

## GOING PLACES #1

TOBY SALTZMAN



COLOURFULLY

# CANADA



Sudden ripples and a surge of spray preceded the dorsal fin of a 10-metre minke whale, and our serene enclave in Eastern Canada's Saguenay Fjord suddenly became a hive of activity. From the deck of our explorer vessel, we watched a group of kayakers paddling frantically away from this precariously close encounter. The minke nosed upward, showing her gentle face, before arching through the water once, and then again, flaunting her body and claiming her domain.

The kayakers, finally at a safe distance, stopped paddling and watched as two minkes approached in tandem, diving and jumping. Within minutes, two more appeared, then two more, joining the feeding-frenzy for small fish and krill that had surfaced in the frothing waters. The sky above became a cacophonous scene, with birds circling and squawking and diving for edible trophies.

We were on a scenic voyage through the Saguenay-Saint Lawrence Marine Park, surrounded by the sheer rocky walls of the fjord. And our onboard naturalist-guide was explaining how the fjord had formed eons ago when glaciers chiselled a chasm through a rocky valley. With binoculars focused on birds, seals and whales, we learned about the oceanographic phenomena of this precious location.

Here, at the confluence of the fjord known as Lac Saint-Jean, the salty waters of the St Lawrence River – the world's largest estuary – swirl into the fresh waters of the 100 km-long Saguenay Fjord, causing the chilly fresh waters to rise, and churning up the small fish and krill which attract migratory whales from May to October.

This breathtaking experience – an excursion from Quebec City – was just one of many highlights on our cruise in New England and Canada. Along the way, we'd gleaned an appreciation for nature, ecology and history – not to mention cultural and culinary delights – in every port.

Our thrills began during the sail-away party, with a send-off only Mother Nature could have orchestrated. We were lingering on deck, toasting each other with champagne and watching Boston Harbour fade in

the distance, when someone shouted, "Dolphins!" A trio of these beautiful mammals was frolicking in our wake, leaping in and out of the water, their bodies glistening silvery in sunshine.

Later that evening, while dining on fresh fish, seafood and filet mignon with our friendly tablemates, we each shared our dreams for this cruise. Yes, we were all looking forward to seeing the maritime coast in brilliant autumn foliage and wildlife in its natural habitat. But, beyond that, our plans went in different directions. The Brown brothers and their wives wanted to prowl for antiques and art. The Shermans



were on a quest for the Holy Grail of seafood chowder. And the Carlsons – avid fitness buffs – intended to cycle, hike or kayak in every port.

Early next morning, as the ship navigated to Bar Harbour, we were following a bald eagle's loops in the sky when a gleeful cry attracted everyone's attention. Huge plumes of spray signalled a whale.

Seconds later a dorsal fin, then the entire whale, appeared, breaching in splendid form ... followed by the gentler plume and smaller fin of her bashful off-



spring. What a perfect lead to our morning excursion: a scenic drive to 1530-foot-high Cadillac Mountain, followed by an exhilarating walk along the craggy coast of Acadia National Park.

Meanwhile, the Browns toured some Victorian mansions and bought antique quilts. The Shermans supplemented chowder with a New England lobster bake of lobster, mussels, corn and potatoes. And the athletic Carlsons proved their mettle, wheeling 24-speed mountain bikes along carriage trails originally constructed back in 1913.

Later that night, while our ship sailed from coastal USA into Canadian waters, we enjoyed a dazzling production of song and dance in the lounge.

**E**n route to Halifax, Nova Scotia – where the historic Citadel looms above the harbour – the Captain described how the city, founded in 1749, played significant roles in times of war and peace, and how the gentle locals rallied during the sinking of the Titanic in 1912.

Halifax's abundant attractions left us with too many choices – from its historic

properties and lush Victorian public gardens ... to a whale-watching expedition in the Bay of Fundy ... to some of the best sea kayaking in the world, from sheltered Terence Bay on the Prospect Peninsula.

We returned breathless from a coastal drive along the lighthouse route that stopped at Lunenburg (a circa 1753 town, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site), Mahone Bay (a hub of art galleries and spired wooden churches) and picturesque Peggy's Cove, whose lighthouse on craggy outcrops has been a seafarer's beacon for centuries.

As we stood on this famous spot,



listening to the sea-birds cackling above crashing waves, we realised that – for all the paintings and photographs – nothing beats being there!

Prince Edward Island appeared almost too beautiful: an artists' palette of emerald grass, red soil and white beaches with sand-dunes rising from blue seas. And historic Charlottetown – renowned as much for the fictional world of Anne of Green Gables as the Birthplace of Canada's Confederation – begged to be explored by foot, by bike or by horse-drawn carriage.

Later, while the Browns visited island



artisans, and the Shermans quit chowder to indulge in succulent oysters and blue mussels, and the Carlsons went sea-kayaking ... we golfed the fairways of a famed course.

**T**he next day, as our ship entered the St. Lawrence River with dolphins yet again in our wake, we were treated to a non-stop tapestry of autumn colours – maples, elms, oaks and birch trees in their brilliant reds, crimsons, oranges and yellows. Then Quebec City appeared like a fairytale vision, its turreted Fairmont Chateau Frontenac Hotel commanding a bluff overlooking the river.

Exuberantly French with a *joie de vivre* (love of life) that's contagious from every café, North America's only walled city is another World Heritage Site – offering everything from the Old Port, to the cobbled lanes and boutiques of le Petite Quartier Champlain, to the scenic Dufferin Terrace boardwalk ... and on to Battlefields Park on the Plains of Abraham, site of a crucial 1759 battle between the British and French.

We couldn't stop talking over dinner that night, reminiscing about playful dolphins, spouting whales, and endless other experiences en route. We shared plans for tomorrow's tour of the cosmopolitan French-English city of Montreal, and learned that the Shermans' appetites had switched yet again – this time to authentic crêpes and French onion soup. ❁

Grapevine's John & Robyn Cooney have been asked to lead a 25-day cruise in Sept 08

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