

Discover the Authentic World of Les Îles de la Madeleine

In the time of early dinosaurs, Quebec's Les Îles de la Madeleine (the Magdalen Islands in English) started a very long Atlantic migration from the Equator towards the north, eventually settling in Canada's Gulf of St Lawrence. Lying in a southwest/northeasterly direction, they consist of a dozen volcanic islands that form a 64-kilometer-long fishhook-shaped archipelago. Six of those islands are interconnected by long, thin dunes of fine cream-colored sand, all joined by paved roads and picturesque bridges.



Most of the hardy 13,000 residents have centuries-old roots with an Acadian French heritage quite different from but just as historical as the Québécois heritage. However, there are also a few communities with British or American heritage, mostly the descendants of mariners washed ashore from some of the 400 shipwrecks recorded over hundreds of years. English is widely spoken, and warm hospitality to visitors is part of the Madelinot character.

Only in the past few decades have Les Îles been accessible for more than a handful of months a year, and even then only by fishing boat or freighter. All that has changed with regular commercial flights from Montréal and Québec City and a five-hour ferry trip to/from Prince Edward Island, also in the Gulf of St Lawrence. However, the most satisfying way to reach these beautiful isles is aboard a white-hulled 450-passenger cruise-ferry cooperatively owned and operated by the islanders themselves.



Boarding the CTMA Vacancier (Ctma.ca), in the port of Montréal, sailing for two days down the St Lawrence River and across the Gulf is an adventurous, satisfying way to observe abundant marine wildlife and historic shoreline communities along the route, and to sample some exceptional cuisine far

more to be expected on a luxury cruise ship. Between June and September, the CTMA Vacancier offers round-trip seven-day packages with a break in the middle of two nights and three days to explore the islands or one-way trips to Les Îles for longer stays. Visitors may then fly out or take the CTMA ferry to Prince Edward Island or enjoy a week on the islands and board the next cruise-ferry as it sails back to Québec City and Montréal. Flexible pricing allows for many possibilities.

Most travelers visit Les Îles de la Madeleine between June and September, with the 300 kilometers of sandy beaches and warm shallow waters particularly appealing to families. However, if sampling the distinctive cuisine, enjoying local music festivals and exploring the rich history and culture of the islands have higher priority, shoulder seasons offer even quieter charm and off-season rates.



Sleeping with history is an excellent way for visitors to immerse in the atmosphere. On the southernmost island, Île du Havre Aubert, where many tourism interests are clustered, there is a cozy B&B mansion, Auberge Chez Denis à François (Aubergechezdenis.ca) a perfect location for exploring the picturesque village of Havre-Aubert and its seaside surroundings. It is a strollable place to immerse in the arts, culture and deep history with art galleries, one-of-a-kind artisan shops, a marine museum and local-species aquarium.

Island-hopping half way up the archipelago to the third largest island, the imposing Domaine du Vieux Couvent (Domaineduvieuxcouvent.com) is the islands' only stone building with its own fascinating story and a gourmet eatery with more gastronomic delights. In the early 20th century, literacy and education were scarce commodities with most students having to leave the islands to get any education. So a residential convent school was built to train young local women to be teachers in tiny community schools throughout the archipelago. It has been impressively restored as a superior class accommodation with ten elegant rooms offering breathtaking views of the sea.

A morning drive north to the farthest island allows visitors to witness the returning lobster boats that go out to sea well before dawn to check their traps. A drive past wide cream-sand beaches, narrow bridges and diminutive fishing and farm hamlets ends at a bustling commercial marina, home to hundreds of lobster boats. Teams of women wait to unload the lobster catch into refrigerated trailers to go to restaurants and local canneries or to be fresh packed for flights to world markets.

Les Îles de la Madeleine (Tourismeilesdelamadeleine.com) share their history and culture generously with many high-quality museums and authentic attractions including an historic herring smokehouse and a local cheese factory. Let it be known that the Madelinots eat like kings and queens and serve their

hearty organic soups and herb-laden savory dishes with the same panache as they play the haunting Acadian music and paint their houses. If joie de vivre is to be found anywhere in this world, it must surely be on these illusive islands floating low on the horizon in the Gulf of St Lawrence!

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her **Travel with a Challenge** web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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