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CANADA BY CARGO SHIP

PHOTOS BY HILARY NANGLE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Discovering Quebec's remote Lower North Shore aboard a cruise-supply vessel

By Hilary Nangle
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My eyes Ping-Pong between Kegaska's port and the sea, from watching the ship's crane hoist containers on deck to scanning the Gulf of St. Lawrence waters hoping to spy any of the 13 whales known to frolic here. I've been eyeballing both since boarding the combo cruise-and-cargo ship *Bella Desgagnés* two days ago.

Kegaska might not be the end of the world, but it's the end of the road. Route 138 stops here and doesn't pick up again for more than 200

miles. Locals call this isolated region *Territoire de la Basse-Côte-Nord* or the Lower North Shore. In winter, the *Route Blanche*, a 325-mile snowmobile trail, connects the villages, but when the ice and snow melt, they rely on the *Bella Desgagnés*. From April through mid-January, it connects the Lower North Shore villages not only to each other but also to the rest of Quebec and the world.

During its weekly round trips between Rimouski, roughly 200 miles east of Quebec City on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, and Blanc Sablon, on the Labrador border, *Bella* visits 10 ports twice: three with road access, five isolated villages along the Lower North Shore, and Anticosti Island. It's a cross-cultural journey that includes Innu First Nations and Acadian villages as well as English and francophone ones. Roughly 5,000 people live along the Lower North Shore, nearly 1,000 in Blanc Sablon alone. The rest are scattered in 13 compact villages, some with populations numbering fewer than 100.

Bella Desgagnés' primary mission is transporting cargo for these communities and providing passenger service for residents. It also bridges the gap for travelers looping through Labrador or ferrying to Newfoundland; their cars, motorcycles, RVs, and bicycles are carried in containers. Increasingly it's carrying round-trip cruisers, passengers like my husband and me, who've come for a glimpse into the people, wildlife, geology, and geography that define this sparsely populated region.

When viewed from the front, *Bella* resembles



a typical cruise ship. It offers comfortable and efficient, but not fancy, guest cabins and port excursions, but that's where the similarity stops. There isn't a casino, nor are there boutiques, nightlife venues, a pool, or a spa, and the deck seats are molded plastic, not cushy chaises. Amenities include a lounge with limited bar service, a cafeteria, a laundry, a kennel, and a small fitness room.

Onboard activities include documentary films and presentations about the ship and communities visited, as well as about seabirds,

FROM TOP
The view of Harrington Harbour from the *Bella Desgagnés*, which works round the clock and offers efficient, but not fancy, guest cabins.





PHOTOS BY HILARY NANGLE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Cruise-cargo ship visits Quebec's remote villages

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whales, flora, and fauna by a naturalist. Live entertainment means scanning surrounding waters for whales, porpoise, and seabirds; watching crew load and unload containers; and enjoying port approaches and departures from the observation decks.

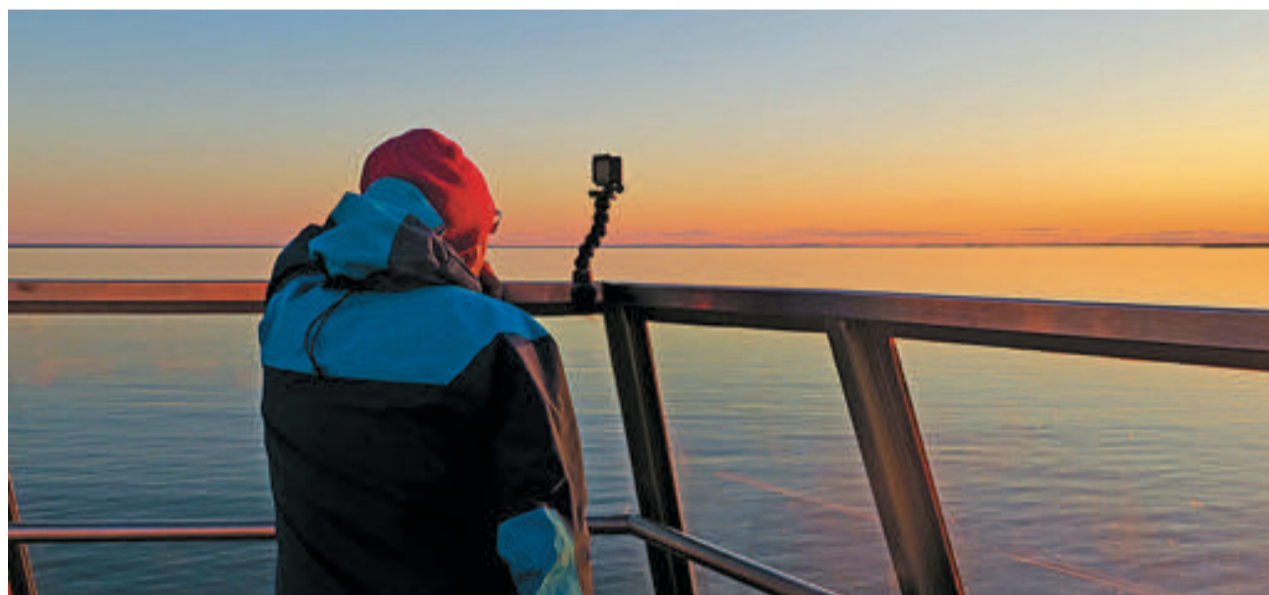
Our cruise package included three meals daily in the dining room. Two sittings are offered, and while there are a few tables for two, we often were paired with other guests at larger ones. The daily-changing, classic French menu lists at least three choices, and always includes local seafood. Although most passengers spoke French, we managed to converse using my limited French, their limited English, and a Franglais version of charades. Wine helped. As a Francophone tablemate quipped: "A glass, understand a little; a bottle, fluent."

