

Textes intégraux ou complémentaires

Dossier thématique : « **LE TOUR DE LA GASPÉSIE** »

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Gaspésie and 90 Years of Tourism Branding

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The Gaspésie is a tourism brand that resonates throughout Québec, across Canada and around the world. It has what is known in the tourism trade today as “brand recognition”, a much sought after awareness that is key to the successful promotion of a tourism destination in a highly competitive international market. The brand recognition that the Gaspésie enjoys is the fruit of successful marketing campaigns of the past decades, but also the result of ninety or more years of promotion by associations, businesses and governments. Tourism in the Gaspésie region has produced thousands of printed tools – brochures, guidebooks, posters and printed ephemera of all kinds. Together, they provide a collection of images and texts that offer a rich portrait of the various ways in which the region has been sold to generations of travellers. Examining the promotional tools offers insights into the ways that the Gaspésie saw itself and the image projected to prospective travellers.

The marketing image of a destination typically builds on the iconic elements that distinguish it from its competitors. The Rocher Percé is one such icon, a godsend to marketers of all epochs and all stripes. Although not as well-known as the battlements of Québec or the falls of Montmorency or Niagara, the Rocher Percé is one of a handful of iconic landscapes in Canada that is recognizable around the world. It still exerts a fatal attraction. Since the Association touristique régionale de la Gaspésie began producing its annual tourism guide in 1986, Percé has been featured on its cover on almost every edition of the past 32 years – testifying to the ongoing pull of this emblematic landscape – and its tempting allure to marketers.

Even though books and the occasional travelogue described the Gaspésie region in the 19th century, travellers were many, but tourists were few. The first generation of hotels served the passengers arriving in Gaspé from Montréal and Québec on the vessels of the Gulf Ports Steamship Company. It was not until the Intercolonial Railway entered the Matapédia River valley that mass tourism arrived in the region. The daily trains from Montréal and Halifax brought an influx of travellers to the doorstep of the Gaspésie. The completion of the railway line to Paspébiac in 1902, and finally to Gaspé in 1911, led to the construction of many hotels in coastal villages in response to the growing stream of tourists. By 1926, there were 36 hotels in operation in the Gaspésie and at least as many boarding houses. Cabins began to populate the coastline, the spectacular scenery compensating for the rustic accommodations.

Marketing the region became an economic imperative, not just to the railways but to the various businesses that had emerged. Most of the early promotion was orchestrated by hotels, family-owned operators eager for business. From 1929, the province of Québec began to lead efforts to promote the province and to invest in roadway infrastructure. The construction of the coastal road from Sainte-Flavie was a major initiative of the Ministère de la Voirie to connect the towns and villages around the Gaspé Peninsula and to create a highway for tourists. The project was promoted by the energetic minister, Joseph-Léonid Perron, who promised to improve Québec’s road network at the banquet held in 1921 to celebrate his nomination to cabinet. The Voirie began by re-building the road from Rimouski to Sainte-Anne-des-Monts in 1925. The construction of the road from Sainte-Anne-des-Monts to Matapédia was completed in 1928¹. Already, the hundred or so tourists estimated to have visited in 1925 had blossomed to 3,500 by 1928². That year, the ministère produced the first of its promotional brochures, *Four, Five and Six Days in Québec Canada*, offering itineraries to drivers in the province. The Gaspé Peninsula was omitted – the proposed itineraries ended with the “gravelled and well maintained” road at Métis-sur-Mer³.

The Perron Boulevard was officially opened in 1929 by a posse of politicians. Banquets, receptions and political rallies were held in villages around the Peninsula between July 20 and July 27, every politician and *curé* vaunting in their speeches the economic impact of the province's investment. The celebratory mood is well-captured in newspapers of the period, whose journalists recounted the transformational nature of the new highway network and the economic opportunities it delivered to entrepreneurs and coastal villages.

The Gaspésie region was among the first in Québec to be given a new and modern road network and the first to benefit from the rising popularity of the "road trip". Even with the onset of the Great Depression that began with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, car ownership was on the rise. A new generation of car-owners and holidayers took to their cars to explore the North American continent. Within months of its opening, the Gaspé Peninsula became the province's premier driving destination. Not simply a driving holiday, the Gaspésie was one better – a tour – a shoreline roadway that provided some of the most spectacular scenery to drivers and their passengers in a 550 mile loop that began and ended in Sainte-Flavie.

