



BELLE SAISON

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BARB SLIGL**



The red cliffs of Îles de la Madeleine. **TOP** Baby harp seal or “white coat.” **OPPOSITE, TOP** One of the signature bold hues of the houses that dot the islands. **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** Locals clambering down snowy, icy cliffs to explore the frozen seascape...and set up lawn chairs to sunbathe.



Winter, wind and white coats
on the isolated archipelago
of Îles de la Madeleine



Flying out of Gaspé, I see the eastern edge of Quebec marked by a long string of lights hugging the shoreline. Far below is opaque snow and then translucent ice, a marbled surface that only reveals its larger pattern at flying altitude. Ice blobs, almost-perfect circles, grow bigger and bigger the farther we fly offshore, and the glow of the plane glistens, illuminated in watery veins like phosphorescence. I spot a star, then another, another, and Orion's Belt and then Orion himself looming large over this wintry hinterland.

It doesn't seem possible that there's anywhere to land nearby, yet just 35 minutes away is another world, les Îles de la Madeleine, an isolated, crescent-like sweep of islands that's almost closer to Newfoundland than Quebec.

As lights again appear on the horizon, the ice seems thicker and unrelenting, and I think of the news of a ferry getting stuck en route to the Îles. I spot a bright glow below and trace a thin strip of road that leads to a bridge across icy nothingness with three cars crawling along it, their headlights illuminating the never-ending white. We land... amidst what seems like nowhere.

At the airport my rental car is already running, keys in, unlocked. "Nobody locks their car here," tells a local—or their house. People around me exclaim, "Ah, *bonjour! Ça va? Très bien.*" Kiss, kiss. As the French Canadian do. I'm immediately warmed by Québécois spirit and banter. Yes, another world.

I meet otherworldliness again the next dawn. A ball of fire rises over the dark outline of the islands as if to portend something momentous—like the birth of thousands of "white coats" just offshore. Late winter brings an annual migration of harp seals to the Îles, where they give birth atop the surrounding ice floes. Think the blink of doe eyes, the tremble of delicate whiskers, the slow *wriggle, wriggle* of soft, furry bodies against wind-sharpened tufts of snow and the glare of white-on-white in a lunar landscape set in the middle of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence.

On the heli ride across the ice, I pick out the "U" shapes of seals, perched in a perfect curve. Their lumbering land-wriggle across the ice leaves crisscrossing snail-like trails. We land upon the ice and I step out into a bright winter scene...and a cacophony of cries—as

if I've been dropped amidst thousands of meowing and yipping kittens and puppies. It's eerie, these babies crying across the ice, and tugs at my heart. But the little fur-balls are fiercely guarded by their mothers, as a fellow photographer learns after his too-close-for-comfort tripod is toppled by a big mama.

Also disconcerting, and in stark contrast to all the snow-white, are the globules and streaks of blood. It's a jarring sight, until I realize these are frozen crimson bits of afterbirth. Canada may still support the seal hunt (94,000 harp seals were commercially harvested in 2013), drawing international ire and an EU ban on seal products, but babies are off limits and on the Îles it's all about seal *watching* that celebrates rather than bludgeons these furry creatures on floes.

It's a small window of time—the last week of February until the second week of March—when tourists from Israel to Japan (the largest percentage of visitors) come here to observe the nomadic harp seals calve on vast ice fields. Being in such close contact with days- or hours-old white coats is unlike anything else. An hour trudging on the ice in -30°C amidst those big eyes and chorus of cries feels like mere minutes. One couple from Switzerland, who went out with me in the morning, immediately booked another tour for the next day.

But my adventure continues on shore. Beyond seal watching, I take in the winter culture of Madelinots and hole up in a historic convent, *Domaine du Vieux Couvent*, check out artisans, sample cheese at *Fromagerie du Pied-du-Vent*, where “the sea wind adds its pinch of salt,” and visit the *Musée de la Mer* to discover “*vivre aux Îles—vivre les Îles.*” I get the lay of the land by driving myself along *Chemin des Caps*, which is as it says, a road that winds from cape to cape to cape... These capes' cliffs are made of the Îles' signature rich, rust-red rock, another crimson contrast against the sea of white.

