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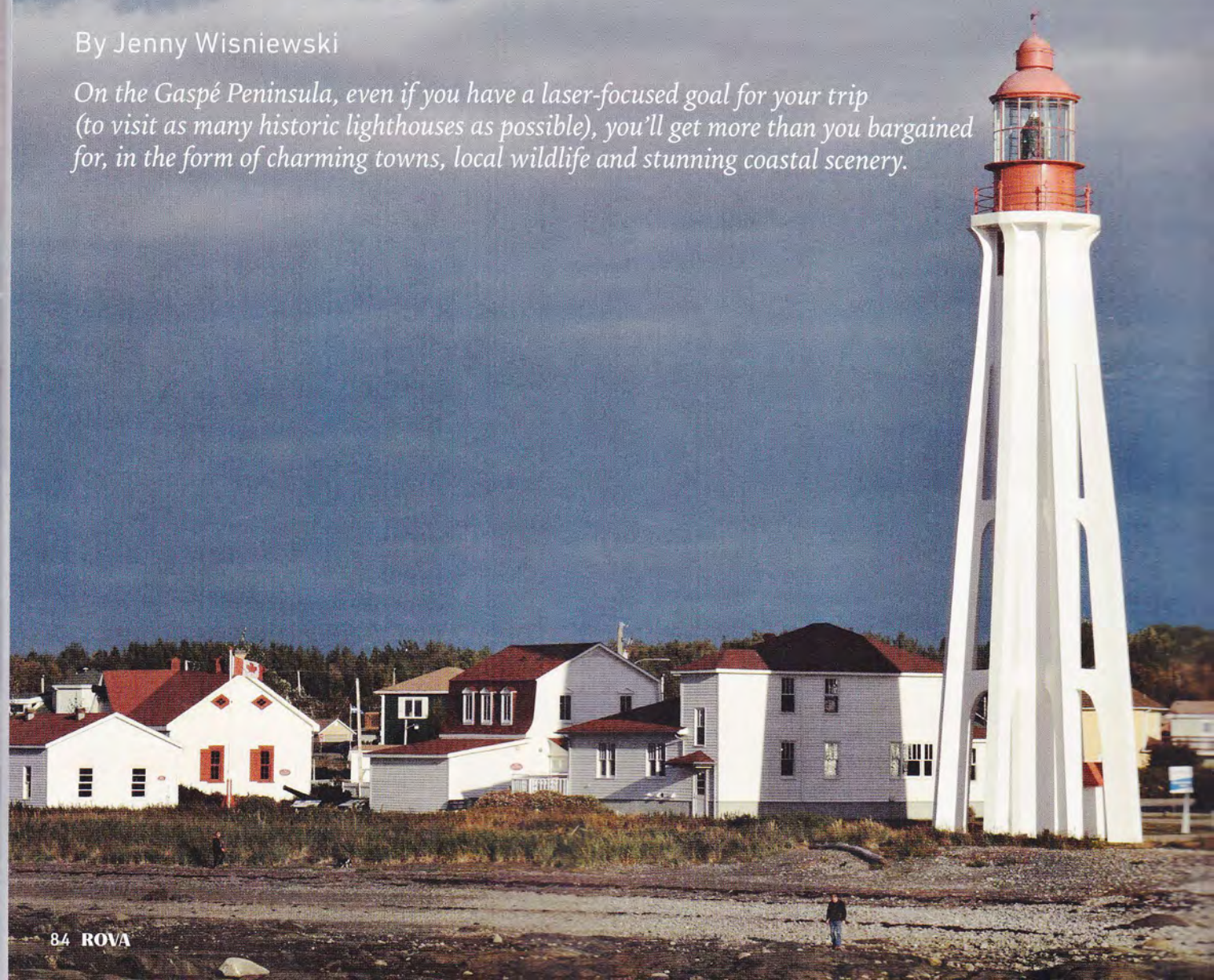
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ADVENTURE THIRTY-FIVE — FEBRUARY/MARCH 2023

HOPSCOTCHING LIGHTHOUSES IN COASTAL QUEBEC

By Jenny Wisniewski

On the Gaspé Peninsula, even if you have a laser-focused goal for your trip (to visit as many historic lighthouses as possible), you'll get more than you bargained for, in the form of charming towns, local wildlife and stunning coastal scenery.



was on the hunt for three things: lighthouses, wildlife, and fall colors. Ours was a trip designed around the 12 lighthouses dotting the periphery of Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula, but secretly I hoped that I had correctly picked dates that coincided with the capricious timing of autumn's colors. I also wished for wildlife viewing—maybe a moose or a bear. When I shared this wish with my 23-year-old son and traveling companion, Will, he told me that he didn't hope for either, but would take the bear over the moose—a creature he believed to be more aggressive.