The province produced publications for drivers from Québec and further afield. The first, *Romantic Gaspé: Gaspé Peninsula*, was published in 1929. Richly illustrated with coloured drawings by graphic designer Albert Cloutier, the 32-page brochure also featured many black and white photographs of the region and its attractions. Offering brief descriptions of the landforms, history and description of the region's peoples, the guidebook encouraged travellers to start their tour of the Peninsula through the Matapédia River Valley and back along the north shore on the return voyage. "The highway had [sic] been splendidly constructed, is well kept, and traffic is practically all "one way", travel going east by the south shore and returning west by the north⁴."

Caption

The cover illustration of *Romantic Gaspé: Gaspé Peninsula* portrays a Gaspésie frozen in the past. Inside photographs show boys with dog carts, men moving hay in trailers pulled by oxen, fishing villages with stark buildings and fishermen in homespun clothing. The imagery romanticizes peasant life and naturally glosses over the poverty that was often its companion.

In 1930, a second 130-page softcover book followed, *La Gaspésie : Histoire, Légendes, Ressources, Beautés*. Its dense text was not likely to attract many tourists, but it was doubtless a useful guide to those travelling through the region, whose numbers were swelling every year⁵. "Depuis cinq ans, la vie de la ceinture gaspésienne a été littéralement envahie par des milliers et des milliers d'automobilistes de toutes les parties du continent nord-américain, charmés de découvrir une région absolument inconnue...» the guide mentioned⁶. Produced by the Ministère de la Voirie (Office provincial du tourisme), it was published in English and French language editions with impressive print runs of 100,000 and 50,000 respectively⁷.

The images used to promote the region were the Gaspésie of fishing villages, wild landscapes and simple folk. The bread oven along the highway, wayside crosses and roadside *artisanat* were visual clichés, a marked contrast to the striking modernity of the roadways of crisp white lines, well-aligned guardrails and reassuring signposts.

This nostalgic marketing was true for the Gaspé, but also typical of the portrayal of Québec generally. Although this caricature may sit uncomfortably with the modern viewer, nostalgia appears to have been key to attracting Americans, who were drawn to a place that had somehow resisted the change that was sweeping their nation.

Wandering artists and photographers helped make the Gaspésie top of mind. In search of landscapes different from the tenement neighbourhoods of New York City, photographer Paul Strand ventured to the Gaspé in the autumn of 1929 (he returned in 1936). His stark images of the villages, fishermen and the lonely unpainted buildings images of the Gaspé are considered to be masterpieces of contemporary photography. His work inspired other artists to visit, like American painter Georgia O’Keeffe. The mistress of his friend, mentor and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz, O’Keeffe’s trip was cut short by the bugs and the cold weather, but she still produced several views of barns beautiful in their stark whiteness. When Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s, sought a destination for a driving holiday in 1933 (some think to flee the emotional distress caused by her philandering husband and to have time with her press secretary and friend Lorena Hickok), the world’s most famous woman chose the Gaspé as her destination.

By appealing to “influencers”, the Gaspésie had unwittingly landed on a successful strategy of promotion by word of mouth. Travel writers, like Gordon Brinley and his wife Putnam, made the Gaspésie the subject of their 1935 book *Away to the Gaspé*. This was one of many books written by American travellers to the region that enjoyed great popularity (an impressive nine printings by May, 1937). In 1937, E.B. White mentioned the Gaspé in the Talk of the Town column in the influential *The New Yorker* magazine in the same breath as America’s leading holiday destinations: “the annual chirruping of the recreational centres (Maine, Vermont, Cape Cod, Nantucket, the dude West, the Gaspé, the Adirondacks) has developed into a kind of hogcalling contest. Every state or section which regards itself as a bargain for vacationists maintains a publicity bureau, buys space in newspapers and magazines; and they all shout at each other...⁸”

The Gaspésie did not yet have a publicity bureau. It was not until the 1940s that the region began to take its own promotion in hand. The Association des hôteliers de la Gaspésie produced its first promotional booklet. Simply called *La Gaspésie*, it offered 96 pages of texts and advertisements from hoteliers around the peninsula. This brochure promoted a more modern destination, choosing a more contemporary graphic style and cover from those still in circulation produced by the Provincial Tourist Bureau.

