of birds nest in the crevices. Seals swimming nearby and a glorious sunny morning made the journey to Bonaventure Island enjoyable.

The real treat was the colony of northern gannets, which is actually on the far side of the island from where the boat docks. You can soak up island atmosphere along four trails leading to the bird area. I took the 3.5-kilometre Les Mousses Trail to the nesting grounds, winding my way through wonderful for-

ests and fields of beautiful wildflowers.

You hear and smell the birds before you see them. As you ascend down a path you are treated to a noisy, unforgettable scene of thousands of birds squawking, flying and fighting.

Most fascinating was the fact that each bird comes back to exactly the same nesting spot each year. The male arrives in April and prepares the nest. When the female arrives, a ritual mating session takes place; the impregnation lasts about 26 seconds, and an egg is laid five days later. Both the male and female tend to the egg, and three months later a chick is born. Unfortunately, a park guide told me that in this perilous environment with many predators, only about 8% of the chicks born last year survived; it was sad to see fluffy white chicks lying dead everywhere.

When it's time to migrate, the male and female leave separately for their flights to Florida or the Gulf of Mexico, reuniting the following year at their nest in Gaspé.

Returning to the boat, I took Le Chemin-du-Roy Trail (4.6 kilometres), which provided stupendous views of the coastal cliffs and seabirds. Taking a walk along a pebble beach and visiting some of the historical homes made the walk back pleasant even in the rain.

Forillon National Park

Located at the eastern tip of the Gaspé Peninsula, Forillon National Park marks the end of the long Appalachian mountain chain. Within the park is the Cap-des-Rosiers lighthouse, Canada's tallest such beacon at 34 metres, and the Mont Saint-Alban observation tower, which provides a stunning panorama of the cliffs and ocean. There are more than 240 species of birds in the park because



of its highly diverse natural habitats, including the steep cliffs that serve as important nesting grounds for seabirds.

I saw black-legged kittiwakes, common murrelets, double-crested cormorants and razorbills nesting on Forillon's cliffs.

My main purpose for going to the park was to go whale watching. I registered with Croisières Baie de Gaspé and boarded the 48-passenger Narval III ship for the 2.5-hour cruise, during which we saw a variety of whales, including humpbacks and minke whales. These creatures are so gigantic and majestic, the trip was worth it just to see them.

Gaspé

In the language of the Mi'kmaq, “gespeg” means “end of the land.” The municipality of Gaspé is huge and includes some 17 coastal villages and towns spread over 135 kilometres along the coast. The area has three famous salmon rivers that attract fishermen from mid-June to mid-September.

I recommend visiting the Micmac de Gespeg Interpretation Centre, where you can learn about the traditional lifestyle of the Mi'kmaq people in the 17th century. You can see replicas of the birch-bark wigwams and smoke houses they used, and learn how they managed resources before the Europeans arrived in North America.

Visit Gaspé and Percé Rock. The area has great camping, excellent hiking, bike trails, horseback riding, kayaks and scuba diving, snorkelling, fishing, whale watching and tremendous birding. There is something for everyone.

Mel Borins is a Toronto family physician.

IF YOU GO

- **Le Quebec Maritime (tourism info for Gaspésie)**
www.quebecmaritime.ca/en/discover-quebec-maritime/gaspesie
- **Ville de Percé** ville.perce.qc.ca
- **Bonaventure Island and Percé Rock National Park**
www.sepaq.com/pq/bon/index.dot?language_id=1
- **Forillon National Park**
www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/qc/forillon/index.aspx
- **Cap-des-Rosiers Lighthouse**
www.pharecapdesrosiers.ca
- **Croisières Baie de Gaspé**
www.baleines-forillon.com
- **Micmac Nation of Gespeg**
www.gespeg.ca