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7 Reasons To Visit the Magdalen Islands

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by Mark Stevens, photos by Sharon Matthews-Stevens | posted in: O Canada | 0

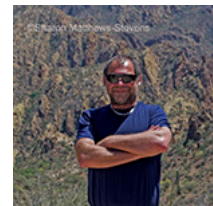
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Meet Mark and Sharon



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It's iron oxide that gives these gorgeous landforms at South Dunes their distinctive colour.

Not that you need seven reasons to visit this island chain that's a secret even to Canadians, a Quebec archipelago that's snuggled down in the Gulf of St. Lawrence north of Prince Edward Island and west of Cape Breton. Once you get here you'll find plenty.

But in case you need convincing (they are admittedly almost as remote as they are appealing), here are some reasons to add the Maggies to your bucket list.



Voluptuous dunes line the shore on Havre Aubert

Mark and Sharon have produced travel stories and photography for close to fifteen years. We've traveled from the Caribbean to the Yukon, from Newfoundland to Morocco.

Our stories and pictures have appeared in publications ranging from the *Globe and Mail* to *Sailing Magazine*, from *Just for Canadian Dentists* to *Ensemble Vacations*.

To see some of our published work and a list of print and online credits check out www.thewriteman.ca. If you'd like to see more travel

1. BEST BEACHES IN CANADA (AND ONE ON THE WORLD'S BEST LIST)

Three hundred kilometres of beaches. One's made it to the "world's best" list; one is a Canadian "top ten". I am a beach bum and usually reserve my enthusiasm for something with a palm tree for shade and a rum punch for company, so this is high praise: I love the beaches of Îles de la Madeleine.

Just be forewarned: they may be Caribbean-worthy but water temperatures are, uh, refreshing.



Fisherman holding lobster caught very early in the morning.

2. BEST LOBSTER IN THE WORLD

Lobster dinner at the restaurant (*avec* sea views) at la Salicorne. Breakfast the next morning – a lobster omelet, my first ever. In between – at 3 a.m. – a visit to Quebec's biggest lobster boat harbour.

It's the middle of lobster season right now (too bad if you missed it). A fleet of boats warms up, ready to cast off and head for their traps. Later that morning they return, holding bins full.

One captain calls out from his boat in singsong Acadian French. He grabs a lobster and lifts it up.

"What'd he say," I ask my friend Camilie.

"Best lobster in the world."

He may be right.

galleries and even some of Sharon's fine art photography go to www.sherryspex.com.

We've won photography and writing awards from organizations as diverse as Ontario Tourism, Travel Media Association of Canada and the Caribbean Tourism Organization - testament to both our fabulous pictures and the readability of our stories.

We love being on the move. We love getting those adventures down on paper. And we love seeing the world through the lens of a camera.

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One of several galleries in La Grave.

3. A LITTLE BIT OF CULTURE

Gilles LaPierre, erstwhile tour guide *extraordinaire*, takes out a home-made percussion instrument made from animal ribs and lays down a rhythm track to a reel with the house band in a packed waterside bar in a historic village called La Grave.

Just down the road an accordion player performs a jig.

These islands boast more than a dozen galleries. Glass-blowers, painters, sculptors.

In August there's an Acadian Festival. Live drama all summer. Come September they have an international storytelling festival.

On one sunny afternoon we crash the beginning of a puppet show fifty metres from the sea.

Beaches don't do it for you? Then come for the culture.



Cliffs at South Dunes.

4. THE RED CLIFFS OF THE MAGDALENS

Forget the white cliffs of Dover. Give me, for sheer beauty, the red cliffs of the Magdalens. They're made from mostly quartz healthily laced with iron oxide, these surreal sculptures craved by wind and wind. They shelter gorgeous beaches, they stand sentinel in the north.

Some of the most spectacular cliffs and formations are found in Fatima, but there are also some gorgeous examples at Grand Entrée.

But don't get too close. The soft material that lets the sea and wind create their wonders can collapse beneath you, sending you seaward. (See "Beaches" above: the water is not warm).



One of many exquisite meals in the Magdalen Islands. Here is one offering from la Table des Roy.

5. A FOODIE'S PARADISE

Prime rib of young locally-raised beef at la Table des Roy. An *amuse-bouche* that makes your mouth a happy camper. Clam chowder in a bowl made from bread at Café de la Grave. Dinner in a family-friendly setting at Chez Denis à François but boasting fare worthy of Old Quebec (scallops melting in your mouth). Lunch in a converted convent,

perfect food with an even better view.

A cooking lesson in lobster ravioli (Gourmande de Nature) or sign up to forage for edible mushrooms.

Artisanal cheeses. Smoked herring. And homemade chocolates with fresh berries or salt toffee for fillings at Chocolat Diane.

Bon appetit.



Just poured beers from a local brewery (L'Abri de la Tempête.)

6. ELEVEN-PER-CENT BEER

Ten-minute lesson in beer-making in a microbrewery called A L'Abri De La Tempête.

Then the tasting.

Beers with names – and sheer potency – that capture the imagination and cloud the consciousness.

"Beautiful Seasons", "Sea Foam", "Foghorn", "Mainland".

One's called "Dead Body." Eleven-per-cent alcohol. The name, surprisingly, doesn't come from the effects of this beverage but from a treacherous offshore rock.

Then again, it *is* a lethal brew.



Cows grazing next to colourful houses in the countryside – Havre-aux-Maisons

7. RAINBOW-PAINTED HOUSES

I am standing outside a schoolhouse been converted into an elegant Bed and Breakfast called *Auberge de la Butte Ronde*. It's shortly after sunrise.

The skies and seas match each other in complementary shades of blue. The hills are seven shades of green. It's a mainly dichromatic landscape.

Except for the houses. Rudimentary board-and-batten, many of them sporting gables, all with steep roofs. Some are reminiscent of transplanted Norman architecture (via rural Quebec), some remind you of New England.

But for their colours – they could be models for a Jackson Pollack abstract.

One house across the road is vibrant purple, its neighbour lime green. Everywhere are these splashes of colour, a sort of metaphor for the thumbing of noses of Madelinots at sometimes-bleak conditions.

The result of seeing these colours is downright uplifting.

Peruse a bubble-gum-pink-painted seashore house for a bit and feel immediately better.

TRIP TIPS: For more information on these seductive and beautiful islands check out

<http://www.tourismeilesdelamadeleine.com/en/>

◆ A L'Abri de la Tempête, Acadian culture, Acadian Festivals, Auberge de la Butte Ronde, bed and breakfast Magdalen Islands, Café de la Grave, Chez Dennis à François, Chocolat Diane, Gilles LaPierre, Gourmande de Nature, Grand Entrée Island, Îles de la Madeleine, La Grave, la Salicorne, la Table du Roi, lobsters and Quebec, Quebec Tourism

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