

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL GAINS

Even from our deep-forest campsite high above the St. Lawrence River, we could hear the unmistakable noise of whales exhaling as they feasted on krill below the surface.

The “blow” is an eerie sound, even more so in the dark and when accompanied by the crackle of a campfire.

Still, it was an encouraging sign that our 12-hour drive across Ontario and much of Quebec would be worth it.

My teenage son, Owen, and I were staying at Mer et Monde Écotours, a campsite on the north side of the St. Lawrence in Les Bergeronnes, Que. Fourteen years earlier, a friend’s invitation had turned us on to this spectacular region, home to bald eagles, black bears, caribou and the main attraction – the planet’s largest animal, the whale.

On that occasion, I was sworn to secrecy, our friend not wishing to turn a favourite hideaway into a tourist destination. But recently Mer et Monde was listed as one of Canada’s top campgrounds and is now so popular that it’s necessary to book six months ahead.

The preferred campsites are those on the rocks where one can sit in a deck chair outside the tent, morning coffee in hand, and observe the whales without having to move. The forest sites require a little more commitment – a 300- or 400-metre walk down a dirt road to the shore.

According to Nadia Menard, an ecologist with Parks Canada, the end of June to the end of September is the best time to see the extraordinary marine life, although she notes that some years are better than others.

She says two species are year-round residents – the beluga whale and the harbour seal.

“In the winter we think the beluga will go deeper down into the St Lawrence,” she says. “But they are year-round residents of the St. Lawrence. They have their young here and they do all their life cycle here.”

As well, several species of whales make the



journey inward from the Atlantic, including humpback whales, fin whales, blue whales and minke whales, which come down the St. Lawrence to feed. The latter are the most common seen near this campground and for good reason.

“Often minke whales will use the seashore, especially rocky cliffs like we find at Mer et Monde,” Menard says. “This is where the whales will actually chase fish against the

rocks. So if you are sitting on the rocks, it might happen that these animals are using underwater cliffs to herd their prey.”

At sunrise I grabbed my camera gear, a windbreaker and a deck chair, then, after announcing my intentions to a sleepy teenager, ventured down to the river. We had only a few days allocated and I wanted to make the most of them. Surprisingly, there

were few people down there at that time.

An elderly woman sat meditating as the waves stirred up by passing boats lapped the rocks. A couple wrapped in blankets nodded hello as they sat with their backs against rocks occasionally peering up and down the river through binoculars. The muffled sound of voices in nearby tents and the smell of bacon cooking reminded me others were not far behind.

A slight mist partially obscured the view of the south shore and the sun had not yet burned through it. I set up my chair on a rock near the water’s edge and heard a whale blow before I could spot it.

Nearby, a pair of loons dove for fish. Cormorants flew across the surface of the water. I spotted something moving in the middle of the river. It stayed at the surface and I realized it was a harbour seal. A few

minutes passed before it appeared again in the shallow bay a few hundred metres away.

Distractions abound when one has time to observe, but wildlife doesn’t respond to a pre-ordained schedule. I sat down prepared to wait for as long as it took to see a whale.

Several minutes passed before I heard a blow. Then a fin rose and slipped below the water about 60 metres off the shoreline. I raised my camera to snap some pictures. One of the attractions to me is that from this location you might actually get closer than on a boat, which is restricted to staying 400 metres from a whale.

“When the whales come, they come for food,” Menard had told me over the phone. “We are a thousand kilometres from the ocean and what attracts them is the food. That’s why we have put in place a lot of measures to limit the disturbance of these animals because it is fundamental for them to get fat during the summer. When you are land-based whale watching, you are just an observer; there is no interference whatsoever with their activity.”

This was a North Atlantic minke whale I was watching. They can grow to nine metres or more and weigh as much as 4.5 tonnes. Slowly traversing the near side of the St. Lawrence, it would rise every few seconds, blow, then slip beneath the surface for a couple of minutes, dining on another mouthful of krill. Unlike other whales, the minke doesn’t show its tail when it dives.

Menard had explained the whales are unpredictable and go where the food is. If the krill congregate farther down river, then so too will the whales. Even a wind blowing across the water surface can force the krill to the bottom and, with them, the whales. I considered myself lucky to see this minke on my first calling.

