

**By Richard Rubin**

• May 26, 2024

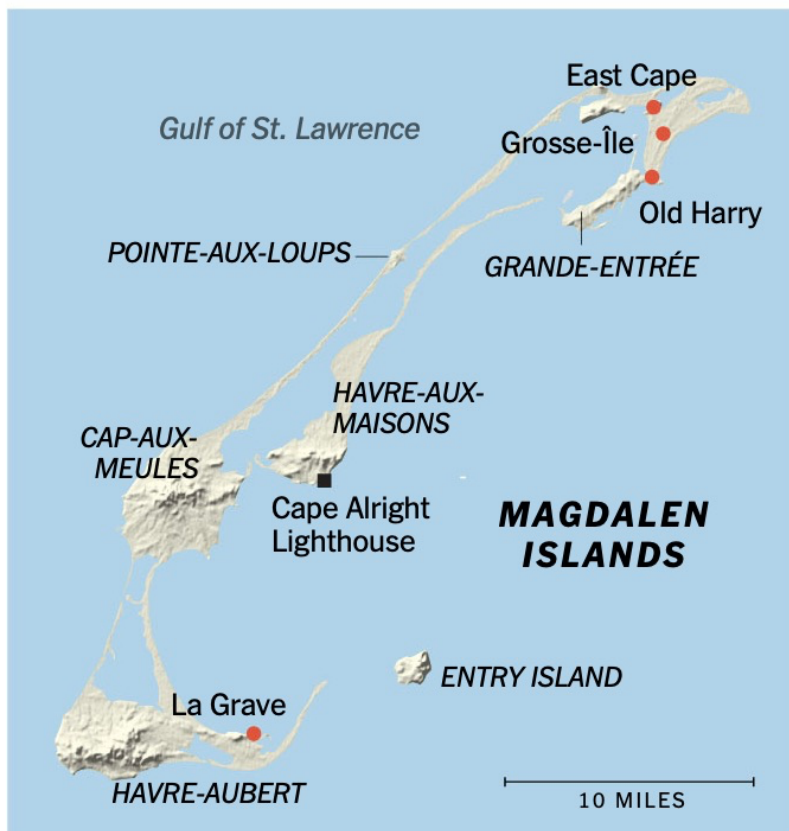
They tell a story in the Magdalen Islands about a winter so bitter that they were completely cut off, with no way to guide their boats through the frozen harbors.

Running out of supplies and desperate, they penned letters detailing their plight, sealed them in an empty molasses cask, affixed a tiny sail to it and cast it into the sea. Two weeks later, it washed up on the mainland, the Canadian government dispatched icebreakers, and the people of “the Maggies” were saved — as in a fairy tale.

Except it really happened. In 1910, an errant ship severed the undersea telegraph cable connecting the islands to the world; a tiny, bobbing barrel really did save them from disaster.

But not obscurity. As I drove across the border from Maine into St. Stephen, New Brunswick, the Canadian agent, inspecting my passport, asked me where I was going. When I responded, “The Magdalen Islands,” he narrowed his eyes, cocked his head and said, “The what?”

Map locates the Magdalen Islands off the coast of Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.



By The New York Times

### A place apart

The Magdalens — Les Îles de la Madeleine in French — are an archipelago of eight islands, seven inhabited, six connected by bridges, causeways and sandbars, the whole shaped like a fish hook, or maybe a question mark, both fitting. Altogether, they comprise less than 80 square miles and have a population of about 12,000.



Residents of the Magdalens, known as Madelinots, paint their houses bright shades of red, blue, green, orange and purple. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

They sit in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, far from everywhere but closer to the Maritimes and even Newfoundland than to Quebec, to which they formally belong. There's one small hospital, which looks as if it may fall into the sea before too long — the islands' sandstone cliffs are [eroding in some places](#) as fast as a meter per year — and a movie theater, which looks as if it could tumble in any day. The only chain restaurant, a Tim Hortons, was closed when I visited last summer.

Madelinots, as the locals call themselves, fish and farm and hang their laundry out to dry in the islands' strong winds exactly as they have done for more than two centuries. They live atop garnet-colored cliffs, surrounded by sapphire water and emerald grass. They keep their houses tidy and paint them turquoise, orange, cherry red, lime green, bright yellow and every shade of purple. (I saw more purple houses on the Magdalens than I have everywhere else put together.)

