



The dramatic coastline of Île du Havre Aubert, part of Quebec’s remote Îles de la Madeleine. PHOTOS: TOURISME ÎLES DE LA MADELEINE

CHECKING IN

ÎLE DU HAVRE AUBERT IS A STAR



ROCHELLE LASH

Île du Havre Aubert has tough competition, but I think it’s a winner.

This little island just might be the most picturesque of all of Les Îles de la Madeleine, one of the most unusual parts of Quebec. Les Îles make up a remote archipelago in the Gulf of St. Lawrence that is part of La Belle Province, but lies 135 kilometres north of Prince Edward Island.

Route 199 runs the length of the string of sea jewels, also known as the Magdalen Islands or the Maggies. It’s about 85 kilometres from tip to tip, from Île de Grande Entrée to Île du Havre Aubert, the southern end. You can drive or cycle the route, and stop to browse at craft shops or gather a gourmet picnic — with lobster, of course.

When you reach Île du Havre Aubert, it’s easy to explore, first by car. One particularly pretty road is Chemin d’en haut, which has dramatic views from atop the steep cliffs overlooking the St. Lawrence. A road less travelled is the loop through the island’s forests — they’re pleasant and peaceful, but not quite as luxuriant as the dense woods of mainland Quebec because the sandy soil and salty air take their toll.

When you are ready for a

walkabout, head for the sociable side of Île du Havre Aubert. La Grave is a charming waterfront promenade of boutiques, galleries, bistros and boîtes à chansons, all surrounded by hundreds of pleasure boats in the marina and fishing craft docked at the wharfs.

The bohemian community combines beach life with a Quebec-Acadian spirit. In fine weather, the streets and shore are alive with impromptu jam sessions of musicians with fiddles and accordions. These are free little shows, by the people, for the people, and they really evoke the soul and style of The Maggies: informal, inclusive, gentle and free-spirited. With music.

Live music also rocks Le Vent du Large, a tapas restaurant with a terrace, and Le Café de la Grave, which has a patio on the beach. Both are must-stops for a drink, the spectacular sea views and lunch or supper.

Besides music, Île du Havre Aubert is an artisans’ haven that showcases crafts such as the famous sand sculptures shown at the mini-museum, Artisan du Sable. There also is jewelry at Boutique Émerance and Le Limaçon, where fashion pieces are made with semi-precious stones mined in The Maggies.

Les Îles de la Madeleine produces an astounding 170 food and beverage products, including craft liquors from Le Barbocheux and beer brewed by À l’Abri de la Tempête. Among the shops specializing in treats is l’Étal, a tiny emporium selling local jams,



Auberge chez Denis à François is painted a bright colour, in keeping with local fishermen’s traditions of spotting their houses while still at sea.

beer, honey and cheese, as well as the brews.

Le Barbocheux distils digestifs and aperitifs from berries using old-time recipes dating to when each house made its own hooch because the islands were so isolated. “Barbocher” means to visit and sip a little drink at each stop, so you can start at cocktail hour along the waterfront, watch the splendid sunset and wind up at Auberge chez Denis et François for dinner.

Auberge chez Denis et François is the quintessential reflection of the culture and landscape of Îles de la Madeleine. It’s a sunny yellow clapboard house — painted a bright hue in keeping with a local tradition.

Auberge chez Denis et François is owned by the husband-and-wife team of Francine Pelletier and Denis Painchaud (François is Denis’s father). Known for its country dining room, it’s an invit-

ing space with blue and white floral tablecloths, wood-panelled walls and lots of contemporary abstract art on loan from Boutique d’art Tendence.

The core of the inn is an 1867 house that has expanded to accommodate tourists. The most recent addition is a bright, cheery six-room wing with bed quilts, pine furniture handcrafted by Denis and today’s comforts such as walk-in showers, individual climate control, flat-screen televisions, coffee machines, mini-refrigerators and Internet.

Chef Francine Pelletier is the star of the kitchen. “I call our food ‘cuisine terroir,’ but it is mostly of the sea,” Francine said. “We do freshly-caught fish, seafood, paella and cheeses and beef from the islands.” Some of her specialties are crab with avocado, scallops with Pernod, bouillabaisse, seafood pie and rack of lamb.

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IF YOU GO

Îles-de-la-Madeleine: 877-624-4437, www.tourismeillesdelamadeleine.com.

Île Havre-Aubert is 30 kilometres from the airport on Île du Havre-aux-Maisons. Two car-rental agencies operate at the airport: Hertz (888-818-4537, www.hertzesdelamadeleine.com) and Leblanc (844 969-9006, www.leblanclocationdautos.com).

Air Canada flies Montreal-Îles de la Madeleine, either non-stop (approximately 2.5 hours) or with stops in Quebec City and Gaspé (www.aircanada.com). Pascan airline flies from l’Aéroport de Saint-Hubert on the South Shore and Quebec City (www.pascan.com). Watch for seat sales, around \$550.

By ship: Escalpe Îles de la Madeleine co-ordinates international cruises. The luxurious Crystal Symphony will sail from Montreal (Sept. 27) to New York with a day-time stop in the Madeleines, and other ocean liners come from Boston, New York, Britain and Germany.

The Madeleine-based company Cruises CTMA (ctma.ca) travels weekly from Montreal, with departures starting June 12. If you drive, a five-hour ferry runs from Souris, Prince Edward Island.

Auberge chez Denis à François: 418-937-2371, aubergechezdenis.ca; Île Havre-Aubert, Îles de la Madeleine. Prices fluctuate: High season, approx. May to October, \$135-\$160 for two, including breakfast, Wi-Fi. Single rates available. Dinner costs \$30-\$40 p.p.

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