

Scooped out by a meteor 400 million years ago, the region is now a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.



On the road in old Quebec

It doesn't get any better than Charlevoix region on the north shore of the gulf of St. Lawrence

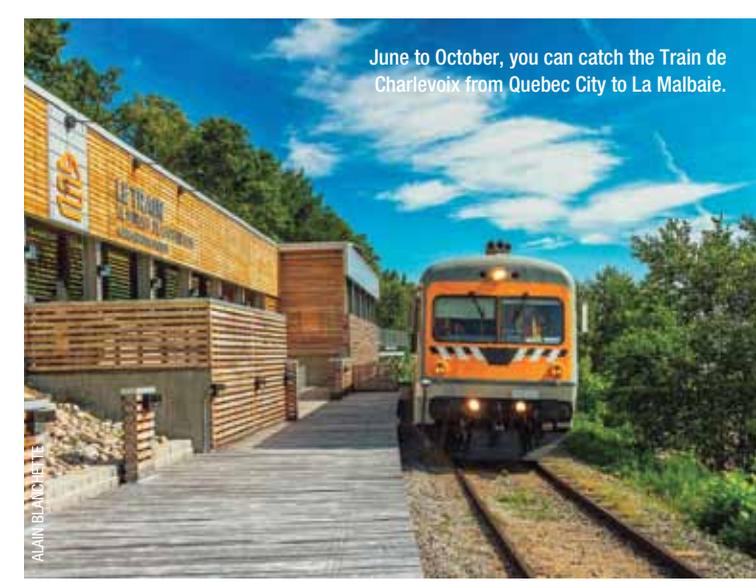
BY *Lin Stranberg*

One of the most beautiful places in the country for an easy road trip is Charlevoix, the smallest tourist region in Quebec. Hard to get to except over rough roads until the 1970s, it is now just a comfortable one-hour drive from Quebec City.

The beautiful and now highly civilized Charlevoix region began life in fire and brimstone — 400 million years ago, a meteorite carved out a 58-kilometre wide crater.

Today, from the village of Petite-Rivière-Saint-François to the mouth of the Saguenay Fjord, the rolling farmlands of the Laurentian foothills are dotted with picturesque towns and villages overlooking the vast 24-kilometre-wide St. Lawrence River. In 1989, UNESCO declared the entire area a World Biosphere Reserve.

Between June and October, you can book a tourist train from Quebec City to La Malbaie aboard the **Train de Charlevoix** (traindecharlevoix.com), a 125-kilometre scenic ride along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, with some of the oldest towns and grandest landscapes anywhere. Here's a sampling of what to see and do.



June to October, you can catch the Train de Charlevoix from Quebec City to La Malbaie.

ANNE GARDON

BAIE ST-PAUL

Baie St-Paul is known as a hub for artists and artisans. It was painted by members of the Group of Seven and was the birthplace of the Cirque du Soleil. Stroll down rue St-Jean-Baptiste, stop in at some of the many small boutiques and art galleries, and catch an exhibition at the **Museum of Contemporary Art** (machsp.com).

If you have a taste for vintage games and nostalgia, browse the remarkable collection at **Le Joker**, at 116 rue St-Jean-Baptiste. For beautiful items made from pure local wools and felts, visit **Charlevoix Pure Laine** (charlevoixpurelaine.ca) at 69 rue St-Jean-Baptiste — you may even get to see the charming Solange Bessette work her knitting machine.



Solange Bessette knits wonderful woolens at Charlevoix Pure Laine in Baie St-Paul.



Peaceful off-shore sanctuary L'Isle-aux-Coudres is a place for bike rides, kite surfing and sunsets.

ON THE ROAD TO ST-URBAIN

From Baie St-Paul, take Route 138 north to 1167 Blvd. Mgr. de Laval. If you like cheese — or appreciate old memorabilia — **Laiterie Charlevoix** (fromagescharlevoix.com) is a must. Their cheese is sold throughout Canada, so you may already know these three superstars: L'Origine, a mixed-rind, Reblochon-like soft cheese from old-breed La Canadienne cows' milk; L'Hercule, a firm, cooked and aged washed-rind cheese somewhat between a Comté and a Gruyère; and Le 1608, a semi-firm, smooth-textured washed rind cheese also from La Canadienne cows. After sitting down for a tasting, walk over to the on-site milk museum to view a fabulous collection celebrating the glory days of the white stuff.

Back on 138 north, bear left at the gas station onto Route 381 and stop for a little agritourism at the **Emu Farm** (emeucharlevoix.com), 706 rue Saint-Édouard. With its flock of 400, this is the biggest emu farm in Canada. Raymonde Tremblay raises these big, kind of goofy-looking Australian birds to produce oil and meat products that you can sample at the small on-site boutique. Emu oil is recommended for sensitive skin. It's moisturizing, anti-inflammatory, non-comedogenic and hypo-allergenic.

