

CORONAVIRUS INFORMATION

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Road trips now offer excitement, but require more planning than ever before

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED AUGUST 4, 2020

UPDATED 18 HOURS AGO

1 COMMENTS

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Percé village, Gaspé.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

It's a moment months in the making. Just that morning, we had climbed in the car, buckled up and set our sights on a destination far beyond any place we'd seen, or even considered, in a long time – since before the pandemic. Driving along Ontario's Highway 401, the tall, blue sign – *Bienvenue* – and flapping Fleur-de-lis appear on the broad shoulder of the road and we roll

to a stop. Climbing out for photos here at the gateway to Quebec, we hear the truckers lay heavy on their horns as they rumble by. A seasoned traveller, I've been to more than 100 countries. And yet here, a scarce few hours from home, crossing my first border of any sort since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, it's a moment I'll remember for a very long time.

Weeks of planning went into this 10-day trip from Toronto to Montreal, Quebec City and the Gaspé Peninsula. Even the packing was complicated. How many packs of wipes should I bring? Masks – will I be able to wash them, and should I bring disposable back-ups in case I can't? What about hand sanitizer – two bottles, three? What if I run out and can't find more on the road? Then friends unhelpfully added worries based on rumours they'd heard that police were stopping people at the provincial boundary, that self-quarantine measures were being introduced. Neither ended up being true, but additional research went into dispelling them. Quebec currently has no travel restrictions, but a provincewide mask mandate is in place.

And though a road trip seems the perfect solution for anyone who longs to travel beyond their backyard but still desires physical distancing, the open road remains uncertain. Worries once you leave home range from whether you'll inadvertently steer yourself into a COVID-19 hot spot to the simple, but important concern about whether you will be able to find a bathroom when you really need it.

On this trip, washrooms, fortunately, are mostly not a problem. Along Highway 401, the On Route service centres remain open, with distancing measures in place: Every second toilet and hand-dryer blocked, chairs and tables for restaurants stacked in a corner, and the always long Tim Hortons line now even longer with two metres between customers. Once in Quebec, rest stops and most gas stations also provide respite.

In Montreal, as we check in to Le Germain hotel downtown, the valet advises us that they've done away with standard paper tickets and instructs us to call at least 15 minutes in advance to retrieve the car. "So we can sanitize everything – the steering wheel, the seats," he says. I wonder about tips, too, in a time when cash isn't always welcome. The best thing to do is to add a little extra onto the bill at checkout and designate that for those who have provided good service during your stay.

And then, having broken the seal on the rooms – literally, a little tab on the door, marked "*propre/clean*" – to drop off our luggage, we head out to explore, opting mostly for the open air. Under the sun, we rent and ride scooters through a succession of neighbourhoods, from the Plateau through redeveloped Griffintown and along the Lachine Canal, stopping for a pint

on the patio at the Terrasse St-Ambroise. In the evening, we dine on grilled cheese and gourmet hotdogs from Chez Tousignant at a picnic table in a park in Little Italy.

The mood in Montreal is a mix. Some places, such as museums, are much quieter than usual, in part because many require advance reservations for visits. But neighbourhoods and parks are bustling, mostly with local residents getting some fresh air; many enjoy provincial laws that allow drinking, within reason, in parks, as long as food is also being consumed. Most tourists are Quebeckers, with just a trickle coming from Ontario.

A couple of days later, we're headed for the coast, to the Gaspé Peninsula via Quebec City. Now out of urban areas and off four-lane highways, our Ontario licence plate attracts attention – people stare at the front bumper, bare on Quebec cars, and squint to see where this alien automobile is from. I spot only one other, the only non-Quebec plate during a week here. We skirt the edge of the Atlantic Provinces' COVID-19 bubble at two separate crossings between La Belle Province and New Brunswick – the far side of the bridge, in both cases, cordoned off by flashing lights. We continue east, toward Percé.

Overnight, while we sleep in Carleton-sur-Mer, Quebec's provincewide mandatory mask law comes into effect – very few locals were wearing them at the hotel restaurant for dinner the night before; everybody had one on at breakfast the next morning. At Paspébiac, we visit an open-air museum, learning about the heyday of the cod-fishing industry in the 18th and 19th centuries. Then we dine, right there, on superfresh lobster – again, at a picnic table – salty breezes adding to the meal. At one point, we follow a whim and make a last-minute turn, finding a hidden beach at the end of it, the pleasures of discovery even purer after so many months of confinement.

And finally, we reach Percé. As we walk onto a ferry, crew carefully ensure that all riders in line are wearing masks and that everyone sanitizes their hands before boarding. The eminence of Percé Rock rises to our port side. Our destination – Bonaventure Island – is just a dark smear in the horizon.

Perce rock, Quebec.

MATHIEU DUPUIS/QUEBEC MARITIME

For a moment, I almost forget we're in the middle of a pandemic – and then the captain makes his announcement. Along with usual instructions about muster stations and life jackets, he instructs that masks are required on board “at all times, and that includes the mouth *and* the nose.” Sun beating down on my face, mask secure in place, hands still a bit damp from hand sanitizer, it's still almost perfect, this strange and wonderful journey.

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