

Where the wind moves you, a visit to Quebec's Maritime region

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Let the wind carry you on a kitebuggy along the shores of les Îles de la Madeleine in Quebec. *M. BONATO / TOURISME ÎLES DE LA MADELEINE*

By Liz Fleming

In the Îles de la Madeleine, it's all about the wind.

On a warm summer day, the wind can be gentle, caressing the tiny archipelago adrift in the Gulf of St. Lawrence like a loving mother. On rainy spring and fall mornings, that same wind is a wet slap in the face as you

head down to the fishing docks, where boats bob madly, straining to escape their anchors and cleats. In winter, the wind is a relentless, icy tease, sneaking cold fingers into a tiny gap in a parka, under the cuff of a mitten or down the top of a boot.

On a bright March day, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, on the ice fields surrounding the Îles, the wind howls along with the barking harp and hooded seals gathered to give birth to this season's pups. The furry cacophony of life seems to push through the windows of the touring helicopters hovering above.



Baby harp and hooded seals are born on the ice around Baby harp and hooded seals are born on the ice each March. *D.I. JESKE / TOURISME ÎLES DE LA MADELEINE*

Like most things – and most people ,too – the wind is at her best at the seashore. There, she becomes your playmate and the engine powering your adventures.

Your feet gripping a kitesurfing board, and the delicate strings of a billowing parabolic kite in your hands, you slice through the waves as the wind takes control. The ocean is cold, but your wetsuit is a shield. You splash, leap, crash, rise again and taste salt on your lips. Later, dry and warm on the beach, you and the wind play again, exchanging surf board for buggy – sort

of an adult-sized trike without handle bars. Ready for the next adventure, your kite rises, snaps tight and pulls you like a chariot driver across the hard-packed sand. The joy of speed is electrifying and your laughter mixes with the keening of the wind.

Still later, you plunge back into the Gulf, in your wetsuit again but this time helmeted. In moments, you're gathered into the embrace of the waves, moved not by your own will but by wind and water. You roll rather than swim, in and out of the ancient red rock caves that form the rugged coast.

If you've timed it just right, you watch the sun settle into the horizon, turning the waves gold and the sky crimson. And, of course, you hear the wind.

People don't think of Quebec as a Maritime province, but with its vast eastern coastline dotted with fishing villages and lighthouses, it certainly feels like one and there's no place where that's more evident than the Gaspésie.



Percé Rock is the most iconic symbol of Maritime Quebec. *LIZ FLEMING*

The highly photogenic Percé Rock is easily the best-known symbol of the Gaspé region of Maritime Quebec, but it's just the start of the show. Things

even more stunning await on nearby Bonaventure Island, in the Parc national de l'Île-Bonaventure-et-du-Rocher Percé (<https://www.sepaq.com/pq/bon/>), as this provincial park is known in French.

There, on a rocky outcropping, lies North America's most accessible colony of northern gannets – thousands of wild seabirds nesting, raising their young, and fishing the rich waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The eerily blue-eyed adults are covered in sleek white feathers with heads that are a soft burnished caramel – like toasted marshmallows. By contrast, young gannets look wildly disheveled, like split feather pillows, with black beaks pointedly opening in their mother's direction. The colony is in constant motion, with hungry young birds squawking, long-suffering parents delivering beaks-full of food, early fliers practicing lift-offs and tired oldsters patrolling in search of a peaceful perch.



The most easily accessible northern gannet colony in North America is found on Bonaventure Island near Quebec's Percé Rock. *LIZ FLEMING*

People too, come to Gaspésie in search of peace, and if they're clever enough to go to Forillon National Park (https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/qc/forillon/index?utm_source=gmb&utm_medium=forillon), they find it. A vast green expanse, dotted with a discreet cluster of Parks Canada facilities, Forillon is the essence of forest bathing – a place of towering

trees, silent pathways and shimmering water where it's not unusual to find a wandering bear cub, or a hawk wheeling overhead. It's a place where morning seabirds call and the night sky is studded with stars. Stay in an OTentik (an well-outfitted glamping tent/cabin combo), smell the pine trees, listen to the wolves howling in the night, pack away your cell phone and sink into the wilderness.

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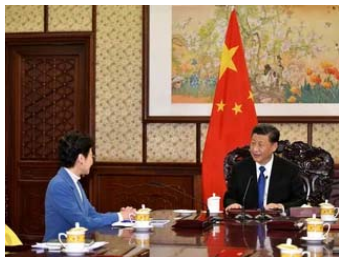
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