Of all the popular whale-watching sites, Les Bergeronnes is unique. Beneath the St. Lawrence is a 1,200-kilometre valley called the Laurentian Channel, which ends right about here. And here’s the interesting part. Water from the St Lawrence flows out towards the Atlantic while at the same time



Sitting on lawnchairs on the rocks outside the campsite a perfect spot to watch the whales.

salt water flows inwards along this valley, creating some kind of conveyor belt. Food is therefore abundant for whales.

“You can taste the water,” Menard had advised. “But the ocean is a thousand kilometres away and it is thanks to the Laurentian Channel that we have all these marine properties. So the krill slowly moves up and when it gets to the marine park, well, most of it is two years old and nice and juicy and full of fat. So it’s an important component of the food.”

Later in the day, after dining most appropriately on fish and chips at a nearby eatery, Owen and I relaxed on the rocks.

At one point there were three whales in the vicinity and a handful of kayakers were trailing them. Tourist boats from the south shore were now out in force. My GPS indicated we were one metre below sea level since the tide was out.

We would see several minke whales during our short visit to Mer et Monde, but none of the resident belugas. No matter. Menard had also suggested we visit Baie-Sainte-Marguerite, located north of Tadoussac along the Saguenay River. Baie-Sainte-Marguerite is one of three areas in Parc National du Fjord-du-Saguenay.

“Baie-Sainte-Marguerite is one of my favourite places and a great spot for observing beluga whales,” Menard said. “That place, we think, is a critical area for females with their young, and we highly suspect they are actually giving birth there.”

After checking into a hotel, we drove for

30 minutes to this section of the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park to try our luck with the belugas.

From the parking lot, it’s a three-kilometre hike through the forest to the observation deck. The path traces the waterline.

We passed campsites tucked in the woods and some along the water’s edge, at once vowing to come back to experience this paradise further – we imagined ourselves looking out the tent directly into the face of a beluga.

At the gazebo that serves as an observa-

tion deck, we met several other visitors including a family from France. Everyone was delighted when someone cried, “Belugas!”

In the narrow expanse of the Saguenay River among the sunlit waves, three belugas could be spotted, though it was difficult to capture a decent photo even with a telephoto lens. Those belugas vanished. After a couple of hours and no more sightings, we decided to go back to the hotel to drop off my camera equipment before dinner.

Owen entered into a conversation with a woman at the gift shop who told him her grandfather had hunted belugas because the local fishermen believed they ate all the fish. Whale oil was used for sealing boots while the meat fed local families.

Menard and her colleagues at Parks Canada had also suggested we visit their official observation and interpretation centres at Cap de Bon-Désir and Pointe-Noire, as well as the Marine Environment Discovery Centre. Because of time constraints – and the fact Menard had already been helpful by phone – we decided to skip the centres. But they are there for a reason.

Driving home over the following couple of days, we concluded the trip was an overwhelming success. We would have liked to have spent more time at Mer et Monde, but we had seen whales from the shore and totally relaxed in the sea air. There’s satisfaction in that. And there’s also comfort in knowing we may return in the near future. 📍

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Parks Canada and Parcs Québec co-manage the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park together with public support. The park covers 1,245 square kilometres, including part of the Saguenay Fjord and St. Lawrence River estuary.

- The marine park’s website has a wealth of general info as well as details about whale watching:

<http://parcmarin.qc.ca> (There’s an English tab on the top bar) > Visit > Choose links to At Sea or On Land

- Parks Canada’s section about the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park also includes info about the interpretative centres at Cap-de-Bon-Désir in Les Bergeronnes and Pointe-Noire in Baie-Sainte-Catherine. Follow these links:

www.pc.gc.ca > English > National Marine Conservation Areas > Find a National Marine Conservation Area > Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park > Visitor Information

- Baie-Sainte-Marguerite is part of the Parc National du Fjord-du-Saguenay. For info on both: www.sepaq.com/pq/sag (switch to English through menu beside the site logo). Scroll down for link to a visitor’s guide and a link to the Baie-Sainte-Marguerite section of the park.