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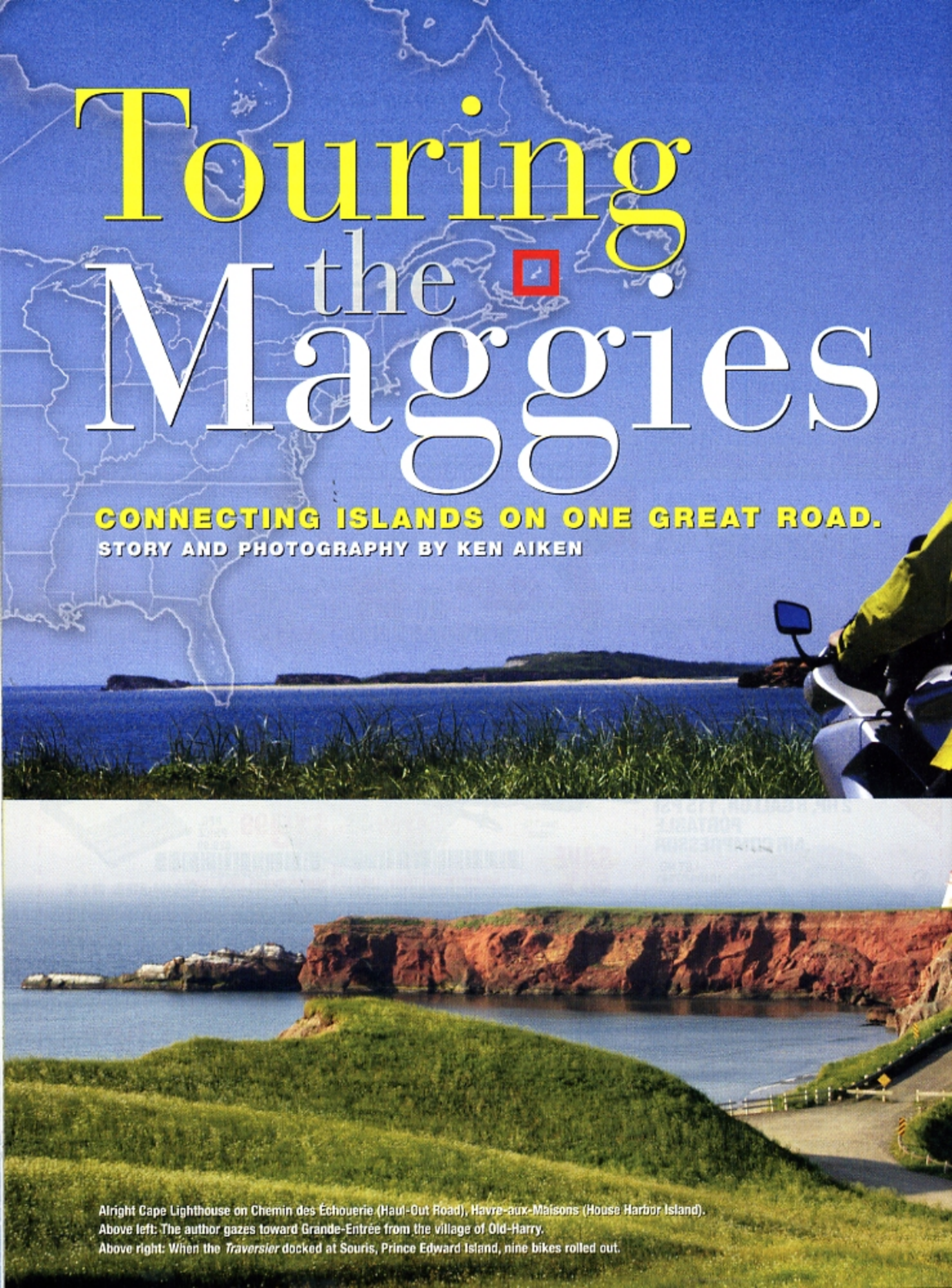
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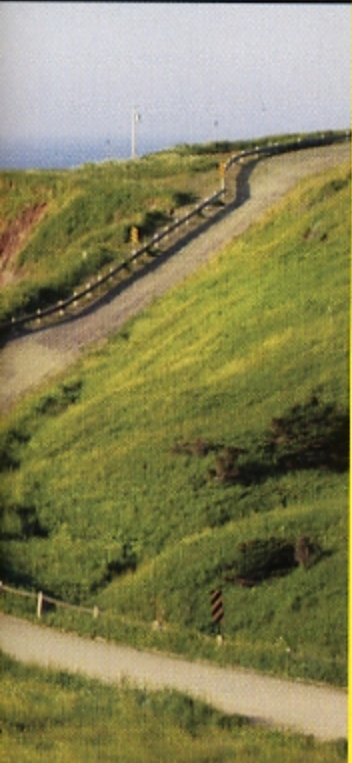
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Touring the Maggies

