

March 2009

CRUISE

North America

m a g a z i n e



New
**frontiers,
sizzling cities**

**Close-to-home
vacation value**

'Green' ships

Where the river

St. Lawrence offers wealth of tourist attractions, activities

The number of cruise ship passengers visiting ports of call along the St. Lawrence River will skyrocket over the next two years. One reason is a new Carnival Cruise Lines offering in 2010 that specifically features stopovers in Baie-Comeau, Havre-Saint-Pierre and Quebec City. Without stops in either Maine or Atlantic Canada, Quebec's picturesque ports have finally come of age, enthralling the world's largest cruise companies such as Carnival and Holland America - the first international cruise line to visit Sept-Îles - which are constantly on the hunt for exciting new itineraries for their customers.

To promote tourist attractions and activities the ports are revving up to present, René Trépanier, executive director of the St. Lawrence Cruise Association, squired four journalists from the United Kingdom and the United States, including myself from Canada, on a hectic, activity-packed visit to nine ports in eight days last summer.

Our itinerary started off in Gaspésie and ended up in Montreal, and here's a taste of what's going to wow cruise passengers.

DAY 1:

Percé and Gaspé

As we approached the city of Percé situated atop red cliffs, dominating the landscape below was Percé Rock, emblematic of Gaspésie. The massive chiselled rock rises over 80 metres (260 feet) straight out of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. One of the world's largest natural arches, the limestone structure and its companion obelisk were carved out of ice sheets 375 million years ago. The oldest known illustrations of it date back to the 16th-century travel logs of Jacques Cartier and Samuel de Champlain. Cartier, who sailed into the Bay of Gaspé and planted a cross to claim the land for France, first explored the region in 1534, and this year marks the 475th anniversary



Photo: Berean

of his arrival.

At high tide, the arch, one of Canada's natural wonders, is large enough for a boat to motor through, and, at low tide, it becomes a marooned island approachable by foot. Marie Leblanc, who is responsible for tourism for the City of Percé, has walked to it many times, but unescorted visits are now prohibited because tourists

meets the sea

often become stranded by the high tide.

The next morning, fog entirely shrouded the rock – what a difference a day makes – and seagulls soared overhead as we cruised to Bonaventure Island five kilometres (three miles) from town. This isle is home to 300,000 sea birds, including razorbills, gulls, murrelets, puffins and northern gannets. Seals basked on the rocks surrounding the island, Capt. Yves obligingly posed for photographs, and Rémi Plourde, director of Parc de l'Île-Bonaventure-et-du-Rocher Percé, filled us in on the island's flora and fauna.

Take a tour of recently restored Maison Le Boutilier and you'll learn about the salt cod fishing industry and the lives of the fishermen once employed by the hundreds.

Before hiking to the gannet colony, we lunched at Resto des Margaulx, an enlightening environmental lesson. Due to the island's limited water supply, forks and knives are made of potatoes and bowls and plates from corn – all 100-per-cent biodegradable and compostable.

The hike along the trail to the gannet colony, the largest migratory bird refuge in North America, criss-crossed meadows and lush forests and then, at last, the phenomenal sight of 132,000 nesting birds like a blanket of snow covering the steep cliffs. What an experience to see them so up close courting and preening. Established pairs return to the same nest annually and, once their young leave home, they fly south and disperse along the coast from New England to the Gulf of Mexico.



DAY 2:

Havre-Saint-Pierre

Founded in 1857 by six fishing families from Îles de la Madeleine, Havre-Saint-Pierre is proud of its Acadian roots and its natural environment. After a hearty breakfast, we drove to Mingan Island Cetacean Interpretation Centre, an hour from the village of 3,300.

Established by biologist Richard Sears 20 years ago, the station combines research and education on the region's dolphins and whales, and a biologist even conducted the guided tour. Large-scale murals and life-size sculptures of humpbacks, finbacks and minke whales festoon the centre, a joint venture with Parks Canada. Truly spectacular, they are a must see.

After touring the offices of the Innu Band Council of the Ekuanitshit community and one of its churches to learn about aboriginal culture, we cruised to the Mingan Archipelago National Park Reserve accompanied by Parks Canada superintendent Cristina Martinez. The Mingan Archipelago is a 152-kilometre (94-mile) stretch of 40 limestone islands and 1,000 granitic islets and reefs, she said. The grey limestone is 450 million years old and has been eroded and sculpted into works



of art by the sea.