L'ISLE-AUX-COUDRES

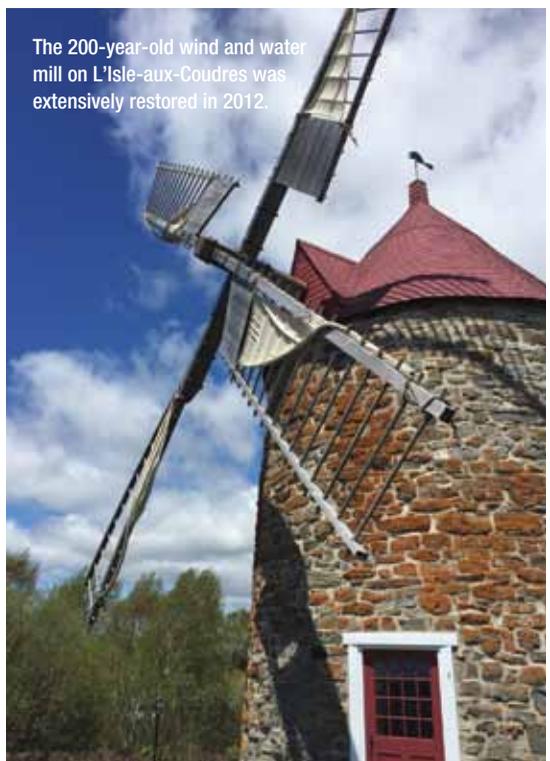
When Jacques Cartier discovered this small island in 1535, he named it for the many hazel trees called *coudres* that still grow there today. It's known for great kite surfing and the spectacular sunsets from its western tip. With a population of only 1200, the island remains relatively untouched and quiet enough that you can drive or bike the 23-kilometre road around it in peace. Rent a bicycle, tandem, quadricycle or **electric bike** (velocoudres.com), tour the historic **wind-cum-watermill** (lesmoulinsoftheisland.com),



Whale watchers get an eyeful during a Croisière aux baleines expedition at the mouth of the Saguenay.



Miller Nicolas Harvey grinds grain in the iconic mill on L'Isle-aux-Coudres.



The 200-year-old wind and water mill on L'Isle-aux-Coudres was extensively restored in 2012.



At Laiterie Charlevoix, stock up on the region's famous cheeses made from the milk of La Canadienne cows.

taste fine fruit ciders at **Pednault** (vergerpedneault.com) and stop in for a down-home island lunch at the Boulangerie Bouchard, a local favourite since 1945.

The **free car ferry** (traversiers.com) takes 20 minutes or so, leaving from Saint-Joseph-de-la-Rive every half-hour and returning on the hour.

WHALE WATCHING ON THE ST. LAWRENCE

Head east on 138 and enjoy gorgeous river views all the way up to Baie St-Catherine at the mouth of the Saguenay River, then board a relaxing cruise boat or adventurous **Zodiac boat** (croisieresaml.com) to see the lively population of minke, beluga, blue whales and seals in the waters of the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park.

LA MALBAIE

Samuel de Champlain named this lovely spot “the bad bay” in 1608 because of the low tides that prevented his ships from mooring there. Once known as Murray Bay, it was an international resort frequented by rich English Canadians and Americans who steamed upriver on the old “white boats” during the 19th and early 20th century. William Taft, US President from 1909 to 1913, had a summer home here until his death in 1930; his descendants still come up every year.

Beginning in 1928, Canada Bay and its sister hotel, The Tadoussac at the mouth of the Saguenay, were serviced, during the summer months, by three large, 350-foot passenger ships out of Montreal and Quebec City. The service continued until 1965. Now the **Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu** (fairmont.com/richelieu), the hotel continues to be a landmark on the cliffs of Pointe-au-Pic as it has been since it opened in 1898, offering a grand view of the ships that ply the river today. ■

WHERE TO STAY

Le Germain Charlevoix (legermainhotels.com/en/Charlevoix): contemporary country chic with a stylish urban feel, a Nordic spa, a heated outdoor pool and two good restaurants. The Baie St-Paul Charlevoix train stop is on the property.

Auberge des Falaises (aubergedesfalaises.com): a charmingly traditional family-owned inn and a separate two-storey pavilion with comfortable condos and rooms with views. Reliable cuisine, Nordic spa and a heated outdoor pool with a spectacular river vista.

For more information on travel to the region, visit **Tourisme Charlevoix** (tourisme-charlevoix.com/en).