Will and I ended up visiting 11 lighthouses—some for a quick photo or two, and others for a longer exploration. In many ways, my other wishes came to fruition, too.

Up the Peninsula

North of New Brunswick, the Gaspé Peninsula, or Gaspésie, is a sparsely populated piece of land that juts into the Gulf of Saint Lawrence; it's also where, in its interior, the Appalachian Mountains come to their Northern halt.

Our road trip officially began in Rimouski, a city of nearly 50,000 people that was the largest, by far, on our journey. We wasted no time in visiting our first lighthouse, Point-au-Père, a red-and-white concrete sentinel towering 108 feet over the Saint Lawrence River. After climbing 128 steps, we found a guide at the top waiting to give us a talk. Gazing out at the expanse of the river, we learned of the 14-minute sinking of the *Empress of Ireland* in 1914, in which over 1,000 people died. It remains the worst maritime disaster in Canada's history.



We also learned that long before a foghorn was introduced to cut through soupy weather with its loud, low warning, the lightkeeper fired a cannon every 30 minutes. Many iterations of signaling followed the cannon, right up to the radar and GPS that are used today. In many ways, lighthouses are a story of technological progress, which eventually led them to become obsolete.

The following day, we began our northeasterly drive on Route 132, beginning a loop up and around the peninsula. A few of the lighthouses were closed for the summer season. This was the case for the three between Rimouski and Sainte-Anne-des-Monts, where we planned to stop for the night; however, a lighthouse being closed for the season simply means that you can't go inside, which didn't stop us from our explorations.

The first lighthouse of the three, in Matane, is right on the main drag, swallowed by 21st-century life. A giant Gatsby-esque eye at the top of the lighthouse

stared back at us as we took our photos and drove on.

Moving on to the Cap-Chat (Cat Cape) Lighthouse, we tried—unsuccessfully—to make out the supposedly feline shape of the cape below. As the wind was whipping up over the cliff, we moved on quickly to a nearby trail, hiking down to the rock beach for a look at the shoreline.

By now, our minds were on our stomachs, so we hurried on to Sainte-Anne-des-Monts. Finding our way to Chez Bass—a local pub and hostel—we happily sat at a table near the window, sipping beers from a local microbrewery and watching the edges of a storm whip up the waves as a few huddled souls hurried along the boardwalk. It was time to sample the seafood that the Gaspé Peninsula is known for. My pan-fried salmon on a bed of wild rice hit the mark.

We completed our stay in this lovely fishing village the following morning with a stop at a fascinating sculpture garden, the art based on local folklore and made of driftwood. And with that,

Opposite: The striking sentinel in Rimouski: Point-au-Père.

Above: Unexpected eyes watch over the water at Matane.



Above: Forillon National Park houses two lighthouses, as well as scenery that is almost unmatched in Canada.

we began our next 3.5-hour drive. A surprise awaited us at every turn as we followed the ribbon of road laid out before us. Along one stretch, the coastal region's characteristic cherry-red roofs burst against a cornflower blue sky. As we crested a hill, out popped a cove edged by a small town, the metallic-looking steeple of a white church glittering in the sun. It felt raw, little touched.

After short stops at picturesque La Martre and Cap-de-la-Madeleine lighthouses, we drove on to the remote Pointe-à-la-Renommée, the location of several historical events—most notably, the site where Italian entrepreneur Guglielmo Marconi set up shop in 1904, creating the first wireless marine telegraphy station in North America. It was this groundbreaking communication system that led to the rescue of 465 *Empress of Ireland* survivors.

In 1977, the lighthouse was moved to Quebec City. There it

oddly sat, a maritime structure on a city street, until three local women triumphed in a multiyear effort to return it to its rightful home. In 1998, the lighthouse returned to Gaspésie, where it continues to lure travelers—now road-trippers rather than seafarers. The women's pursuit illuminates the cultural significance and pride that lighthouses hold for residents of the Gaspé Peninsula. Simply, they connect them to the past.

