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So This Is France...Really?

The churning Atlantic waters 15 miles southeast of Newfoundland challenge travelers to visit the islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon (93 square miles in total) for a brief jaunt into, yes, France. Just two hours ahead of New York time, the sandy islands are fine places to dig into foie gras (made locally), *coquilles* St. Jacques, and true Chablis.

Outdoor revelry electrifies this maritime community in summer. July's highlight is Bastille Day, a time of communal gusto. Uniformed gendarmes salute the republic as the "Marseillaise" is trumpeted in Place de Gaulle. Copious red-white-and-blue flags swaddle municipal buildings, and barbecues fragrance the sea air in the midst of concerts, parades, and games such as *pelote*, played against a high wall with paddles and a ball.

If you love scallops and mussels, snow crab in puff pastry, fine French white wines, and affable hosts to share these delicacies with, the mid-August Miquelon Seafood Festival—or the newer Labor Day weekend Snow Crab Festival—are tasty reasons for a visit. Some say the Basque festival—August 13-19 this year (the last two days being the liveliest)—is the most fun fete of all. Horseback rides along the beaches and ancient hunting trails are another fair-weather option.

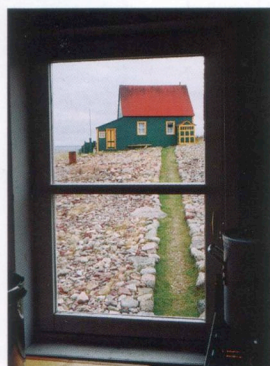
February warms the winter freeze with a one-day Carnival. Primarily a local festival for children, the day ends with the burning

of the main float, a seashell named Bulot.

The islands' French citizenry happily admit to living like other North Americans, but passionately insist their ground is France. Indeed, tons of French soil traveled here as ship ballast during the 19th century, greatly improving the thin, rocky, acidic soil of the islands.

France's original interest in St. Pierre and Miquelon was fishing. In the 21st century, the motherland is paying dearly to embrace its toehold in North America, especially considering that the cod industry has just about collapsed, thanks to overfishing. The French government gives the islands some of the highest per capita financial aid in the world—about \$65 million annually.

—GREGORY B. GALLAGHER



LOGISTICS: For an overview, www.st-pierre-et-miquelon.com and www.2.st-pierre-et-miquelon.info. Air Saint Pierre, www.air.saintpierre.com, offers service from Montreal, Halifax, and St. John's (Newfoundland). SPM

Express, www.spmexpress.net, offers ferry service. Hotel Robert (reserve through St. Pierre Tours Ltd., 709-832-2006 or 800-563-2006; www.spm.tours.com) is close to the ferry; double rooms from \$256 including breakfast and ferry passage. Maxxim Vacations offers two- and three-day packages that include round-trip airfare from St. John's, accommodations, and breakfast daily at Auberge Saint-Pierre, a three-course dinner with wine at La Voilerie, and a guided tour, starting at \$429 for two for two nights, www.maxximvacations.com.



The islands' sole sheep breeder, Thierry Gautier follows his flock on a Miquelon beach. Fishermen's cottages and stones used for drying cod (top) are part of a cultural preservation program.