CONNECTING ISLANDS ON ONE GREAT ROAD.
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN AIKEN

Alright Cape Lighthouse on Chemin des Échouerie (Haul-Out Road), Havre-aux-Maisons (House Harbor Island).
Above left: The author gazes toward Grande-Entrée from the village of Old-Harry.
Above right: When the *Traversier* docked at Souris, Prince Edward Island, nine bikes rolled out.



I arrived at the dock in Souris not knowing what to expect. Even with my research they remained a mystery and, despite stories heard, I'd never met anyone who had actually been there. Basque fishermen had been voyaging to this archipelago to hunt "sea cows" even before Columbus discovered America, but then, as now, the best-kept maritime secrets don't appear on maps. Yet, when the *Traversier* docked at Prince Edward Island, nine bikes rolled out; when it left, it carried four.

The Magdalen Islands (Îles de la Madeleine) are one of those rare "in" places to ride, but few have heard of them. Located in the Gulf of St. Lawrence approximately 134 miles (215 km) east of the Gaspé, 65 miles (105 km) north of Prince Edward Island and 60 miles (95 km) west of Cape Breton, the "Maggies" are considered to be the northernmost portion of the Appalachian Mountains and belong to the province of Quebec. Authoritative sources can't even agree on the extent of their land area (somewhere between 77 and 88 square miles), but there are seven inhabited islands and all but one are connected by a single highway. The sole purpose of my long journey was to ride this road.

A five-hour ferry ride establishes a sense of distance and imbues a feeling that one is headed to an exotic location. Rising from a vivid blue ocean off the port side of the ship were emerald-green hills atop red sandstone cliffs a hundred feet high; a finback whale swam parallel to our course. My first view of Entry Island was unlike any other part of the Appalachians I'd ever seen.

Debarking at Grindstone (Cap-aux-Meules), my first stop was just outside the gates of the ferry terminal at the tourist information center. The tourist board had graciously assisted this trip by doing all the hard work in setting up an itinerary based on my specific requests. It appears that tonight I'll be sleeping in a convent.

Imagine a place where every home is painted a

different color. Originally an Acadian tradition developed as identifying beacons for fishermen returning home, it has survived and matured into a cultural art form that's actively embraced by the Madelinots. Varied hues of purple, red, blue, orange, green and yellow intermingle with houses painted pastel turquoise, pink, lavender, mint and mauve. Trimmed in contrasting or complementary colors, each differs from its neighbors; it's a photographer's dream.

Route 199 is only 54.6 miles (88 km) long and, despite a few sharp corners, it doesn't offer any technical challenges. Its entire length, from the docks in La Grave to the harbor in Grande Entrée, can be easily ridden in an hour and a half. The total mileage of all roads, both gravel and paved, on the archipelago is less than 186 miles (300 km). However, all the time, effort and expense required just to get me to this highway proves to be justified.

One 12-mile segment of Route 199 runs along North Dune and across tiny Seal Point Island (Île de la Pointe aux Loups—

Park anywhere (the bike will be safe),
and enjoy the sand on South Dune.



A concrete sculpture of fishermen
hauling in a net, L'Étang-du-Nord,
Cap-aux-Meules (Grindstone Island).



Even summer cottages are painted different
colors in Havre-aux-Maisons (House Harbor Island).



This B&B by the sea in Havre-aux-Maisons is one of
the most often photographed buildings on the islands.



