

BACK EAST

The long trip to eastern Québec's riverside villages, whales and gulf beaches

Whale watching in Tadoussac

Even for a born-and-raised Montréaler like me, the eastern side of Québec is a place apart. The region, which extends from wolf-haunted forests to windswept islands, simply feels less tame than the west. Québécois accents grow stronger here — in some parts of the Gaspésie, you can hear the strains of Acadian French descended from the language of 17th- and 18th-century settlers. It's a long way from Vermont. But for visitors with several days or more to explore, a trip to eastern Québec offers rich rewards.

POINTS NORTH

La Route des Navigateurs,
routedesnavigateurs.ca/en

Boulangerie Niemand,
82 avenue Morel,
Kamouraska, facebook.com/
boulangerieniemand

Festival en Chanson de Petite-Vallée,
festivalenchanson.com

Gaspésie National Park,
1981 route du Parc, Sainte-
Anne-des-Monts, sepaq.com/
pq/gas

Baie-Saint-Paul Museum of Contemporary Art, 23 rue
Ambroise-Fafard, Baie-Saint-
Paul, macbsp.com

Musée de Charlevoix,
10 chemin du Havre, La
Malbaie, museecharlevoix.
qc.ca

Train de Charlevoix,
5300 boulevard Sainte-Anne,
Québec, traindecharlevoix.
com

Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park, 182 rue de
l'Église, Tadoussac, parks.
canada.ca/amnc-nmca/qc/
saguenay

Marine Mammal Interpretation Center,
108 rue de la Cale Sèche,
Tadoussac, gremm.org/en

Not long ago, in search of some wildness myself, I followed the Trans-Canada Highway, then Route 132, eastward from Québec City, watching as the landscape grew greener and emptier. Hugging the southern edge of the Saint Lawrence River, Route 132 is more whimsically called **LA ROUTE DES NAVIGATEURS**, or the seafarers' route, and it serves as the gateway to waterside villages of the Bas-Saint-Laurent and the Gaspésie's world-class hiking. With each passing mile, the waters of the Saint Lawrence become saltier as they flow toward the sea.

Perhaps the most picturesque village in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region is riverfront **KAMOURASKA**, a meadow- and farmland-wrapped community that's a five-hour drive from Burlington. Known to locals as *le doux pays*, "the sweet land," it's famed for fabulous sunsets and is the setting for an eponymous historical novel that's a Québécois literary touchstone. Bright Victorian homes sporting gabled roofs and wrap-around verandas line its main street, alongside boutiques and gourmet eateries. One favorite is the flower-draped **BOULANGERIE NIEMAND**, beloved for its artisanal breads and pastries.

La Route des Navigateurs eventually brings travelers to **GASPÉSIE** (Gaspé Peninsula), long a favorite summertime



Festival en Chanson de Petite-Vallée



Les Îles de la Madeleine



escape. In this maritime region in the far reaches of eastern Québec, colorful clapboard cottages follow the shore. The distinctive notes of traditional and contemporary Gaspésienne folk music can be heard at the area's annual **FESTIVAL EN CHANSON DE PETITE-VALLÉE**, taking place this year from July 28 to August 5. While **GASPÉSIE NATIONAL PARK** is a nearly nine-hour drive from Burlington, it's worth the journey for access to spectacular trails through a refuge encompassing tundra and venerable old stands of balsam fir.

The river's north shore, meanwhile, is a haven of another kind. Generations of artists, writers and summer cottagers have sought the painterly landscapes of its **CHARLEVOIX** region, where Baie-Saint-Paul is a cultural hub around five hours from Burlington. Art galleries and craft boutiques lend the historic community a bohemian feel. This summer is the 100th anniversary of Québécois painter Jean-Paul Riopelle's birth, and two Charlevoix museums are marking the occasion with major Riopelle exhibitions: You can find his work at the **BAIE-SAINT-PAUL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART** and the **MUSÉE DE CHARLEVOIX** in nearby La Malbaie. Also debuting this summer is zero-emissions rail travel along the **TRAIN DE CHARLEVOIX** between Québec City and Baie-Saint-Paul, the first passenger train in North America powered entirely by green hydrogen.

From there, the landscape gets woolier as you travel north and east toward the **SAGUENAY-ST. LAWRENCE MARINE PARK**, frequented by migratory whales and local belugas from May through October. A hub for whale-watching tours is **TADOUSSAC**, where wildlife seekers head to sea, visit the excellent **MARINE MAMMAL INTERPRETATION CENTER** and spot minke from shore while walking the 0.6-mile **POINTE DE L'ISLET TRAIL**.

Even farther afield in eastern Québec are **LES ÎLES DE LA MADELEINE**, or the Magdalen Islands, an archipelago of eight islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Furry white harp seal pups born on nearby ice floes draw visitors in February, but in summer *les îles* are beloved for their rugged red cliffs, grassy sand dunes and almost 200 miles of fine, white-sand beaches whose water can reach a swimmable 64 degrees. Just getting there is an adventure: You can choose between the five-hour ferry from Prince Edward Island and summer-only direct flights from Montréal and Québec City.

Despite a fine drizzle back in Bas-Saint-Laurent, the sun pierced through the clouds, painting the sky with orange and pink streaks — one of those famous riverside sunsets I heard so much about. Leaving Kamouraska behind, I set a course in the direction of Gaspésie, traveling seaward into the darkening east.

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