

# A slice of Europe... in North America

Saint-Pierre and Miquelon is the last bastion of France in the New World

Story and photography by Denise Flint



Top: The town of Saint-Pierre is squeezed between the harbour and the hills behind.

Above: Houses are so close to the street that the windows, which open outwards, had to be left shut so as not to endanger passersby. Many houses, therefore, have a smaller, inwards-opening window to get a bit of fresh air.

**Y**ou can't get there from here. It's a term often used in a joking manner to indicate how lost someone is. But in the case of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, unless you're already in Canada, the statement is true. The only way to get to this tiny archipelago, the last piece of France in the New World, is through a Canadian port.

## La vie en français

At first glance Saint-Pierre looks indistinguishable from its nearest neighbour, the Newfoundland coast, a mere 25 kilometres away. The same style of colourful houses cling to steeply sloped streets, windswept barrens sparsely scattered with doubled over but defiant trees. But the chatter on the street is in French, the licence plates are European and corner stores are replaced by *patisseries* where *citron tartes*, *croissants aux chocolat* and fruit flans, when purchased, are treated with the respect they deserve, carefully nested into a plain white box and tied with gold ribbon. *Tres français*.

## Exploring Saint-Pierre

Walking through the streets of Saint-Pierre, which is also the name of the largest city on the archipelago, is an adventure, thanks to the *tambours*, small enclosed porches meant to keep inclement weather out of the houses, which sit right on the sidewalk. The *tambours*, or drums—so-called because you have to bang so hard on them in order for the occupants to hear you—stretch to the curb, which means frequent forays off the sidewalk. Fortunately, with few road signs, narrow streets and almost no stop signs at the frequent intersections, vehicles don't move through the old town very quickly.

Neither do pedestrians. There's little rhyme or reason to the layout. A person could find themselves next to a *discothèque* as easily as a *bibliothèque*. If they're lucky they'll find themselves next to one of the restaurants that dot the town. My



Clockwise from top left: Dinner at *Les P'tits Graviers*, an atmospheric restaurant in the heart of Sainte-Pierre; the only guillotine in North America was used just once before being put into permanent storage; the church on Ile-aux-Marins has a wooden, hull-shaped ceiling; the ship commemorates all the sailors of the island; the architecture of Sainte-Pierre is extremely eclectic.



husband considered the monkfish he had at Restaurant le Feu de Braise to be the third finest meal of his entire life. The best part? Though we were willing to pay what it took to enjoy a first-class repast, his fish, my filet mignon and a litre of very respectable *vin de table* came to less than 50 euros.

Just across the harbour from Saint-Pierre lies Ile-aux-Marins, once called Ile-aux-Chiens, and the refuge of fishermen, or seadogs, who preferred independence to working for the merchants who controlled the fishing trade on Saint-Pierre. No longer inhabited except by a few summer cottagers, the island is basically one large open-air museum, and tours run daily. Everything on the island was built by the inhabitants, and their craftsmanship and ingenuity are a tribute to their independence. A large church is securely capped by a hull-shaped ceiling—the work of a local boat builder who only had his own experience to rely on when it came to design. The charming paintings inside were done by a resident with no artistic training and I couldn't help but wonder how far he would have gone in other circumstances. The schoolhouse has been turned into a museum with artefacts culled from the former residents and is a testament to their ability to salvage from the many shipwrecks that have happened in the surrounding waters over the years. Wurlitzer anyone?

### Larger island, smaller population

Miquelon, although by far the larger of the two main islands, has a much smaller population. A 45-minute ferry ride drops you off at the wharf in the only town, which consists of a few businesses, a couple of restaurants and a scattering of houses. The tiny town centre holds a library, town hall, the *gendarmerie* and a now recognizable style of church, touchingly adorned inside and, again, capped with a hull-shaped

roof. A brand new *Maison de la Nature et de l'Environnement* is a great resource for visitors and locals alike and gives you an idea of what to expect when you tour the island. Shaped like an hourglass, *grande Miquelon* and *petite Miquelon* (Langlade) are joined by *la dune*, a 13-kilometre stretch of sand that is a haven for horses—who are dropped off by their owners to live there all summer—and hikers taking advantage of the numerous trails crisscrossing the islands.

Though waves crash against the shore, and constantly attack the sand isthmus, residents brave the icy waters to free-dive for lobsters. The best spots are where the seals, also fans of the tasty crustaceans, hang out. But horses and seals aren't the only animals to be found. Miquelon used to serve as a quarantine centre for farm animals travelling between Europe and North America. When the facilities were closed a herd of alpacas was left unclaimed and was adopted by the islanders. The last two animals still disconcertingly roam the shores.

### Fishing and rum-running

First discovered by the Basque, for hundreds of years Saint-Pierre and Miquelon supported a prosperous fishing trade. American Prohibition brought unprecedented wealth as huge warehouses were built to handle a lively trade in Canadian whisky and Caribbean rum. Al Capone is said to have visited several times, although the only 'proof' was a hat frequently brandished by the owner of the Hotel Robert, who swore it belonged to the famous gangster.

With both those sources of income long dried up, the *petite* archipelago is now focusing on tourism to bring in needed income. Coming home loaded down with French wine, French perfume and French food bought at fire-sale prices I couldn't help but consider it a winning strategy. 🍷