Although the ship docks in other ports, Kegaska marks the beginning of the Lower North Shore, 233 coastal miles first charted by explorer Jacques Cartier, but home to First Nations peoples for millennia. In this staggeringly beautiful, glacial-sculpted region, free-flowing salmon-rich rivers and inland boreal forests cede to rugged coastline seasoned with squishy peat bogs, rocky outcrops, deserted beaches, and smatterings of islands. The subarctic climate attracts Atlantic puffins, guillemots, and razorbills. Icebergs often linger into summer.

As the ship hopped the coast and islands, we disembarked for self-guided walkabouts as well as guided excursions, some professional, most homespun, almost all including the local school, health center, church, and ice hockey rink. Jobs may be few, ages increasing, and populations declining, but those remaining value their rugged independence and the safety of their communities and think nothing of snowmobiling a couple of hundred miles for weekend hockey tournaments or festivals. "You'll see 300 Ski-Doo's for a hockey game," one guide told me, as she pointed out the local arena.

Early on the third morning, the ship squeezed between Entry and Renfall Islands to enter Harrington Harbour, where "Le Grand Séduction" was filmed. The previous night, we'd watched this English-subtitled comedy in our cabin. I still chuckle when remembering the scene with locals playing cricket in white longjohns atop Entry Island — and that was before local guide Keith Rowsell revealed that he was one of those cricket players.

"At the end of the shooting, the film



If you go . . .

Weather is always a factor. Gusting winds can prevent docking in some ports and make access to others, such as the narrow channel into Harrington Harbour, tricky. Although the **Bella Desgagnés** has ice-breaking capability, it sometimes gets caught in late and early season and must wait for a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker to clear the way, which might take several days.

Relais Nordik operates the **Bella Desgagnés** (800-463-0680; relaisnordik.com/en). Round-trip fares (ages 16-64) for the seven-night cruise begin at \$1,318 Canadian per person, quad occupancy or \$1,502 Canadian, double occupancy, April 1-May 19 and Sept. 30 to the end of season;

\$1,420 Canadian per person quad, \$1,689 double May 20-June 23 and Sept. 2-29; and \$1,689 Canadian quad and \$1,877 double, June 24-Sept. 1. Price includes maritime passage, cabin, and meals; taxes are extra. Shorter options are available.

Port excursions are extra; most are booked through **Voyages Coste** (877-573-2678 or 418-465-2002; voyages-coste.ca/en), both Harrington Harbour (\$21.74 Cdn) and La Tabatière (\$33.20 Cdn) are in English.

Both **Cote-Nord Tourism** (888-463-5319; tourisme-cote-nord.com) and **Quebec Maritime** (quebecmaritime.ca/en) offer information about the region.

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company made beer and food available on the island; not the brightest move. By the time we left, everyone was staggering," he recalls. "Our boat of drunks dressed in white underwear arrived at the dock just as tourists were getting

off the **Bella**. They detoured as far away from us on the dock as they could."

This isolated village, with boardwalks instead of streets, enjoys a relatively stable population hovering

around 300. "People think we suffer out here, but we have a restaurant, bar, and radio station. I have high-speed Internet. I don't have or need a car, but I do have three generators, four ATVs, two boats, and five snowmobiles.

From top: Harrington Harbour, an English-speaking village where boardwalks replace streets; cargo containers on the **Bella Desgagnés**; the shore dinner is a highlight of the cruise; Krystal Chandler, a naturalist aboard the ship, offered a presentation on whales; a passenger took photos of the setting sun from the vessel's observation deck.

These aren't toys, they're essentials. I'm not struggling," Rowsell says, patting his ample belly.

Other villages aren't so stable. We toured La Tabatière by schoolbus, with Tony Gallichon driving and 17-year-old Amy Willcott, one of five in the school's largest class, pointing out local sights. "I love walking out the door knowing nothing bad will happen," she says. "If I ever need help, I know someone will." But jobs are scarce, and once she leaves to become a veterinary technician, she doubts she'll come back.

We return to the ship as the crane is being stowed. First Officer Mathieu Roi choreographs the loading and unloading at each port. The local crew alerts him to what's coming aboard — vehicles, frozen lobster or crab, appliances, etc., and he plans and charts unloading and loading in advance. "People say it's the same trip every week, but it's never the same," he says. "With 22 stops in seven days, there's always something to keep you on your toes."

And passengers eyeballing the action.

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