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The charm of Iles de la Madeleine

Remoteness preserves the history

BY JOANNE BLAIN, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MAY 1, 2015

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Children playing on the white sand beach of the Dune du Sud, framed by red sandstone cliffs.
Photograph by: Joanne Blain.

Isolation is both a blessing and a curse for the Iles de la Madeleine.

It isn't particularly easy or cheap to get to this slender chain of islands in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which means they aren't on the radar of many travellers, particularly those outside Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces.

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But that remoteness has preserved the history and charm of the islands — also known by their anglicized name, the Magdalen Islands — rewarding those who do make it there.

Settled in the 1700s mostly by Acadian émigrés from other parts of what is now Atlantic Canada, the Iles de la Madeleine were under the jurisdiction of Newfoundland before they were handed over to Quebec in 1774. Six of its seven populated islands are connected by narrow sand dunes, while the seventh is accessible only by boat.

Even though they are part of Quebec, the islands are closer geographically to Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. And in practical terms, they are an amalgam of all their neighbours.

From Quebec comes the dominant language of the Iles and a love of fine food. Some parts of their topography echo the ruddy sandstone cliffs of P.E.I., others the rolling green hills of Nova Scotia. And like that of many of its neighbours, the economy of the islands relies heavily on the fishery.

These days, the islands' 300 or so commercial fishermen spend most of their time fishing for lobster, but mackerel, crab, scallops and oysters are also harvested off the coast. And Madelinots, as residents of the Madeleines call themselves, know just what to do with that bounty from the sea.

Johanne Vigneau is a native of the islands and one of its best-known chefs. Both at her restaurant, La Table des Roy, and her cookware store and school, Gourmande de Nature, she focuses on using as much locally produced food as possible, from seafood and beef to cheese and produce.

Take a cooking class led by Vigneau and Evangeline Gaudet at Gourmande de Nature on the island of Cap-aux-Meules and you'll learn how to artfully dismember a lobster to extract every last scrap of succulent flesh from its shell.

It's a messy business, but when you sit down later to eat lobster bruschetta, Thai-spiced lobster bisque and open-faced lobster ravioli, you'll realize it has been worth the effort.

On the neighbouring island of Havre-aux-Maisons, the Fumoir d'Antan smokes 30,000 pounds of herring a year in the traditional way, brined and hung high over smouldering piles of birch and maple for 60 to 90 days. About 40 smokehouses operated on the islands until the 1970s, when they fell victim to the demise of the local herring fishery.

Brothers Benoit and Daniel Arseneau, whose family had been fishing and smoking herring on the islands for three generations, revived the tradition in 1996 when herring returned to the islands. At the Fumoir d'Antan, you can get a guided tour that walks you through the history of the herring fishery on the Madeleines and then buy some smoked fish to take home.

Also worth a taste are the delectable raw-milk cheeses produced by the Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent at the opposite end of the Ile du Havre-aux-Maisons. And if nibbling cheese and smoked fish has made you thirsty, hop south to the Ile du Havre-Aubert for a beer at the island's lone microbrewery, A l'Abri de la Tempête. If you're feeling brave, try the 11-per-cent alcohol Corps Mort, which translates as Dead Body.

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Nothing captures the distinctive character of each of the islands like a trip from one end of the archipelago to the other.

Near the top is Grande-Entrée, known as the lobster capital of Quebec. On this ruggedly forested island is a bustling harbour where fishermen set off before dawn to harvest their day's catch. If you're there later in the morning, you might see them returning to sort and off-load bins laden with crustaceans.

On the southernmost island, Havre-Aubert, the artsy side of the Madeleines is the draw. As soon as the sun comes out, tourists and locals flock to La Grave, a well-preserved strip of historic shingled buildings on the water that is home to local artisans, jewellers and art galleries as well as cafés and restaurants where you can listen to traditional Acadian music.

Don't miss one of the most unique shops near the strip, Les Artisans du Sable, where a unique moulding process allows the gallery to create sculptural and practical objects out of natural sand from the islands.




If you just want to feel sand between your toes, plan a stop at one of the many beaches on the island. One of the most spectacular is the Dune du Sud (South Dune) on the Ile du Havre-aux-Maisons, where red sandstone cliffs and caves create a spectacular backdrop to 22 kilometres of white sand beach.

For an equally stunning photo op, ask for directions to the Butte du Vent on the Iles du Cap-aux-Meules. After a bumpy drive, and hike to the top of the hill, the reward is a 360-degree panorama of the islands and ocean.

And if you want to work off some of the food and wine you've eaten on the islands, consider taking part in one of the active sports the island is known for. Its more exposed beaches are a paradise for wind surfers and kite-buggy riders, while its sheltered waters are ideal for kayaking and standup paddleboarding.

The writer was a guest of Tourisme Quebec, Le Quebec Maritime and Tourisme Iles de la Madeleine. The article was not read or approved of by these hosts before publication.

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