

# Bleak beauty to winter life on Isle aux Grues

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 23, 2011



The rooms at Auberge des Dunes on Isle aux Grues are bright and basic.

**Photograph by:** Auberge des Dunes, Auberge des Dunes

Imagine a nearly private island, a short plane ride to get there and socializing with the locals once you settle in. It's a recipe for a wintertime getaway or even New Year's Eve that is intriguing and different.

There are a few "buts." Glamorous as it sounds, Isle aux Grues, about an hour north of Lévis, is home only to two-star inns. Plus, although there are basic winter pastimes, there is no resort life. Still, you'll enjoy a soupçon of adventure. And I guarantee that you won't bump into anyone you know.

Isle aux Grues is part of a 21-island archipelago in the St. Lawrence River that has two claims to fame. It is a stopover during spring and fall for the migrating snow geese who feed on marine plants that are abundant when the tides are low. And, the island is the source of Riopelle de l'Isle cheese, a delicacy named for Jean-Paul Riopelle, the Quebec artist who summered and painted there for many years.

This picturesque spot is opposite the mainland town of Montmagny and it is accessible only by ferry and cruise boats from April to December, and by small plane year round. The adventure starts here.

Air Montmagny flies twin-engined, nine-passenger Britten-Norman Islanders and single-engine, five-passenger Cessna 206s several times a day. Their core clients are schoolchildren, workers and shoppers who need to get to Montmagny. The round-trip from Montmagny to Isle aux Grues takes four to five minutes and costs about \$22 each way. You have to admit, it's an exciting little escapade – and a bargain.

Most visitors to Isle aux Grues come during warm-weather months, yet there is a bleak beauty to the landscape in winter. Life on an island without a bridge is quiet at the busiest of times, but there are trails through a park for cross-country skiing or snowshoeing, or you can join up with the locals who orchestrate a few events that keep the winter months interesting.

Johanne Vézina and Joël Bernier, both natives of Isle aux Grues, spent their honeymoon at Auberge des Dunes nearly 25 years ago. Johanne liked it so much that she started work there shortly after. And years later, the couple bought the place.

Next week, the New Year's Eve party at Auberge aux Dunes will be the highlight of the holiday season.

Vézina and Bernier have decked their dining room with glittery decorations and are expecting nearly 100 townsfolk, many with children in tow, for line dancing and rock 'n' roll from 9 p.m. until about 2 a.m.

The inn is a rambling, nine-room lodge that rates two stars on Tourism Quebec's scale of one-to-five stars, so be prepared for simple surroundings, but it has fine qualities if you are willing to live without fancy hotel accoutrements. Here, the luxuries are the splendid setting on the western tip of the island with views of the St. Lawrence and the view of the sun setting over the frosty water.

The heart of the auberge is an exceptional log cottage house dating from the 1700s.

There still are traces of old Quebec in the original floors, the dark wooden ceiling beams and the striking walls of knotty spruce. From there, the decor is a hodgepodge of old and new. The lounge is filled with cranberry velvet

Victorian settees. The dining room is a mix of vintage Quebec pine pieces and flowered oilcloth table covers. The new extension is an airy, bright sports bar with a pool table and a large-screen television.

The winner, art-wise, is the collection of superb works by the talented photographer Michel St-Jean, who has captured the region's snow geese in magnificent colour. The inn's motel-style guest rooms are bright and basic, with antique-style country furniture and fabulous views.

Vézina's buffet breakfast includes homemade cretons and waffles topped with the Dunes's own maple syrup. At night, dinner might feature duck confit, pork flavoured with ginger and maple, or coquille St. Antoine, a creamy concoction of shrimp and scallops in a sauce made with local cheese.

After the bacchanalia of New Year's Eve, the islanders' main event will be a repentant series of Sundays in January, the "vente des âmes," which translates as "the selling of souls." It sounds ominous, but these happenings are sociable get-togethers. Almost all of the community's 160 or so residents show up for Mass followed by a buffet lunch and an auction of donated goods to benefit the church. Business has been brisk so far. In a bidding war last year, a jar of strawberry jam was sold for \$350.

In March, Isle aux Grues's major happening is the Mi-Carême, a Mardi Gras type of extravaganza which is linked to Lent and has roots in the Middle Ages. Months ahead of time, the community splits into groups to plan costumes and parties. In the past, revellers frolicked as Pink Panthers, disco divas or circus performers, but this season's get-ups are top secret until the big week. There even is a Mi-Carême cheese, a tribute to the holiday festivities, sold at the Fromagerie Île-aux-Grues.

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### **If You Go**

Montmagny is a three-hour drive from Montreal via South Shore Highway 20 East and Exit 376.

Auberge des Dunes: 418-248-0129, auberge-des-dunes.com; 118 chemin de la Basse-Ville, Isle aux Grues.

Price: Lodging, breakfast and supper, \$154-169 for two. Open Mon.-Sun.

Société des traversiers du Québec: 418-643-2019, traversiers.gouv.qc.ca; April-mid-December (weather-

dependant). The eight-kilometre ferry takes about an hour, including boarding and unloading. The ferry is free.

Air Montmagny: 418-248-3545, airmontmagny.com, \$22 one-way p.p., (\$65 minimum per flight); Montmagny, between four and 12 round-trip flights per day to Isle aux Grues, between 8 a.m. and 5

p.m. Aerial tours focus on the 21-island archipelago, Quebec City and the Beaupré Coast with Montmorency Falls and Mont Ste. Anne.

Regional tourism information: 418- 241-5117, [isle-aux-grues.com](http://isle-aux-grues.com); Tourisme Chaudière-Appalaches: 888- 831-4411, [chaudiere-appalaches.com](http://chaudiere-appalaches.com)

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