

Sailing adventure to the Mingan Archipelago - 2018

Here's the account of a 1,200 nautical mile adventure aboard "Exilés", our sturdy little Southern Cross 28 sailboat, between Montréal and the Gulf of St-Lawrence. It took a total of eight weeks to complete this loop with the help of four brave crew members who accompanied me along different legs of the trip. Some preparatory boat upgrades were required and a timely job transition was managed in order to free up the time needed. It was more than worthwhile - what an adventure! It was also a little test for me which led to now being hopelessly hooked for more extensive cruising! In a nutshell, we left Pointe-Claire Yacht Club (just west of Montréal) on July 1st 2018, headed east down the St-Lawrence Seaway along the Gaspé peninsula to Rivière-Au-Renard, crossed the Gulf of St-Lawrence to reach Port Menier on Île D'Anticosti, sailed further north beyond the 50th parallel to explore the spectacular Mingan Archipelago, and then headed back west along the St-Lawrence's north shore to Sept-Îles and eventually returned to Pointe-Claire. Sailing through a wide range of different conditions (record heat, damp cold, dense fog, overnight passages, strong winds, gulf swells, tidal currents) brought about a rich set of experience but it was the people we met along the way and the new stories we now have that made this trip particularly rewarding.



My wife Liuyuan joined me on the first leg to Québec City along with our two and a half year old, and increasingly talkative, African Grey parrot called "Smokie". July 1st was one of the hottest days on record (46 degrees C with the humidity factor) and our exhaust manifold threw us a curve ball right as we entered the Côte Sainte-Catherine Lock; a pipe sheared off at one of the manifold's elbows. An emergency duct tape repair was made just before the next lock (St-Lambert) with the heroic assistance of my brother Christian. Through his network he somehow managed to secure high temperature-resistant duct tape on a Sunday which happened to be Canada Day, a national holiday where all major hardware stores were closed. What a start! Imagine being down below dealing with a hot engine manifold in the peak of a severe heat warning. We had the entire manifold assembly replaced a few days later in Québec City (at reasonably high expense, thank you very much). Other than this, the Montréal-Québec leg

went smoothly with favourable currents and winds, allowing us to sail with very little motoring. Of the four stopovers to reach Québec we anchored three nights and enjoyed intensely refreshing (i.e. heart-stopping) swims everyday around the boat. Rivière Saint-Maurice, located right next to the halfway town of Trois-Rivières, was a particularly pleasant anchorage where Liuyuan felt she was finally on vacation (pictured on right). Our brave parrot behaved



reasonably well



the entire way despite being very hot, and may have picked up a few more words; I couldn't make it all up but she seemed to be speaking, rather eerily, in continuous monologues. My parents and brother joined us in Québec on Saturday, which happened to be my dad's 80th birthday, and we had a fantastic dinner at Le Château Frontenac overlooking the St-Lawrence. Liuyuan returned the next day to Montréal with my parents, and it was Christian's turn to accompany me for the next two weeks.

The trip's second phase took us all the way to Rivière-Au-Renard, located at the eastern tip of the Gaspé peninsula. Soon after leaving Québec we stopped at Marina Saint-Laurent on Île D'Orléans (now referred to as Parc Nautique de L'Île Bacchus) for the tide to reverse so we could keep riding the strong ebb current. Here we met Michel, one of my cousins whom I hadn't seen in over 40 years, and his wife Line; we all enjoyed a pleasant lunch together aboard their classic 30-foot sailboat "Atlantide". From there the water and ambient temperatures started dropping and we had a nice, albeit brief, swim while anchored near Île de Bellechasse. The wind really picked up that night and it was uncomfortably rocky down below. We barely slept, if at all, but thankfully our 35-pound CQR anchor held its ground.



We got up at 0230 and managed to retrieve the anchor in total darkness with a good chop without breaking our backs - not too shabby for two guys in their 50s! The rest of that leg went very well and included great highlights. Nice anchorage at L'Île Du Pot À L'Eau-De-Vie (aka Brandy Pot, pictured on left) but cold enough to warrant hats and gloves. Getting across to Tadoussac was a tad tricky with a particularly strong

ebb cross-current. Despite actually moving backwards at one point, it all worked out in the end and we rewarded ourselves with a fish & chip lunch at the marina's restaurant upon arrival. We bumped into a fellow sailor whom we'd met earlier in Québec with his Bayfield 32 "Independence" - he was a spitting image of Gilles Vigneault (an iconic Québec artist) and perhaps a little wild in several ways, including his bold approach to navigation.



