

Go to Tadoussac for the whale watching, but stay for the outstanding cuisine, craft beers and scenery

Nancy Truman: Each individual's tail is as unique as a human fingerprint, making it easy for researchers — and observant whale watchers — to identify



. Nancy Truman



NATIONAL POST

September 27, 2019
5:30 PM EDT

Last Updated
October 1, 2019
3:34 PM EDT

Filed under
Travel



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Surely, the dream of every whale-watcher is to snap a perfect photo or video of the world's largest mammal leaping from the depths of the ocean, water splashing in all directions. I expected no less when I travelled to the Saguenay and Maritime regions of Quebec. Sadly, no whale breached while I was out in the Saguenay St-Laurent Marine Park. But that doesn't mean the couple of days spent in this corner of Quebec weren't full of lasting memories.

Every May to October, Tadoussac, a town of 800 perched on a hill overlooking the spot where the Saguenay and St. Lawrence Rivers

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154-year-old, whitewashed, red-roofed Hôtel Tadoussac and Mission Church of Sainte-Croix-de-Tadoussac from 1747.

Arriving a day before our pre-booked excursion afforded time to enjoy the town and its surroundings. We spent our time whale-spotting from shore; visiting the oldest wooden church in Canada, built in 1747; and seeing the replica Chauvin Fur Trading Post commissioned by William Cloverdale, president of Canada Steamship Line and onetime owner of Hôtel Tadoussac.



· Nancy Truman

The best part of an afternoon was spent honing up on our whale knowledge at the Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre. Members of the Group for Research and Education on Marine Mammals — a non-

profit dedicated to whale research and marine conservation education — were on hand to walk guests through the interactive displays. Discoveries included why whales migrate from the Caribbean to the Saguenay estuary each year; what they eat; the size different species grow to; and how some whales feed with baleen, while others have teeth. A handful of whale skeletons suspended from the ceiling were impressive enough, but an expansion this winter will see the collection grow. A short *National Geographic* film, *Mission Critical: Call of the Baby Beluga*, about the rescue of a baby beluga (one of the 900 that live in the St. Lawrence River), was a great way to learn about the belugas.

The next morning, with clouds threatening rain, I suited up in a Mustang jacket and waterproof overalls, tucked my Nikon and zoom lens under my jacket and boarded one of Croisières AML's Zodiacs for a two-and-a-half hour whale-watching cruise, feeling fully confident we would witness a whale breaching. This trait is thought to be a whale's version of a long-distance call, though some researchers speculate it could be a mating ritual to attract or warn off other whales. Before long, our guide pointed to a pod of snowy white Belugas, watching over a pair of grey-hued youth. The captain lined up parallel with the pod, explaining that these "smiling" Arctic whales are endangered and it is illegal to approach them in a boat or kayak or put your craft in their path. The Saguenay St-Laurent Marine Park was created to protect the belugas that live year-round in the St. Lawrence, and in 2011, whale tour operators, researchers and Parks Canada agreed to

Farther out, we joined other Zodiacs bobbing a distance from a pair of fin whales and stayed a while to catch a glimpse of the backs and dorsal fins of these large whales as they surfaced. While waiting for the fins to



.Whale-watching excursion in the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park. *Mathieu Dupuis/Le Québec maritime*

resurface, our guide

announced there's a Northern minke whale starboard. While these small whales are known to breach often, this one flashed a dorsal fin and was gone. We watched while the fin whales resurfaced and dived again. Then, we were off racing across the St. Lawrence — cold salt water and wind pummeling our faces — to a spot near Île Verte. We followed the tall plumes of mist from their blowholes and arrived in time to see them dive. Again, no breach, but I did get several shots of one as it gracefully revealed its tail flukes as if posing for us. Each individual's tail is as unique as a human fingerprint, making it easy for researchers — and observant whale watchers — to identify.

After more than two hours zig-zagging across the St. Lawrence, I'm disappointed to be leaving the whales behind. In hindsight though, I'm just as awed to have seen four of the 10 whale species known to hang out in the St. Lawrence estuary, as I was when I photographed the Big Five in Africa.

While the Saguenay estuary is a veritable “open buffet” for whales — which consume an average 2,000 kg of food a day, which for belugas could be crab, lobster, shrimp, smelt or herring — there's still plenty of seafood to enjoy back on shore.