The majestic monoliths, some resembling flower pots, dot the beaches and coastline.

Don't forget to stop by Bruno Duguay's Maison de la Chicoutai de Rivière-au-Tonnerre. Here chicoutai is king. Native to the region, the amber-coloured fruit is also known as bakeapple in the Atlantic provinces or cloudberry in Nordic countries. Pick up some chicoutai liqueur or chicoutai butter as souvenirs.

DAY 3:

Sept-Îles

A helicopter ride that swooped and glided along the salmon-rich Moisie River introduced us to the seven islands of Sept-Îles, a spectacular way to get a bird's-eye view of the vast territory's rich natural resources.

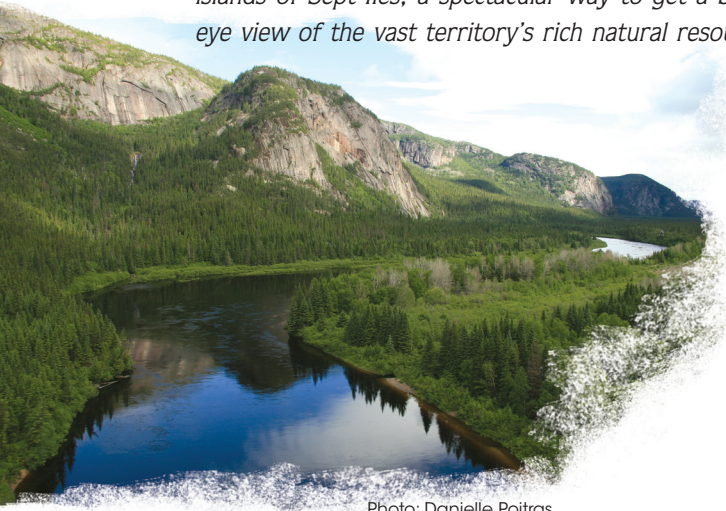


Photo: Danielle Poitras

After landing on the wharf, the Shaputuan Museum was our next stop.

From museology curator Laureate Moreau, we learned about the Innu's annual life cycle in which four animals, the caribou, beaver, porcupine and fox, each represent a season. You can take a guided tour of the permanent exhibit like we did or pick up an audiocassette for a self-directed tour.

On the site of the Innu summer camp alongside the Moisie, where cruise passengers will see re-enactments of tribal customs, we enjoyed a salmon bake and met 79-year-old Philomène McKenzie. In a colourful tartan costume, the mother of 14 and grandmother of 80 demonstrated a traditional dance.



DAY 4:

Baie-Comeau

As we travelled east, the cities became more populated. Baie-Comeau is a company town dominated by the Alcoa aluminum smelter, the city's biggest employer and a funding contributor to the Garden of the Glaciers. Set up in a converted church at a cost of \$13 million, this unique attraction features the Glacier Exploration Centre. A 3-D multimedia installation, its theme is glaciers and climate change.

"The project was originally conceived 13 years ago," said Emma Duncan-Kerr, president of the Manicouagan Outdoor Corporation's board of directors and former Alcoa public relations manager who retired in 1998. MOC originated the idea of this impressive attraction, which is viewed through transparent screens. Visitors can visit the Cyber Park for further information and/or the Maritime Adventure Park, a 40-square-kilometre (15-square-mile) area east of Baie-Comeau. On a guided tour of the latter reached

by shuttle from the centre, we trekked through the forest, cruised to photograph waterfalls, canyons and fluvio-glacial channels and enjoyed a campfire lunch.

Another must see is the Centre National des Naufrages du Saint-Laurent de Baie-Trinité. Here you'll learn about shipwrecks from artefacts, a multimedia presentation and an interpretation, research and genealogy centre.



Photo: Ville de Baie-Comeau

DAY 5:

Saguenay

One of the most breathtaking regions of Quebec is the Saguenay and we hopped onto a helicopter for spectacular views of the fjord, including right up close to the Notre Dame du Saguenay statue erected on Cap Trinité. Saved from drowning by praying to the Virgin Mary, Charles-Napoléon Robitaille commissioned a nine-metre-high white sculpture to thank her for saving his life, said Priscilla Nemey, director of tourist development and communications for Promotion Saguenay and president of the St. Lawrence Cruise Association.



