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Great Outdoors

Cruise: From Montréal to the Magdalen Islands

By Gregory B. Gallagher

Charting a course from Montréal to the Magdalen Islands in the wake of Champlain and Cartier.

In Montréal's Old Port, the loading and off-loading of cargo ships, the smells of marine life and the promise of unknown destinations mix together. My wife Linda and I feel the tug of anticipation as we prepare to set sail along the historic St. Lawrence River, bound for the Magdalen Islands, over 1,490 km (925 mi) away, in the surprisingly warm Atlantic waters between Newfoundland and the Gaspé Peninsula. After we've climbed the gangplank of the *CTMA Vacancier* for our eight-day cruise, foghorns announce our departure and passersby wave *bon voyage* as we weigh anchor and set out to explore the river and the distant red archipelago.

Explorers' route

Our ship cruises the route of the European explorers Jacques Cartier and Samuel de Champlain during their discovery of North America, passing Québec City, perched upon Cape Diamond; Montmorency Falls, site of the continent's first seigneurial homestead; and numerous islands, including pastoral Île d'Orléans – often called the breadbasket of Québec City – and Grosse Île, the historic quarantine station that once served as the first stop for new Canadians.

We awake on our second day to the Gaspé Peninsula and the backdrop of the Chic-Choc Mountains, a land of wild beauty that is home to the last herd of caribou south of the great river. Sunset arrives as we cruise around Percé Rock, one of the largest limestone arches in the world and an icon of maritime Québec.

A shore thing

Video clip: Callebaut and the chocolate factory

Ontario spa getaway

Arctic safari

Golf goes green

Saskatoon's River Landing

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As we arrive Sunday morning at Cap-aux-Meules, passengers flock to the edge of the ship for a better view of the tiny port. The captain slowly threads his way among the humble flotilla of local fishing boats as we spy undulating hills and multicolored homes. There are no trees here, just red sand gracing swooping bays.

Along this archipelago of 12 islands, our ports of call provide options for adventure. At [Parc de Gros-Cap](#), kite-boarders congregate, coming from places as far away as New Zealand, California and Europe. Located about 4 km (2.6 mi) from the port, the park offers a family beach campground with inexpensive sites, an international youth hostel and even a fish market selling fresh mackerel, herring and lobster.

Return voyage

On the way home, we spend a morning in the tiny seaside village of Percé, a quaint clutch of summer homes, souvenir shops and restaurants. About 20 from our group visit the legendary Percé Rock as well as the migratory bird sanctuary on nearby Bonaventure Island, where some 290 species have been recorded.

Later the same day, just beyond the town of Tadoussac we cross the waters of the largest estuary in the world, the [Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park](#), where the flow from the longest fjord in eastern Canada meets the river. Here we see a wildlife feeding frenzy worthy of *The Blue Planet*, featuring three different species of whale – sperm, minke and blue, the largest creature on Earth – porpoises, harp seals and legions of birds. It's one of the most animated wildlife scenes I've ever beheld, but as we make our way back to Montréal, I realize that this is just a blip in the long history of the St. Lawrence.

Getting here

CTMA Group, 418-986-3278, [ctma.ca](#)

Parc de Gros-Cap, 74 Chemin du Camping, L'Étang-du-Nord, 1-800-986-4505, [parcdegroscap.ca](#)

Package deal: [Culture and Cuisine in the Magdalen Islands](#)

Tourisme Québec, 1-877-BONJOUR

(1-877-266-5687), [www.bonjourquebec.com](#)

[See more about the Magdalen Islands](#)

Gregory B. Gallagher is a Montréal native and bestselling author of Eyewitness Top 10: Montreal and Quebec City. His stories and photos have appeared in National Geographic Traveler, Smithsonian and Travel Weekly.

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