Among the newer crop of restaurants making a splash with menus showcasing the region's bounty is Chez Matilde, opened by Mireille Perron and Jean-Sébastien Sicard in 2007. Lunch features include North Atlantic specialties such as salmon tartare, mussels, lobster linguini and l'arrivage du jour (the catch of the day), which on my visit was a tender, succulent serving of halibut topped with a salsa of figs and balsamic vinaigrette, a bean purée and a fresh salad of arugula, snow peas and heirloom cherry tomatoes. A pint of Crââbe Bitter, which takes its name from the blue crab shells added to the brewing process at Microbrasserie St-Pancre in Baie-Comeau, Que., proved the perfect complement to the seafood.

meats using plants found in the boreal forest, from wild mushrooms to Labrador tea, wild blueberries, raspberries and lingon berries, as well as spruce and alder. Onsite smokehouses produce amazing salmon and duck. Come with an appetite: The five-course le Croutier du Fjord — seafood chowder; regular and maple-smoked salmon, marinated turbot; a toasted bannock topped with cheese from the neighbouring Charlevoix region; and a steaming crock of lobster tail, shrimp, scallops, fish and seasonal vegetables in a lobster bisque sauce — comes on a serving board the width of the table. There is also a “turf” board that includes smoked duck, foie gras, and osso bucco.

The writer was a guest of Quebec Tourism

www.quebecoriginal.com/en-ca and Quebec Maritime Tourism

www.quebecmaritime.ca.

If you go

Getting there Air Canada Express – Jazz flies from Montreal and Quebec City to Saguenay/Bagotville Airport. Tadoussac is less than two hours by car from Saguenay via Highway 172. Quebec City Jean Lesage International Airport is about a three-hour drive on Hwy 138, or you could drive the 480 km from Montreal, planning to stop in Saguenay along the way.

Where to stay Hôtel Tadoussac offers a full resort experience and is a short walk from restaurants, shops and the docks. Many of the generously proportioned rooms afford a view of Tadoussac Bay and the St. Lawrence River, and offer modern amenities including free high-speed WiFi. There is an outdoor pool for those who find the river temperature a tad too cold, and tennis courts. A generous breakfast buffet is served in Le Coverdale, a grand dining room with period woodwork and mural.

Quaff a pint Quebec is renowned for its excellent craft beers and Tadoussac doesn't disappoint. Restaurants carry a variety of regional craft brews, but for a really local experience head to Microbrasserie Tadoussac on the board for a flight or perhaps a pint of Tadoussac Pale (Wh) Ale — in honour of the belugas. Microbrasserie Tadoussac donates 10 cents to GREMM for every litre of this ale sold.

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in their fill of krill before heading to their Caribbean breeding grounds. Whales live on their blubber during the months they are in warmer water. Getting on the water is the best way to see more species. The 2.5-hour Zodiac tour I took with Croisières AML in the Saguenay St-Laurent Marine Park is available from late April to late October twice daily. The company also offers boat tours — a better option for families with young children or those who like their creature comforts. For more information, go to www.croisieresaml.com.

From land, it is easy to spot such species as minke whales, seals and belugas, which often come close to shore to feed. In town, head to De la Pointe-de-l'Islet — a scenic 900-metre wooden boardwalk next to the St. Lawrence Estuary that runs from the Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre to the mouth of the Saguenay River. Bring a picnic, or your morning coffee and choose a bench or a spot down on the rocks and wait for the whales to come by.

Parks Canada's Cap-de-Bon-Désir Interpretation and Observation Centre, 35 km from town in Les Bergeronnes, is an ideal spot for whale watching. Belugas, porpoises and other whales often swim within a few hundred feet of the shore. And on a cold or rainy day, a sheltered lookout keeps you warm and dry while you have lunch and wait for whales to go by. Park guides are on hand to identify the sea animals and answer questions. Children and the young at heart can climb down the rocks to the shore to experience Ocean Encounters: Each day divers bring up animals from the bottom of the estuary to let visitors see what lives in the depths of the river. At the lightkeeper's house, learn about the whales and the history of the lighthouse and its lightkeepers, or test your talents as a river pilot. For more information on this park and others, go to: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/amnc-nmca/qc/saguenay/>

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