Different colored homes are an Acadian tradition. This view is on Petite Baie (Little Bay), Havre-aux-Maisons (House Harbor Island).



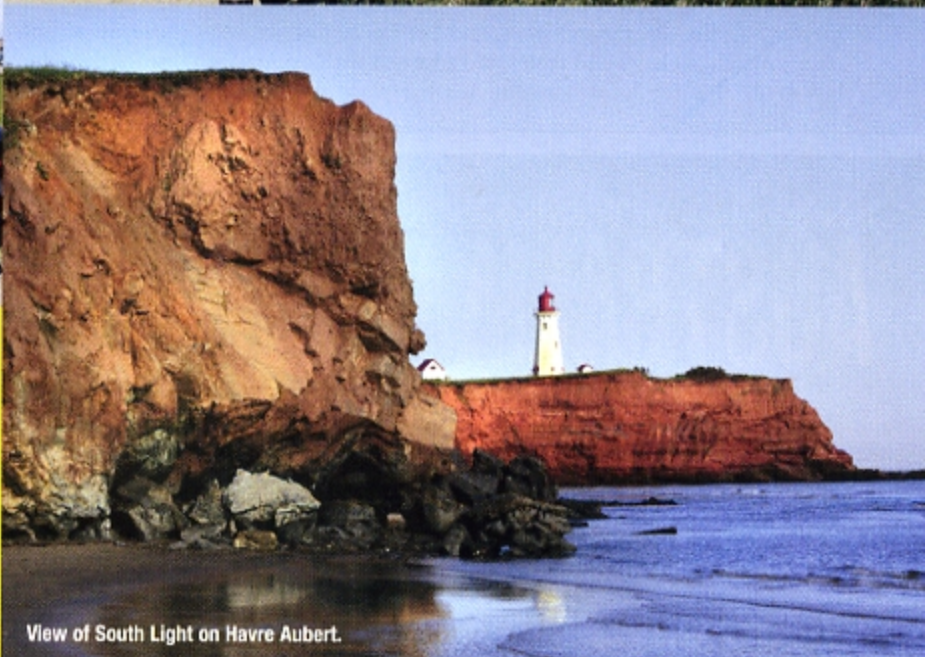
The Fumoir d'Antan on Havre-aux-Maisons dries herring in the traditional island style. Delicious.



The north end of Route 199 arrives at the docks in Grande-Entrée on Grande-Entrée Island.



The boutiques of L'Étang-du-Nord, Cap-aux-Meules (Grindstone Island).



View of South Light on Havre Aubert.

loup-marin being the local name for seal). It's a long, straight stretch of highway. Utility poles line each side of the road, converging in the distance while heat waves add a surrealistic image to the already gentle undulations of an asphalt surface built on a foundation of loose sand. Normally I don't care for long, straight roads, but this is exceptional. Here, the ocean lines both sides of the highway only to disappear behind a long ridge of grass-anchored sand.

In other places the powdery sands of transverse dunes crest above the road and spill onto its asphalt shoulders while blue herons stride through the lush saltwater marshes on the opposite side of the highway. I enjoy riding through sand dunes and this offers more miles, more dunes, less traffic and only a tiny fraction of the amount of people found on the National Seashore in Cape Cod.

I pass one of the top-ranked beaches in the world. Arcing around East Point National Wildlife Reserve, East Point Beach and Grande-Échouerie (an *échouerie* is where walrus, or "sea cows," once hauled themselves ashore to sunbathe) combine to provide 13 continuous miles (22 km) of gorgeous sand beach. Except for two short stretches on either end, this

exceptional strip of sand is deserted. I could run naked on many of the islands' 196 miles of pristine beaches and not encounter a single person. The bike can be parked anywhere, since stealing a motorcycle just isn't feasible when the only escape is by ferry.

The highway ends at the quay in Grande-Entrée. Today most of the fishing fleet is docked and the boutiques and restaurants seem to be moderately busy. I take some photos, but since I've managed to cover less than 30 miles this morning, I want to keep riding. La Grave is at the other end of the road so, pulling a U-turn, I head in the opposite direction.

