



Tracking Moose and Mousse on the Gaspé Peninsula

By Don Mankin (Photos by Eric Brodnax)



The clang of crashing antlers echoed through the clear, cold mountain air as two huge moose butted heads just 50 yards away in the early morning sun peeking over the ridge in front of us.

This was our reward for getting up at 5 am to hike a steep two uphill miles to this moose playground/battleground in the heart of the Gaspé Peninsula. It was the last day of my three day trip last October to this rugged but civilized corner of southeastern Quebec.

While I watched this amazing wildlife tableau play out before

me, I was still digesting my gourmet meal from the evening before – possibly the best smoked salmon I have ever had, a spicy clam and crab soup, veal in gorgonzola sauce, and a decidedly decadent chocolate mousse. Such is life on the Gaspé Peninsula -- wilderness and nature plus French food and culture without the inconvenience and expense of a trans-Atlantic flight.

The trip began with an afternoon canoe trip down the Bonaventure River on the southern coast of the Peninsula. The sky was clear and the air was brisk as

we paddled down the fast flowing river and bounced through the benign rapids. There were just enough rocks and ripples to make it interesting. Our paddle ended as the setting sun turned the few wispy clouds into rosy streaks across the sky.

Our reward for braving the “wild” waters of the Bonaventure was an outstanding dinner, prepared and served by our hosts from CIME Aventures (www.cimeaventures.com) in their rustic but comfortable ecolodge -- grilled codfish in a miso marinade, soup made from oranges and root

vegetables, beet salad with a ginger, garlic and Dijonnaise seasoning, barbequed salmon marinated in maple syrup and served with rice, almonds and cranberries, vodka and Malpèque oyster shots and homemade apple pie.

We were really roughing it! By now we were thoroughly immersed in the charm of the region -- the yin-yang combination of nature and French culture, especially the food.

Day 2 was more rigorous. After a drive of several hours to Gaspésie National Park in the interior of the Peninsula, we embarked on an 8 mile hike on the international extension of the Appalachian Trail in the Chic Choc mountains, guided by our hosts from Absolu EcoAdventure (www.aventure.com). The trail snaked up and down over rocks and tree roots and, since it was very late in the Fall tourism season, through patches of ice and grainy snow. We covered a total elevation gain of less than 1,000 feet, but the ups and downs made it seem higher.

The views from the cliffs, outcroppings and the rocky mountain tops were well worth the effort. The Appalachians are one of the oldest mountain chains in the world. Originally thrusting 40,000 feet above sea level, they have been worn down by 480 million years of wind and rain, giving them a soft, rounded, ancient look. The view over the rolling, tree-covered hills and snow-dusted ridges and through the wide valleys to the St. Lawrence River evoked ancient connections and primal memories.

After the hike, we checked into the picturesque Gite du Mont-Albert, a four star hotel with a zillion star restaurant in the heart of the park. Just as the gourmet meal and fine wine started to lull

me into a relaxed sense of well being, our guides announced the plan for the next day – a well-before-dawn wake-up call to hike up a short but steep trail to watch the sun rise, and if we were lucky, see a couple of moose frolicking in their natural environment.

Only about half of us made the early morning wake up call. I was glad that I did. Watching those two moose bang antlers in the soft glow cast by the rising sun was pure magic. We saw over a dozen moose that morning – at least three adult males with big sets of antlers and several mothers with their

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kids. The setting was also spectacular – trees, rocks and rolling snow-covered hills with not a sign of civilization in sight other than the trail, a simple wooden viewing platform, and a handful of other, early rising hikers. There were also no sounds other than the clanging of the antlers, a high pitched keening from the youngsters, and our excited but hushed whispers.

As we descended the trail to head back, I stopped to gawk at one male with a big rack (not a phrase heard often in everyday life) just a few yards off the trail. When he started to move in my direction, I decided that it was



time for me to also move, in the opposite direction. I've seen moose before – mostly in Newfoundland by the side of the highway – but rarely in their natural environment like this.

From there on, it was all downhill – literally. The hike down was easy and fast. We got back to the hotel in time for a fast cruise through the breakfast buffet and one last chance to immerse myself in the gustatory delights of the Gaspé Peninsula (with apologies to Homer Simpson, “hmmm, crepes, hmmm”).

[Note: In the interest of full disclosure, this trip was hosted by the Provincial tourism board, the two local tour companies cited in the article, and others to promote adventure tourism in Quebec. All of my expenses, except for my airfare to and lodging in Quebec City were covered by the hosts.]

Don Mankin is a travel writer, business author, psychologist, organizational consultant and executive coach. The Wall Street Journal called his latest book, “Riding the Hulahlula to the Arctic Ocean: A Guide to 50 Extraordinary Adventures for the Seasoned Traveler” (National Geographic, 2008), one of the best travel books of the year. For more information on Don or Riding the Hulahlula, check out his website www.adventuretransformations.com.