

Checking In: Lovely little inn captures wonder of the Gaspé

Auberge du Grand Fleuve reveals beauty of the water with walls made out of glass

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 26, 2013



Auberge du Grand Fleuve has a dramatic setting on the shore of the St. Lawrence River in Métis-sur-mer in the Gaspé.

Photograph by: Patrice Guillemain/ Auberge du Grand Fleuve

Auberge du Grand Fleuve is all about simplicity.

It is a 15-room inn on the shore of the St-Lawrence River in Métis-sur-mer along the first stretch of the north shore of the Gaspé Peninsula.

That merits star billing. This coast is a singularly beautiful corner of Quebec, subject to the moods of the wind and the water, an ever-changing inspiration for poets and artists and also a huge draw for tourists. And Gaspé is so intriguing because it is a contrary place, often chilly and damp when Montreal is baking in the hot summer sun. Or it can be bathed in heat and light when it's raining elsewhere in Quebec. There is never a dull moment.

Auberge du Grand Fleuve captures all that wonder, simply by being there. Outdoors, it has the plain, square lines of an old tavern, which it was, but it adds a lawn and a small garden that face the river.

The best way to spend at least part of a day is to experience the seascape. At high tide, the waves lap at a seawall that protects Grand Fleuve from floods. Low tide lays bare the rocks, the sand and the seaweed. Sometimes, a seal will make an appearance, swimming or sunning on a rock. Even the fog is mesmerizing. It's all the ultimate in relaxation — as effective as massage, meditation or medication.

If you are brave, the Auberge lends out kayaks, but I looked at the slim single-seaters, then I looked at the turbulent waves and whitecaps, and settled for a long walk along the shore. House and garden fans will enjoy Métis Beach, an enclave of grand houses, mostly built generations ago by prominent Montreal families including the Redpaths, Birks, Molsons, Stewarts, Drummonds and MacDougalls. The anglo community still is so strong that the local *dépanneur* sells three English-language newspapers daily, including *The Gazette*.

Indoors, Grand Fleuve also captures the beauty of the water because its dining room and many of its guest rooms have full glass walls and decks looking out onto the St. Lawrence. There are so many windows that the inn is bright even when Gaspé grey prevails.

Auberge du Grand Fleuve also has excellent food and a convivial atmosphere. Guests meet, chat and share stories in the salons, at the bar or on the porch.

One of the main conversation pieces is Grand Fleuve's impressive collection of antique books — there are art books, biographies, cookbooks and mostly masterpieces of literature, hundreds of precious, well-worn books displayed on easels, on bookshelves and on tables. Books here are objets d'art, part of a comfortable clutter of chairs and tables, throw pillows and plants.

The owners, Marie Fradette, a former agronomist from Matane, and Raynald Pay, who sold antique books in Brittany, France, give Auberge du Grand Fleuve its great food tradition and its character. They met more than 20 years ago while trekking in Nepal and fell in love. Or, maybe she fell in love with his crêpes. Bretonne crêpes, of course.

Pay does breakfast and brings all of the authenticity of his French homeland to his craft. He uses organic buckwheat and whole-wheat flour to fashion large, wafer-thin discs. His griddle comes from Brittany, and it's hot, "but not too hot," he is quick to say. "The crêpe must stay moist."

He wields his wooden spatula, dabbing butter, swirling and spreading. Then he makes four folds — and voilà. Your crêpe is served with an egg on top and maple syrup. There also is a small buffet, with baked goods, homemade rillettes and jam that Marie makes with local apples, plums and berries, plus cheddar from the nearby Fromagerie du Littoral.

For dinner, the Auberge has two new talented young chefs for the season: François Morin from the Quebec foodie town of Montmagny, and Renaud Louis, who spent a year at *Maison Boulud* in Montreal. You can expect lots of seafood — halibut, scallops, shrimp and salmon smoked in-house — as well as guinea fowl, osso bucco, lamb and rabbit. Two of the house specialties this season are lobster ravioli and cod and cod liver — a delicacy that is a fishy version of foie gras.

The accommodations — 10 rooms upstairs and five hideaways in the Pavilion wing — are dressed down, but attractive. The main lodge is decked out in pastels with vintage country furniture and lots of extra blankets in case of a cold front. Grand Fleuve renovates a few rooms every season and the recent makeovers have new wooden flooring and top-of-the-line bathroom fixtures. The Pavilion has five cute, cheery rooms, decorated with modern furniture and vivid colours.

In reference to the sea, there are two schools of semantics. The St-Lawrence is a major river, and technically Métis-sur-mer is on the shore of the St-Lawrence estuary. But here, about 400 kilometres from the Atlantic Ocean, it is a salty body of water, complete with whitecaps and cycles of low and high tides. That's one reason many locals refer to it as "the sea."

As well, standing on the porch of Auberge du Grand Fleuve you usually cannot see the far shore, which is about 60 kilometres across, and that's another informal measure that people use to define the term.

IF YOU GO

Métis-sur-mer is a six-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 20 east to Route 132.

Auberge du Grand Fleuve: 866-936-3332, 418-936-3332, www.aubergedugrandfleuve.qc.ca; 131 Principale, Métis-sur-mer. Open until Oct. 8.

Price: \$225-\$269 for two, incl. breakfast and dinner; open to the public for dinner until Labour Day; open for dinner for inn guests until Oct 8.

Gaspé info: 800-463-0323, www.tourisme-gaspesie.com.

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[Previous](#)

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