

salon



Magdalen Islands seals



salon focus



Witnessing the magical Magdalen Islands seals

A remote archipelago in the Gulf of St. Lawrence offers an adventure you can't find anywhere else.

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The Magdalen Islands, or Îles-de-la-Madeleine as they are known in French, is a place of raw natural beauty.

This remote archipelago, made up of eight small islands, sits in middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The topography is a magical mix of red sandstone cliffs, outstretched sand dunes, and miles of pristine beaches. The wind always seems to bellow across the islands evoking a long history of seafarers and shipwrecks.

The Magdalen Islands are the perfect destination for an intrepid traveler to explore any time of year, yet it is in the dead of winter that an unexpected anticipation starts to build. From late February to early March, just off the rugged coast on vast ice floes you can come face to face with newborn harp seal pups, known as white coats.

There is no shortage of fantastic images and scenery for any shutterbug to capture, whether you are an amateur photographer or a highly-skilled one.

The Magdalen Islands is the only place in the world where you can embark on such an incredible adventure and have the opportunity to observe harp seals "whelping" in the wild.

Chateau Madelinot has been providing unique seal watching tours by helicopter since the late 1980s; no one else on the islands offers this "truly one of a kind" experience. Guests gear up at the hotel in red survival suits before heading out toward the water to board the nearby helicopters.

There are only three small trips out to the ice floes per day.

The three-hour adventure takes you high above the snow-covered landscape along the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Looking down as you begin to approach the surface, you will notice dark spots moving along the frozen

water as thousands of harp seals converge on the ice to give birth. The helicopter lands on the packed ice just yards away from the seal pups. You can almost instantly hear a cacophony of newborn seals crying across the barren terrain. No need to fret – the mothers are always nearby, usually emerging from a water hole and returning to the wee pup to feed them milk. Harp seals spend most of their lives in the water, with the breeding season being an exception.

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What may come as a surprise is the sheer enormity of the female harp seals as they waddle across the ice. Fully-grown adults can weigh up to 300 pounds.

They are pregnant for approximately 240 days and only have one pup. These fluffy cuties weigh around 25 pounds at birth. The amniotic fluid makes their fur yellow, but it will become a brilliant shade of white after just a couple of days out on the ice.

There is truly no other place in the world where the wildlife enthusiast can observe harp seals being born in the middle of nowhere. Getting close to these brand new, beautiful



Tiffany Thornton poses with a seal on the islands. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TIFFANY THORNTON

creatures of the sea is an experience like no other. It will leave an indelible impression on your heart.

At less than 400 kilometres from Moncton, getting to the islands is relatively easy and affordable.

There is a ferry service from Prince Edward Island to the small archipelago in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Reservations for the five-hour crossing can be made through Traversier, which is also highlighted on the Tourisme Îles-de-la-Madeleine website. Although geographically closer to Prince Edward Island, the islands are part of Quebec.

Tourisme Îles de la Madeleine also advertises a coach to the island, which departs in Quebec City every Thursday evening, from mid-June to mid-September, with stops at Edmundston,

Fredericton and Moncton. The service is also available in April and May with modified schedules.

In addition to the natural beauty brought by hundreds of thousands of seals who migrate to the ice fields to bear their young each March, the islands also offer a wide range of attractions and activities throughout the year.

In summer, it is known for its beaches. There are also numerous trails and visitors can embark on any number of adventures, from hiking, cycling, and horseback riding, to canoeing, kayak-

ing and boating. It is also renowned for sliding sports and wind sports, including kite surfing, paddle boarding and wind surfing.

Tiffany Thornton is a freelance travel writer and wildlife photographer based out of Halifax.

Seal pups on The Magdalen Islands



1. The seal pups are known for their adorable faces and big dark eyes. 2. A harp seal getting some rest after giving birth. Females are pregnant for approximately 243 days and only have one pup. 3. One of the seal pups on the Îles-de-la-Madeleine plays shy for the camera. Hundreds of thousands of seals each year migrate to the islands to bear their young. 4. A harp seal shows some love to a seal pup. Every year thousands of seals migrate to the islands to give birth. 5. This seal whelps for the camera. 6. A baby seal. 7. Participants get ready to deploy for their seal adventure helicopter tour from Chateau Madelinot. 8. A view of the Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

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