Visitors kayak, kitesurf and parasail in lagoons and on the sea; ride bicycles, scooters, motorcycles and trikes around treeless plateaus speckled with equally



treeless buttes. They seek out bluffs and lighthouses, sun and swim at expansive beaches, eat locally made cheese, locally smoked herring, locally bred beef and even locally hunted seal.



The Cape Alright lighthouse on Havre-aux-Maisons, a bucolic island of cliffs, capes and buttes. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

A shopkeeper told me that 95 percent of the islands' visitors come from Quebec, the rest from the Maritimes. When I asked her how many she's encountered from the United States, she said, "You're only the second since ... well, ever." People come for the place's striking beauty and comforting calm, and, in some cases — like mine — because they spotted the islands on a map and wondered what they must be like, sitting by themselves way out there in the middle of nothing.

### **'We come from the sea'**

To reach them, drive about as far north and east as you can in the continental United States; then drive several more hours through New Brunswick; cross the eight-mile bridge to Prince Edward Island; drive about as far north and east as you can in that province; board a ferry with hundreds of other cars, scores of R.V.s and motorcycles, and dozens of semis; then sail five hours into the unbroken blue.

You can fly to the Maggies from Montreal or Quebec City, too, although that would deprive you of a pleasant experience and some critical context. A woman I told about my visit to the islands' [ocean-themed museum](#) smiled and said: "Now you know where we come from. We come from the sea."



Dune du Sud Beach on Havre-aux-Maisons. As climate change causes winter ice to diminish, erosion is eating away at the islands. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

She wasn't waxing poetic. Everyone and everything here comes from the sea. A great many Madelinots are descendants of people who washed up on shore in shipwrecks. A lot of the houses and churches on the islands were built with wood salvaged from those vessels.

As you approach the islands by ferry, the buildings and terrain spread themselves out before you like a living diorama. Up close, the buttes are particularly irresistible: Every one seems to have a well-worn footpath through tall grass, sometimes no more than a single leg wide. Up top, you can see it all: east shore, west shore, cliffs, dunes, lighthouses, steeples, houses, shops, fishing boats, clotheslines and, depending on the butte, most of the other islands in the chain.

## Shipwrecks and hidden treasures

As one young man there told me, “Each island has its own personality, even its own accent.” The fact that he appended an H to the start of that last word only underscored his point. About 95 percent of people in the Magdalens are Francophone, though a few islands are primarily English-speaking.

The two largest, in area and population, sit at the bottom of the archipelago. The southernmost, Havre Aubert, where most residents speak French, is also known as Amherst Island.



Bluffs near La Grave, the oldest settlement in the Magdalens, a village that is home to a sea museum and arts-and-crafts shops. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

The village of La Grave is a hub of culture, with the sea museum and lots of inviting arts-and-crafts shops in little shacks. It's also the oldest settlement on the islands. The Indigenous Mi'kmaq people visited the Magdalens for centuries before Europeans first spotted them, but didn't stay. The first settlers in the islands were French-speaking Acadians, expelled from Nova Scotia by the British in the 1760s during England's war with France, but invited to settle in the islands.



It wasn't benevolence: The British needed Acadians to establish fisheries. More than two centuries later, their culture and language remain dominant on most of the islands; even the brightly painted houses are an old Acadian custom.

The next island up is Cap-aux-Meules, also called Grindstone, after the rock-faced butte near the ferry landing. This mostly French-speaking island seems to buzz more than Amherst, with many shops and restaurants, parks and lighthouses, and hidden treasures like shoreline caves you can explore by kayak, as well as a shipwreck, the Corfu, which sits on Corfu Beach on the western shore.

Buzzing doesn't mean busy; nothing on the islands ever seems very busy, even when there are a lot of people around. Crowds are even rarer on Havre-aux-Maisons, the next island up, which is home to the airport. More bucolic yet than its southern neighbors, it's seemingly all cliffs, buttes, capes and lighthouses, including one, at Cape Alright, so charming it could brighten even the darkest heart.



The sea sculpted the Magadalens as well as brought the forebears of people who live there now. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times



Some places in the Magdalens are losing up to a meter a year to the sea because of erosion. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

Heading north, you cross onto the most unusual of the linked islands, Pointe-aux-Loups, which to my untrained eye appeared as little more than a 14-mile-long sandbar, barely wider than a two-lane road, sea on one side and lagoon on the other. It was like an eerie no man's land, complete with a salt mine, the product of which sprinkles North American roads every winter.