The southern end of Route 199 terminates at another fishing



Left: St. Peter's-by-the-Sea is on Route 199 in Old-Harry. It's made of wood salvaged from shipwrecks and carries its own stories with its special doors.

local specialty, a seafood pie called "pot-en-pot."

In the town of L'Étang-du-Nord a cluster of colorful clapboard-sided boutiques face the sea. The yellow one turns out to be Café la Côte, where salt-cod pizza is the house specialty. From here the angular hulk of *Duke of Connaught* can be seen resting against the rocks of Savage Head (Cap a Savage). Having rusted to the same red color as the cliffs, I can't figure out what it is and have to ask. The locals joke that it's the work of a contemporary metal sculptor.

As it turns out, a large percentage of the residents are directly descended from the survivors of more than 400 shipwrecks, and many buildings on these islands were constructed from salvaged ship timbers. One such example is the Church of St. Pierre in Lavernière; it also has the distinction of being the second-largest wooden church in North America.

Fishing is the mainstay of the local economy. More than 2 million pounds of lobster are harvested annually, as well as fresh scallops, blue mussels, clams, snow crab and a variety of fish. Smoking fish is an island tradition and a few old-style smokehouses (*baraque*) made of hay bales are used by farmers. Fumoir d'Antan on Île du Havre-aux-Maisons has created an excellent little museum in the original smokehouse. This year they're licensed for 60,000 pounds of herring—they also smoke mackerel, eel and scallops—and three quarters of this will be sold on the islands. I purchase vacuum packages to

pier, although the island of Albert's Harbor (Île du Havre-Aubert) continues for many kilometers as Sandy Hook, a long, thin dune that stretches toward Entry Island. The village of La Grave was the first settlement in the islands, established in 1755 by refugees escaping the Acadian Expulsion (*Le Grand Derangement*) by the British in Nova Scotia (others sought refuge in Louisiana and created Cajun culture).

The village of La Grave has become an artist community. Its tiny cedar-shingled fishing sheds date from the 19th and early 20th centuries, but rather than housing lobster traps, they've been transformed into small boutiques and galleries that feature the work of local artists and artisans. Café de La Grave is in the old general store, and the funky interior with its mismatched chairs and tables and adorned with original art has made this the local hangout. It's the place to order the

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bring home and a couple of "snack-packs" to munch on while riding about—this probably explains why my tankbag smells a little fishy.

Tonight's lodging is Auberge La Salicorne in Grande-Entrée, and kicking back with a foaming mug of the local brew and munching on seal sausage I listened to the other side of the seal hunting controversy and local history. Prior to the creation of Route 199 in 1956, Madelinots had to boat from island to island. This created very diverse communities unique to their particular patch of land. Today this remains evident on Entry Island, the only inhabited one not connected by road. There is a local pedestrian ferry, but I chose to make the six-mile (10 km) trek across open water in a rubber boat (Zodiac) operated by Excursions en mer.

After circumventing the island and looking at the nesting sites of local seabirds, including those of the Razorbill Auk, a couple hours remained to hike up Big Hill for a panoramic view of the archipelago.

It's finally time to leave the islands and I pack the Ducati in the belly of the *Vacancier* for the trip up the St. Lawrence

River to Montreal. Despite their small size, four days in the islands wasn't long enough to take advantage of all they have to offer and I never tired of going back and forth on the same road. I have to be content with this, but it does provide a reason for me to return to Îles de la Madeleine next year. **36**

GOOD TO KNOW

C.M.T.A. ferry from Souris, PEI, is daily; from Montreal and Chandler, weekly. (888) 986-3278; www.ctma.ca

Access to Entry Island is by public pedestrian ferry, or by excursion boat or Zodiac operated by Excursion en mer. 265 Ch Du Quai, Cap-aux-Meules; (418) 986-4745; www.excursionsenmer.com

Motorcycles can be rented in Cap-Aux-Meules from Léon Lapierre (Hertz). 357, Chemin Principal, Cap-aux-Meules, G4T 1E2; (418) 986-3377

Tourist Information Centre. 128 Chemin Principal, Cap-aux-Meules, G4T 1C5; (877) 624-4437; www.tourismeilesdelamadeleine.com **36**

Route 199 crossing to North Dune.



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