

Cruising the best of Quebec

By **STEVE JOHNSON** - Canoe Travel reader

Most Canadians associate a boat cruise with a trip to the [Caribbean](#) or perhaps Alaska. My wife and I had a chance to take a cruise that did not feature the hot tropics or icebergs. Instead, we experienced Quebecois culture and fine-dining.

Our adventure began with a trip to the Magdalen Islands located in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. After having spent four glorious days on the islands, we were looking for an interesting way to return to Montreal. We decided on a boat cruise that promised stop-offs in the Gaspé Peninsula, Old Quebec and finally Montreal.

We boarded the boat at the small town of Cap-aux-Meules, located on the Magdalen Islands. It was a large-style cruise ship that brought back memories of the television series, *The Love Boat*. Immediately, I knew my wife and I would stand out. The other passengers were mainly retired francophones from Quebec in their 60's and 70's. My wife and I are in our thirties. She is from [Mexico](#) and I am from Saskatchewan.

If I had any doubts about fitting in, I was put at ease by the friendly staff aboard the ship. The check-in staff provided excellent service in French and English and explained to us where our cabin was located. We were pleasantly surprised to find a large and clean room with a double bed and shower.

Once we settled in, we decided to visit the outside deck to see the boat leaving from the harbour. A number of people had gathered on shore to say goodbye to friends or relatives. As the boat was leaving, my wife and I re-enacted the romantic scene from *Titanic* except Celine Dion did not provide the soundtrack.

After having indulged our Hollywood fantasies, we explored the entertainment options on board. Passengers with different interests and tastes were able to find their niche. There was a movie room that showed Hollywood films and documentaries about the St. Lawrence, a bridge club from Ottawa was having a tournament, while many other passengers just chose to pass the time outside and enjoy the ocean air.



In this photo, we have departed the Magdalen Islands and are starting our journey in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Sandra Garrido)

My wife and I heard a singer entertaining in the lounge room so we decided to investigate. The bar was fully stocked and the crowd was enjoying itself. The singer was multi-talented, being able to play the trumpet, harmonica and keyboards. He alternated between popular American classics like Elvis Presley and traditional Quebecois songs. He even jumped onto the dance floor leading line-dancing to one or two country songs.

I was surprised to hear a conversation in English at the next table. After introducing myself, I met Ann from Winnipeg who was on the cruise with a group of retired women. I asked for her impressions about the cruise. She said, "This is my first cruise and I am having a very good time. I speak enough French to get by and the staff is very friendly. Everyone speaks both languages so that is not a problem. It is also fun to interact with the other passengers from Quebec. They do not just sit on their hands, but like to get up and dance and have fun."

After having an evening of entertainment, we made our way back to the cabin and had a restful sleep. The next morning, the boat had docked in Chandler, located on the Gaspé Peninsula. Chandler is about fifty kilometres from the town of Percé and the famous Rock Percé. The boat cruise staff had organized different tour options from which the passengers could choose their preference. We picked a boat trip to the Rock Percé and Bonaventure Island. A shuttle bus took us to Percé and then boarded a small boat to start our tour. The highlight was seeing the bird sanctuary on Bonaventure Island. Upon return, we boarded the bus and returned to our cruise ship.



This is a photo from Cap-Aux-Meules on the Magdalen Islands just as the boat is set to depart. (Sandra Garrido)

An excellent feature of our boat cruise was the food. Breakfast and lunch was cafeteria style, with the food far exceeding any cafeteria I have recently visited. One hilarious moment occurred when I tried explaining something in my somewhat broken French. I ended up with applesauce on my potatoes instead of gravy not for any fault of the serving staff, but due to my own linguistic inabilities. I have now permanently memorized the French words for applesauce and gravy!

Supper was fine dining with a Maître D. assigning tables. Passengers could choose from two main courses. The meal also featured an appetizer, soup, and dessert. The wine selection could have been from an upscale restaurant in Quebec City or Montreal with the service also matching the ambiance.

The scenery also helped to set the mood for a perfect evening. We passed by the cliffs and trees along the Gaspé Peninsula interspersed with the odd town with names like Petit Cap or Grande Vallée.

The next day, we arrived in Quebec City around lunchtime. As we were approaching Quebec City, it was possible to see the Chateau Frontenac and the Citadel forming a distinctive skyline. The ship's staff had again organized a diverse itinerary that would give passengers an excellent introduction to the city. My wife and I decided to meet up with friends at a bistro and explore the city on our own. After about four hours in the old Quebec, we boarded the boat for the final leg of the journey to Montreal.

The staff had organized a special event for our final evening aboard the ship. All passengers were invited to a ball called mi-carême. Passengers were encouraged to wear costumes. Mi-carême originated in France during the Middle Ages when people would disguise themselves during lent and go door-to-door. The host would have to guess the identity of the person and then offer treats once the game was over. It is still practiced on the Magdelan Islands and for one evening aboard our cruise ship. Passengers wore an array of costumes ranging from a prison convict to a lion. Prizes were given out for the best disguise and everyone finished the evening by dancing and singing.

We arrived in Montreal early the next morning. Even though my wife and I had started the voyage somewhat unsure whether or not we would fit in, we finished the trip having enjoyed the friendly service and warmth of our fellow passengers. By the way, the French word for applesauce is "sauce aux pommes."

My wife and I travelled aboard the CTMA Vacancier cruise ship. They have numerous departures from Montreal with a stop-over on the Magdelan Islands with the return journey to Montreal. There are also various themed boat cruises throughout the summer including a one week French immersion cruise. You can find out more about their departures and cruises by visiting www.ctma.ca.

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