Gaspé and Beyond

We had arrived at the tip of the peninsula (referred to as Land's End), and the peak of our adventure. It was time to explore Forillon National Park. Two lighthouses sit within the park, and we opted to hike the Les Graves Trail to the Cape Gaspé lighthouse, which also marks the terminus of the International Appalachian Trail. The park offers spectacular coastal vistas, waterfalls, and wildlife. We began

our hike in steady rain, so the visibility was poor; however, along the trail we did spot at least eight piles of berry-laden bear scat, so we knew we were not alone. As the rain slowed to a trickle and the fog temporarily lifted from the cove, we peeled off our rain ponchos, and I spotted him.

His back was gray and rounded, his tail scalloped. It was not a bear, but a whale, surfacing from the waters of Gaspé Bay. I called out to Will, and we stood in silence, watching. It was only a few moments in time, but a pleasure of the deepest kind.

Our day in Forillon National Park would be a tough one to match, but our next stop, Percé, held a few treasures of its own. One of them was a boat excursion to Bonaventure Island. First, the captain encircled Percé Rock—an iconic and isolated rock formation, a natural arch on one side, off the shore of Percé. Birds cawed and circled the giant rock, hinting at what was to come.



Today, the weather was sunny, bright and 60 degrees. As we headed to the island, we watched seals swim, and as we got closer, we began noticing northern gannets—this species is one of the North Atlantic's largest seabirds—flying haphazardly above, their pearly white, cylindrical bodies glowing against the blue of the sky, their flapping wings inky-tipped and their heads the color of mustard (Grey Poupon, not French). On the island, other members of the flock were settled into the crevices of the cliff sides, thousands of little white zigzags on rust-colored perches.

After docking, Will and I began our roughly two-mile hike for a better view of the colony, which is one of the largest in the world. We had been walking silently for quite a while when we began hearing what at first was a soft scraping sound, and then a slow-growing din. We knew we

were close. As we left the woods and entered a wide-open clearing, we walked into their presence: an enormous swath of white—thousands of northern gannets perched on the edge of the island. Soon, they would begin their annual migration south, but today they were content in the early autumn crispness.

Making Our Way Back to Where We Started

Back on the lighthouse trail, we headed to Carleton-sur-Mer, stopping to see three lighthouses along the way. It would be our last stop before heading inland and back to the western side of the peninsula. I was sad to leave the coast, and I wasn't expecting much during our four-hour drive to Rivière-du-Loup. Boy, was I wrong.

As we got into the interior of the peninsula, the Chic-Choc Mountains (a part of the Appalachians) came into full view, and the autumn colors grew steadily more radiant. Traffic was light, and in spots I felt like I had the road to myself. We had exchanged lighthouses for covered bridges and barns. A fast-flowing river ran parallel to Route 132, leading us through the Matapedia Valley. Occasionally, we spotted fly fisherfolk artfully daring the river's residents to rise.

Toward the end of the afternoon, we stopped at Parc national du Bic along the St. Lawrence Estuary and hiked the Chemin-du-Nord trail. As it approached dusk, the sun cast lovely tangerine and pink rays upon the coves, small islands, and cliffs. It seemed to put an

exclamation point on all that we had seen and done over the previous eight days.

We never did see a moose or a bear, but I was content. The road encircling Gaspésie transported us to exploration, adventure and beauty, and provided me the opportunity to create enduring memories with my oldest son. **R**

Jenny Wisniewski is a freelance travel writer based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work can be viewed at jennywisniewski.com or on LinkedIn.

Where to Stay

5 RV Campsites in Gaspésie

Camping Rimouski

1105 Boul St-Germain, Rimouski
About six miles from Parc national du Bic, with views of the Saint Lawrence River

Petit-Gaspé Campground

Forillon National Park
2286 Bd de Grande Greve, Gaspé

Camping Griffon

421 boulevard du Griffon, Gaspé
In Forillon Park, 30 minutes from downtown Gaspé

Côte Surprise

335, Rte 132 O., Percé
Views of Percé Rock

Camping Gaspésie

30 Chemin Du Parc,
Ristigouche-Partie-Sud-Est
On the Restigouche River, 30 minutes from Carleton-sur-Mer