

Country Roads: Enjoy ‘another rhythm of life’ on First Nations reserve

Whale-watching is dramatic, humbling

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 5, 2013



The Natakam condos at the Innu reserve of Essipit were built for whale-watching on the St. Lawrence River.

Photograph by: Luc Gagné/Tourisme Côte-Nord/Manicouagan

At the outdoorsy First Nations community of Essipit, it's just you, the water and the whales.

Essipit is a First Nations reserve near the shore of the St. Lawrence River, about 40 kilometres past Tadoussac, Quebec's well-known whale-watching hub. Adjacent to the Quebec village of Les Escoumins, the reserve is home to about 400 people, both Innu and allochtones, or non-natives.

The Côte Nord from Tadoussac to Essipit embraces one of Quebec's most remarkable sites, the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park. I sweet-talked Nadia Ménard, an eco-system scientist with the Marine Park, into giving me a layman's explanation of the whale phenomenon. This conservation area is the meeting point of the freshwater Saguenay Fjord and the St. Lawrence River, which is salty from this point to the Atlantic Ocean, 1,000 kilometres downstream. The resulting currents and the Laurentian Channel, a vast, deep underwater valley, create the precious summer feeding grounds for whales and seals and a seascape that is both dramatic and humbling. To prepare for an encounter with whales, it's a good idea to get a quick education at the Marine Discovery Centre in Les

Escoumins.

Essipit has developed a tourism industry around the adventure of sea-life observation and the delights of superb trout fishing in freshwater lakes. I don't fish, but I'm told this is the real thing and it's spectacular. There are no farmed fish and no artificially restocked ponds. Les Pourvoiries Essipit, an award-winning outfitter, organizes rustic lodging in cabins.

"The fishing camps have no hair dryers or computers," said Jeannine Villeneuve, Essipit's director of communications. "They are tranquil, without electricity, cellular service or Internet.

"This vacation is for relaxing, reading, walking in the woods and fishing.

"It's another rhythm of life, totally surrounded by the great outdoors."

Croisières Essipit is a zippier experience in nature. Whale-watchers bundle up in waterproof layers and board a bouncy Zodiac boat for cruises out in choppy open water — the St. Lawrence is about 25 kilometres wide here. These are suspenseful and thrilling excursions with everyone on board swinging and swaying, gripping the gunwales and craning their necks for a fleeting glimpse of impressive minke or finback whales. In August, you might spot the extraordinary blue whale, the world's largest animal, about 28 metres long and weighing 80 to 120 tonnes. That's almost unimaginable when you consider a school bus measures 10 to 20 metres and weighs 10 to 20 tonnes.

Essipit rents vacation condos that were built for whale-watching, up close and personal. Called Natakam (an Innu word for "riverfront"), the compact, one- and two-bedroom apartments overlook the St. Lawrence and have private patios or balconies and handy binoculars. From your patio, you might even spot a minke, a blue whale or a pod of belugas.

"There are other whale-watching sites along this coast," Villeneuve said. "But most are campgrounds, and the Natakam accommodations are very comfortable. The sunrise over the water is hypnotic, and this is an idyllic place to unwind."

The Natakam condo complex stretches alongside walking paths that meander down to the river. They're dotted with interpretative panels on Innu culture, especially the community's early shelters — wigwams and teepees fashioned out of bark and the skins of beaver, moose and caribou.

For another breezy history lesson, the Centre Archéo-Topo, a multimedia museum in nearby Bergeronnes, highlights thousands of years of First Nations life and the discoveries in the 1500s of French explorers and Basque fishermen who came for cod and oil from whales and seals. The museum has preserved artifacts from local archeological digs.

Even better for local cultural immersion, the annual Essipit Pow-Wow, July 19-21, will be an all-out party with shows, family fun and traditional folklore.

Visitors to Natakam and Les Pourvoiries can bring their own provisions from home, but I recommend going local at the neighbourhood's grocery stores and bakeries. At La Pêcheurie Manicouagan, which

is both a fish store and a waterfront restaurant, the seafood is so fresh, you would think it jumped out of the St. Lawrence and into the kitchen. The catch includes turbot, cod, sole, halibut, clams, shrimp, snow crab, scallops and even lobster from waters near Gaspé. To stock the home fridge, La Pêcheurie prepares seafood salads and pizza, shrimp mousse, clam chowder and sandwiches of shrimp, lobster and crab.

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IF YOU GO

Essipit/Les Escoumins are about 500 km or a six-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 40 east and Route 138 to Baie-Sainte-Catherine. Take the 10-minute ferry across the Saguenay, which is free and runs frequently. Continue east on Route 138.

Les Entreprises Essipit includes Natakam condos, Les Pourvoiries outfitters, Shipek waterfront chalets, as well as other cottages and campsites: 888-868-6666, 418-233-2266, www.essipit.com; 46 rue de la Réserve, Essipit, Les Escoumins, Croisières Essipit.

Price: Natakam's one- and two-bedroom condos, some with fireplaces: \$166 per night for four people, incl. Internet and riverfront walking trails. Extra person, \$18. Shipek waterfront chalets for two, \$130. Les Pourvoiries: from \$82 p.p., per night, in chalets accommodating between four and 22 people, rowboats and fishing permits. Family rates available. Example, \$635 for five days for four people.

Essipit Croisières: 888-868-6666, 418-233-2266, www.essipit.com; 498 rue de la mer, Bergeronnes; weatherproof gear provided; June 7-Oct. 6; adult Zodiac cruise, \$56.40; for ages 16 and under, \$38.65.

La Pêcheurie Manicouagan: 418-233-3122, www.fruitsdemeretpoissons.com; 152 rue Marcellin E./Route 138, Les Escoumins; open daily for lunch and dinner, but reservations are recommended.

More info: Tourisme Côte-Nord/Manicouagan: 888-463-5319, www.tourismemanicouagan.com. Innu culture & Essipit Reserve: 418 233-2509, www.innu-essipit.com; Centre Archéo-Topo, 866-832-6286, www.archeotopo.com, open daily June-Sept.; Marine Environment Discovery Centre, 418 233-4414, Les Escoumins, www.pc.gc.ca/amnc-nmca/qc/saguenay.