## **Faith, fishing and heavy sweaters**

Pointe-aux-Loups, quiet as it is, provides a nice transition from the lower islands to the upper ones. The latter have fewer people, and though their cliffs are just as red and their grass just as green, the colors seem more muted.

The first, Grosse-Île, has no English name, which is curious because almost everyone who lives there is Anglophone. The same is true for the next two communities, East Cape and Old Harry. In all, the Magdalens have about 600 English-speaking residents, and almost all live up here. Their houses are white, gray or brown; their churches are Anglican, not Roman Catholic like the Acadians'. Many are descendants of shipwreck survivors from England, Scotland and Ireland who were on their way to somewhere else when nature intervened.



Harvesting the sea's bounty was, and is, everything in the islands, with some boats painted almost as colorfully as the houses. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

If you go past Old Harry to Grande Entrée, a favorite of outdoor adventurers, you can see what the Maggies were like a century ago. None of the islands had electricity until the 1950s; these northern ones didn't get it until even later. One woman I met at their old schoolhouse museum recalled that she got power only in 1970, after her father installed his own poles.

Harvesting the sea's bounty was, and is, everything there. It started with walrus, once believed to be the largest colony on the planet — Magdalen walrus oil is said to have lit the streets of Paris for 100 years — and though they were all wiped out by 1799, you can still find their bones on the beaches. Cod, haddock and shellfish dominate now, as does a wry sense of humor. One woman shared a local axiom: “When the fishing is done, that’s when the weather will get nice.”



An old fishing boat next to the Church of St. Peter's by the Sea, which was built with lumber salvaged from a shipwreck and houses a memorial to those lost at sea. Credit...Nigel Quinn for The New York Times

There is evidence everywhere of how hard life was, from the cemeteries, which betray a startling rate of child mortality, to the Church of St. Peter's by the Sea, which doubles as a memorial to the many islanders lost at sea. It, too, was built with lumber salvaged from a shipwreck.

I didn't meet a somber soul there, though; faith and fishing seem to keep them moored. You could say the two are inextricable: The whitewashed Holy Trinity Church has a stained-glass window depicting Christ as a fisherman, complete with a rod and a heavy wool sweater. Madelinots refer to the image as “Jesus in rubber boots.”

## **A vanishing way of life**

The Magdalens are disappearing. Erosion used to be checked by winter ice, which climate change has diminished greatly. Tourists come up every February to gawk at newborn harp seal pups on the ice, but there's been so little ice in recent winters that the cows have gone elsewhere to give birth. Rock formations that were landmarks crumble every winter; new ones appear each spring. One red cave was renamed "the cathedral" after its roof collapsed into the sea, opening a gaping hole in the campground above.

But there are other kinds of erosion, too. Take a ferry to Entry Island, the final inhabited piece of the archipelago, and you'll see more dramatic red cliffs and treeless expanses but not many people. The population, which was 270 in 1980, is now 50. Last winter it dropped to 23. The man piloting the boat said that because the island has no police officers, it's not uncommon to see young children driving pickups.

Entry Island is English-speaking, settled originally by farmers. Craig Quinn, who is in his 70s and grew up there — his father was the lighthouse keeper for a while — told me that in 1964, the local school had 72 students. It closed in 2015, when that number fell to two. A woman who works at the museum that now occupies the building told me her son was one of them.

If the place is dying, though, it's dying well. Every person I met there agreed with the woman working at the island's tiny grocery store/post office, who told me, "I would never want to be anywhere else." Entry Island is the Magdalens' Magdalen: dazzling and soothing, the kind of place that dislodges the clutter in your head and then sweeps it clear.

Back on Grindstone one evening, I was in line at a poutine shack when the gentleman ahead of me, a local who'd spotted my foreign license plate, asked, "What brought you to the Magdalens?"

Before I could answer, his friend chuckled and said, "He got lost."

He's right; I did. But only once I was already there.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/travel/magdalen-islands-quebec-canada.html?campaign\\_id=301&emc=edit\\_ypgu\\_20240526&instance\\_id=124553&nl=your-places%3A-global-update&regi\\_id=177901256&segment\\_id=167860&te=1&user\\_id=eac38c6faf1f143145c18ad20dab966b](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/travel/magdalen-islands-quebec-canada.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_ypgu_20240526&instance_id=124553&nl=your-places%3A-global-update&regi_id=177901256&segment_id=167860&te=1&user_id=eac38c6faf1f143145c18ad20dab966b)