At one curve in the road I have to stop and get out. I bundle up and follow the footprints of those before me (this is an island of avid walkers) down a steep embankment (with a handy rope someone's set up for easier access). I meander through a winter wonderland, under arches and icicles, past snowy tufts and formations. I meet a Japanese couple on snowshoes with fold-up chairs slung across their backs. They trek out onto the frozen sea and set up their chairs to sunbathe.

I'd join them, but I move on to the next cape and walk through red-tinged snow to the *Cap Hérissé* lighthouse. I stop countless

times to take photos of candy-hued clapboard houses. ...red, yellow, blue, green... a rainbow of which every islander and visitor has a favourite (mine's a solitary yellow one atop a crest). I continue and stop again to watch a group of men manually moving an ice-fishing hut, grunting “*un, deux, trois, GO!*” in a mash-up of French and English. I walk around *Île aux Goélands* or Gull Island—there may be 300km of beaches to explore on the Îles in summer, but in winter one can wander pretty much *anywhere*—and watch the sunset.

Overloaded with sensory stimulation, I partake in some après-Îles at *Les Pas Perdus*, a lively bistro in *Cap-Aux-Meules*, for poutine (with local *Pied-du-Vent* curds) and *Écume* beer (an apt name that translates to “sea foam”) from local brewery *À L'Abri de la Tempête*. I linger over a *blanc* brew infused with *gingembre et citron* and named for *Vieux Couvent*. The Îles are self-reliant and produce everything from locally caught lobster to island-roasted coffee beans. There's even an industry spurred out of the sand, *Les Artisans du Sable*, which makes gorgeous pieces using the Îles' very soil.

“We're pretty crazy about sand,” says owner *Pauline-Gervaise Grégoire*, whose parents started the business in their hippie days, using recycled dental tools to sculpt shapes. Every *Madelinot* has a favourite beach. Hers is *Old Harry*, where she says the best sand is found. It's also *Réginald Poirier's*, the owner of *Vieux Couvent*. He loves the sound it makes. “Our sand is like a little ball. Not dust. So when you walk on it, it is *chou chou chou.*”

But I'm content with the *crunch, crunch, crunch* of the snow. The next day, I walk along another shoreline, navigating phantasmagoric crusts and pieces of ice to stand at the foot of more red cliffs. Like sand dunes, the snowdrifts cover everything. This is Îles sand in winter.

Back inside the warmth of *Vieux Couvent*, I look out the window and my footsteps are gone. The wind blows—huffs, puffs, grunts, groans—ceaseless and comforting. It's as if I'm in a lighthouse. Snow is curling, twirling, spiraling in all manner of patterns, dancing with the wind upon the icy surface outside. I gaze at the whirl of white as the snow and wind tango manically, and sip another local brew called *Belle Saison* with hints of the Îles' summer captured in a bottle. And I wonder if that season can be as lovely as this *belle saison* of winter. ●



IF YOU GO

DISCOVER Îles de la Madeleine: tourismeilesdelamadeleine.com.
SEAL WATCH via a helicopter tour with *Chateau Madelinot*: sealobservation.com. **STAY** at *Domaine du Vieux Couvent*: domaineduvieuxcouvent.com. **EAT + DRINK** at *Les Pas Perdus* restaurant (pasperdus.com) and *À L'Abri de la Tempête* brewery (alabridelatempete.com). **GO BEYOND** in Quebec Maritime (quebecmaritime.ca) and *la belle province* (quebecoriginal.com).





OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM The red cliffs at Cap Hérisse; seals made of local sand at Les Artisans du Sable; Belle Saison brew. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Île aux Goélands, a popular destination over the frozen seascape that's only accessible in winter; bright-yellow clapboard house; mama and baby seal; more red cliffs off Chemin des Caps; Anse-à-la-Cabane lighthouse on the south end of the islands; frosty winter-wonderland view from Domaine du Vieux Couvent; and Réginald Poirier, owner of the old convent that's now a high-end boutique hotel.