Photo: DeCoste

Rejuvenated by munching on cheese curds from Fromagerie Boivin, a fourth-generation cheese-making company founded in 1939, we visited the Musée du Fjord, a living museum for learning, observation and discovery. Then donning rubber boots, we walked the shores of Baie des Ha! Ha! looking for marine invertebrates and examined them under microscopes on our return.

Embarking on the colourful new hop-on/hop-off Saguenay Tourist Bus, we toured two ecomuseums. Olivier is an olive oil soap-making company and Le Chevrier du Nord is a farm where mohair fibre from angora goats is made into clothing and accessories.

La Pulperie de Chicoutimi was our next stop for a history of the region's pulp and paper industry including an exhibit on primitive painter Arthur Villeneuve. Then we got a taste of the urban life dining in Chicoutimi, the region's capital with a population of 70,000. In the Montagnais language, Chicoutimi means "the end of deep waters." It was founded by Scottish timber baron Peter McLeod.



DAY 6:

Quebec City

In the provincial capital, we overnighted at the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac within view of Holland America's Maasdam, which had called that morning. In time for the city's 400th anniversary, the hotel, the most photographed in the world, underwent a \$12-million renovation, which included the introduction of Fairmont Gold on the top four floors and a new guestroom décor with contemporary touches such as flat-screen televisions and high-speed Internet access. "Its fresh new look respects the historic character that is expected from Quebec's fabled chateau," said general manager Robert Mercure.

The next morning, we set out for a walking tour along the cobblestone streets of North America's only fortified city and a UNESCO heritage site. We trekked under Sous-le-fort Street to reach the foot of Cap Diamant with its imposing view of the Château Frontenac, window-shopped along du Petit-Champlain Street and climbed the steps to where Paul McCartney performed on the Plains of Abraham to celebrate the city's founding four centuries ago. This year, the Plains marks its 250th anniversary.

For a taste of the good old days, browse around the nooks and crannies of J.A. Moisan, a gourmet store founded in 1871. North America's oldest grocery store is both a museum and an emporium. Housed in a building that dates to the early 1800s and is the former residence of founder Jean-Alfred Moisan, the top floor is now a bed and breakfast.

Photo: Luc-Antoine Couturier





DAY 7: *Trois-Rivières*

Getting jailed was our fate in this city. North America's second oldest city, Trois-Rivières, celebrates its 375th anniversary this year. But first a costumed priest, Monsignor Albert Tessier, conducted a historical walking tour. Tessier was the founder of Séminaire de Trois-Rivières, now housing the Pierre-Boucher Museum, which highlights the region's historical and cultural heritage. Then it was on to the Pulp and Paper Exhibition Centre. At the beginning of the century, Trois-Rivières was the paper capital of the world, and the centre paints a portrait of the past 100 years.

Then Valérie Lalbin, promotional agent for Tourisme Trois-Rivières, had us jailed in the Old Prison of Trois-Rivières, which opened in 1822. After mug shots were snapped, we were turned over to Stéfan, an ex-con who served seven years for armed robbery. "I've known the dark side of life," he said. Out of prison for five years and now a tour guide, he told us what life was like for prisoners during the 1960s and 1970s. In earlier days a bell tolled to announce hangings so townspeople could watch. Disruptive prisoners were chained to the walls, spending months on end in solitary confinement in the hole, a windowless area in the dirt floor basement. Women were also housed in the facility until the late 1960s, along with their preschool-age children. Due to the abuse that was taking place, Canada's oldest operating prison was closed down in 1986.



DAY 8: *Montreal*

A new 15-kilometre (nine-mile) bicycle path along De Maisonneuve Boulevard has been added to the existing 330 kilometres (204 miles) of bike trails around Montreal. This new addition consolidates the reputation of the city's La Route Verte, which National Geographic Society recently designated as the best bicycle route in the world.

"Visitors already love Montreal's warm, welcoming atmosphere," said Charles Lapointe, president and CEO of Tourisme Montréal. "But setting up an extensive bicycle path network, right downtown, makes it an even friendlier destination."

For golf lovers, Montreal offers a wide variety of options, including a dozen public golf courses less than half an hour's drive from downtown.

Multicultural Montreal is celebrated for its fine dining, trendy nightclubs and colourful outdoor terraces. It's also a shopper's paradise. The vast 'underground city,' with its boutiques and restaurants, offers a unique shopping experience. Montreal also is home to internationally renowned festivals, ranging from jazz to comedy to fireworks.