The negative impact of the sudden invasion of tourists was picked up by operators who used this as an argument to promote the region – a well-known trope in the tourism industry – “see the Gaspésie before it is too late”. Tauck Tours was among the first to offer organize bus tours to the region. Their 1941 brochure, promoting weekly departures from New York City between July and September for a tour of the Gaspé (for \$165 for a 13-day tour), uses the prospect of change as a key selling point. “The Gaspé Peninsula is becoming increasingly popular as its fame is spread abroad by returning travelers who have seen and appreciated its unique charm. Now is the time to visit Gaspé so that you may see it in all its unspoiled simplicity, for future years will tend to commercialize a country which is now unaffected by modern progress⁹.”

At the same time that Québec was positioning the province as being “the old world at your door” (the title of a 1932 publication of the Roads Department), Percé began to be used as a symbol of modernism. Montreal painter Paul-Émile Borduas was one of a handful of artists whose photographs (taken as part of the 1938 inventory of Québec’s natural resources for the Duplessis government) illustrate a different Gaspésie, one anchored in the past but reaching for the future. The French Surrealist thinker, André Breton, made Percé a metaphor for the new world emerging from war-torn Europe in *Arcanum 17*, a book written during an extended visit in 1944.

The government's promotional tools also began to show a more progressive destination. In 1944, illustrator Ernest Sénécal produced LA PÉNINSULE DE GASPÉ PENINSULA for the Office du tourisme de la province de Québec, a poster that is striking in its modernity.

Caption

A sleek sailor gazes in awe and admiration at the prow of Percé Rock, piercing the shallow seascape like a sleek battleship. Visual historian Marc H. Choko describes the 1944 poster as “sûrement la plus réussie de quatre affiches créées par Sénécal pour l'Office du tourisme”¹⁰.

The advertising culture of the 1950s saw the emergence of a new Gaspésie. Professional photographers working for Canadian National Railways, the Canadian Government Travel Bureau (founded in 1934) and the Service de ciné-photographie de la province de Québec (founded in 1941), produced images of the region that were crisper. They were intended to be picked up by Canada-friendly wire services and were sent to newspapers across the continent with brief blurbs to fill space in the travel section.

“Have you ever had a French Canadian vacation” was the tag line for a series of eight folders produced by the province of Québec Tourist Bureau, one of which was dedicated to the Gaspésie (the other destinations were Montréal, Québec City, the Laurentians, the Majestic St. Lawrence, the Eastern Townships, the Lac St-Jean, Charlevoix-Saguenay and the Laurentides Park). But the image of modern dames and their swinging liberty was still accompanied by ox-carts and genteel farmer when it came to the Gaspésie.

Caption

“Just like a trip abroad” is how the Gaspésie is pitched in this Canadian National Railways ad from the May 3, 1952 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine. Proximity to the United States was a new angle, even though the tag line “French Canada's romantic Gaspé”, used since the 1920s, continued to be the banner.

The ready availability of the air conditioner made the Gaspésie a less popular destination with Americans seeking to flee the sultry hot summers. The oil crisis of 1973 was one of many shocks that led to the steady decline of the driving holiday. The Gaspésie turned to Quebeckers as the source for the vast majority of its visitors, now accounting for 80% or more of summer visitors. The province of Québec, once the key promoter of the Gaspésie, began to promote all of the province's regions equally, institutionalizing this equality with the creation of ATRs, regional tourism associations in every tourism region. Fortunately, the brand recognition of the Gaspésie remains strong. It continues to be among the most popular destinations in the polling that measures Quebecers tourism intentions that begins every summer – proof that the brand recognition created over more than ninety years still resonates. ♦

Footnotes

1. René Castonguay, “Joseph-Léonide Perron”, *Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*, http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio/perron_joseph_leonide_15F.html
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Four, Five and Six Days in Quebec Canada*, Provincial Tourist Bureau, Roads Department, Quebec, May, 1928.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The guidebook appeared as *The Gaspé Peninsula, History, Legends, Resources, Attractions*.
6. *La Gaspésie, Histoire, Légendes, Ressources, Beautés*, Ministère de la Voirie, juillet 1933, page 36.
7. Jean-Marie Fallu, *La Gaspésie Une histoire d'appartenance*, p. 55.

8. E.B. White, *The New Yorker*, July 17, 1937.
9. *Personally Conducted Vacation Tours All Expense Included by Tauck*, Tauck Tours, 1941.
10. Marc H. Choko, *L’Affiche au Québec, Des Origines à Nos Jours*, p. 133.

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