

JIM BYERS' TRAVEL BLOG

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Fri Jul 11 2014 Posted by [Jim Byers](#)

The marvellous Iles-de-la-Madeleine, a little known Quebec and Canadian treasure

Great beaches, yes, but also fabulous food, towering cliffs, colourful homes and lovely B & B's make this a prime destination in Canada.



LES ILES DE LA MADELEINE, QUEBEC – I had a business call to make to Toronto and was on the phone with a co-worker.

“How’s your trip,” he asked me.

“It’s absolutely spectacular out here,” I said. I told him about the endless and glorious and empty beaches and the adorable towns and the wildly colourful houses and the incredible food and the utterly fabulous art and the local beer and the towering cliffs and the red rock coastline pockmarked with caves and carved into arches and the pounding surf and the gentle lagoons.

I think I sounded like a National Geographic advertisement or something but I heard him whistle on the other end of the phone.

“Really? I knew there were beaches but I thought it was kinda flat.”

He’s not alone. I didn’t have much of an image of this group of small islands before arriving. But I was enchanted even before I arrived, as my plane skimmed over slate green water and a perfect red and white lighthouse and a craggy coastline that took me very much by surprise.

Some folks in these parts liken the place to a cross between Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton with a French accent. It's somewhat apt, as the islands are in the Gulf of St. Lawrence between PEI, Newfoundland and Cape Breton. The red cliffs reminded me of PEI (but higher and more impressive, to be honest) and the rolling hills and meadows and cliffs of a junior version of Cape Breton and the homes of St. John's.



There's a significant Anglo population and most folks, at least those in the tourism biz, speak reasonable English. But it's very much a French-Canadian place, with a certain sensibility that I really admire and a wonderful sense of cooperation and, yes, joie de vivre that comes from living an isolated existence. It's part of Quebec, but it's also a bit of an afterthought to many Quebecers, I suspect.

I hit the ground running upon arrival, grabbing a Smart Car at the airport (it was that or a massive SUV for one person, which seemed silly) and meeting a new friend for lunch at a café near a small bay. We chatted about life on the islands and sipped on a local beer and gazed out at a lovely, quiet bay backed by homes painted deep red, sky blue and deep green. It was 20 minutes into my first trip and I was already charmed.

I spent the first night up at Grand Entrée, which was about a 90-minute drive away. I had no idea the islands were that large, but they stretch on for considerable distance. They're not wide, but it takes a couple or even three hours to go from the north end to the far south.

I drove past an endless parade of sand dunes and lovely lagoons and huge stretches of sand without a soul on them and reached the village of Grande Entrée.

After a marvellous Thai-style soup with lemongrass and coconut and some lovely barbecued shrimp at Auberge La Salicorne, my guide and new friend Guillame took me on a tour of the area, checking out the rugged coastline and giving me tastes of local sea parsley that he picked from the ground.

I spent the night at Auberge La Salicorne, where I had a simple room with a nice bath in a supremely quiet location overlooking a beautiful lagoon. The next day I checked out some local beaches and admired a stunning orange home near the water before wandering down to the docks in xxx to watch the lobster fishermen return with their catch.

The women pitch in and work just as hard as the men, loading crates of lobster into trucks and performing other tasks. I hear them chatting in a mix of English and French and laugh as the women and men interact, joking and teasing one another.



I'm taking photos on one part of the docks when I hear someone shouting at me. I'm thinking I overstepped some kind of boundary but instead one of the local fishermen wants me to see a nine-pound lobster he's hauled in. He insists on my holding the creature while he takes a photo, and we laugh together as he clicks away.

I get the feeling that's these folks lot in life. But I also get sense they've long since adjusted to the relative isolation (you can only get here by plane from Montreal or a five-hour ferry from PEI) and to the rhythm of the weather and the waves and the fog and the rain and the snow and the never-ending wind that dictates when you can take out your boat and when you can windsurf and when you can fly.

I could go on and on about this place, but in the interest of brevity I'll instead mention some highlights:

BEACHES Plage de la grave Echouerie is on the far north shore and marches on forever. It's been named one of the world's most beautiful beaches, and it's easy to see why. There are dozens of fine spots all over the island; far too many to mention. This is one of the best.

HIKING/DRIVING The village of L'Etang-du-Nord has cute shops and restaurants, but I particularly liked the Our Lady of Assumption statue guarding the harbour with an Acadian flag and the nearby lighthouse. The hike along the beach near Auberge La Salicorne also is beautiful. But the best to me is at Cap Alright on Havre aux Maisons, where you'll find enormous red cliffs and a perfect lighthouse and, to the north, massive brown cliffs that rise high into the sky. Lobster boats can be found offshore in season, and you'll likely have the beach to yourself.



JIM BYERS PHOTO

Cafe La Grave, a fine spot in Les Iles-de-la-Madeleine

EATING Auberge Chez Denis a Francois is a lovely spot on Havre Aubert with fine wood furnishings in an old home. The lobster risotto is to die for, with enormous chunks of seafood and a giant lobster claw. La Table du Roy is a beautiful spot on the main road on the island, with luscious local meats and seafood and a superb French style. Great wine list, too, and terrific local art on the walls. Café La Grave on Havre-Aubert is a local gathering spot which sometimes has live music. It's got a great interior with old wood shelves and magazines on display and chairs painted yellow, blue and red. Tons of character. Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent is a great cheese factory on Havre-aux-Maisons island. You can watch them make several varieties of cheese, including Pied-de-Vent (feet of the wind) and creamy Jeune Couer. Some of their varieties are available in Ontario; others can only be found in Les Ies.

DRINKING À l'Abri de la Tempête is an old factory in L'Etang-du-Nord. It's got lots of character, including great local art. Try the beer flight to see which kind you like best, then order up a pint and chat with locals. A great, great spot.

SHOPPING The Meduse Gallery, not far from the airport, has fabulous local art, of which there is a ton in this part of Quebec. Gourmande de Nature in L'Etang du Nord sells lovely local food and kitchen gear.

LEARNING The Musee de la Mer on Havre Aubert tells the story of life on the islands, where they didn't have electricity until the 1960s and weren't allowed to own their land until the 1950s. Very cool art exhibits and temporary exhibits, too.



JIM BYERS PHOTO

The coastline at Cap Alright is a treasure to behold.

ARRIVING You can fly via Air Canada from Montreal. But CTMA offers wonderful cruise options. You can do a five-hour trip from Souris, PEI, or you can do a longer journey that starts in Montreal and also stops in Quebec City and the Gaspé area. You'll get several days in the Îles de la Madeleine, and you can arrange bike trips, foodie tours and other excursions.

SLEEPING Havre-Sur-Mer B and B on Havre Aubert has luscious ocean views and is steps from a couple of great beaches. The rooms are lovely and fashionable and the breakfast room is bright and airy and beautiful. There's a lot of local art on the walls and they have a terrific spa and hot tub with views of the ocean, and a very friendly owner. Tough to beat. La Butte Ronde is an utterly fabulous B and B on Havre-aux-Maisons, an old school house converted into a small place with a lobby area filled with comfortable sofas and chairs, a gleaming piano and tons of huge tropical plants. The rooms are beautifully furnished and they make an excellent breakfast.

Source :

http://www.thestar.com/life/travel_blog/2014/07/the_marvellous_iles_de_la_madeleine_a_little_known_quebec_and_canadian_treasure.html