Beyond Tadoussac I radioed the coast guard each morning with the day's route plan and closed it on arrival (otherwise the coast guard would promptly call if they hadn't heard back) - definitely a great service! L'Anse À L'Original near Parc Du Bic should have been a spectacular anchorage but we didn't see much thanks to dense fog... plus yours truly fell overboard fully dressed, with shoes 'n all, by impulsively trying to retrieve a fairly pricy solar lamp that got knocked off and started sinking fast. I sort of lost my breadth on

that one and was lucky to climb back on board fast enough with Christian's helping hand - didn't waste time changing into dry clothes! Sadly I lost the lamp. We saw lots of whales and seals along the way, but there were just too many fast-going sightseeing boats - good for money, bad for whales. In Sainte-Anne-Des-Monts (right picture), we were greeted by Sylvain, the marina's attendant who looked as he though he belonged to a long line of tough-as-nails seamen but was as friendly and resourceful as you could imagine. Then there was Yvan Pelletier, the 81 year old mechanic who, on very short notice one evening, meticulously machined a new stud for Exilés' manifold in his pristine shop on top of a hill overlooking the St-Lawrence.



What followed the next day was an exhilarating sail between Sainte-Anne-Des-Monts and Grande Vallée with a strong breeze blowing between 20 and 25 knots from the west with 6-foot waves; a small craft warning was in full effect but Exilés was in her element and we had a blast despite successive controlled jibes (and being knocked around a little). While anchored in Grande Vallée we observed many Northern Gannets (Fous de Bassans) expertly diving for fish; what a show! Near Cap Gaspé on the eastern tip of the peninsula we set our Cape Horn wind-vane self steering system and it was a real treat for the two of us to sit comfortably on the forward deck while



Exilés steered herself effortlessly with the wind. Finally we arrived at Club Nautique Forillon located at Rivière-Au-Renard, a colourful and busy fishing port that included a small marina; this was an amazingly pleasant stopover with really friendly people and a variety of locally smoked fish. Mary-May had been looking after the little marina since setting it up 27 years earlier and, with her second hand Clément,



welcomed all visitors as if they were family. It's at this juncture that

Christian left to catch a 15-hour bus ride back to Montréal while Robert, a good friend from Pointe-Claire Yacht Club who accompanied me to Tadoussac the previous year, arrived by the same bus route a day later to join me for the next four weeks. He seemed to know Mary-May rather well, as with just about everyone who has passed by over the years. The evening before Robert's arrival I met the very friendly crew of "Drakkar II", a CS27 leaving the next morning for Île De La Madeleine; we had supper in their

cockpit, happily sharing sailing plans and stories (both were very accomplished blue water female sailors). I also took part in the endlessly generous sampling of the most elaborate rum collection I've ever experienced.

On Aug 24, Robert and I left Rivière-Au-Renard by heading straight north for 50 nautical miles across the Gulf of St-Lawrence to reach Port Menier on Île D'Anticosti. It was a first for me to be far enough from shore not to see any land for several hours. We spotted numerous porpoises on this passage, some quite close to us. At some point dense fog settled in and we couldn't see beyond 50 feet or so. We came fairly close to a passenger ship called "Aidavita" which I contacted by VHF radio to ensure he had us



on radar (Exilés doesn't yet have one). Île D'Anticosti is an island that ranks 20th in size in Canada (bigger than PEI) and is often referred to as the "Cemetery of the St-Lawrence" with over 400 ship wrecks along its shores; we took great care not to increment this statistic. Only a few hundred people live there permanently but there are thousands of deer that roam everywhere, and even more mosquitoes that greeted us with surprising gusto. Tying to Port Menier's 20-foot high steel public dock was a learning experience - definitely not setup for pretty little pleasure crafts. As luck would have it, oversized wooden planks were graciously given to me while in Marina Du Port de Québec by a sailor who was selling his boat and



realized I was ill-equipped for where I was going with my skinny little 2x4; Exilés' port side would have been quite damaged without those planks (placed between our fenders and the dock's steel wall). We stayed an extra day in Port Menier walking about, chatting with people and picking up interesting history. The crab club and cold beer at "Resto Chez Mario" was a hit.

From Port Menier we rounded the western tip of Île D'Anticosti and headed north towards Mingan on the gulf's north coast, thereby crossing the 50th parallel (right picture) and entering the cold Labrador current. It started as a rocky sail with a strong breeze and lively chop, and I didn't have much of an appetite for our breakfast-on-the-go; Robert still laughs when he recalls how unusually slowly I chewed my eggs & bacon that morning (I'm normally a fast eater). The Mingan Archipelago is a natural park reserve with a chain of about 40 islands between Île D'Anticosti and the St-Lawrence's north shore. We made it safe & sound to our first island of the archipelago: L'île Nu De Mingan. Sadly, dense fog settled in and we didn't see a darn thing but



we *did* hear lots of whales breathing around us. Once anchored we rewarded ourselves with single malt scotch-whisky which I had reserved for crossing the 50th and reaching the archipelago. Out of six days spent there, four were in dense fog and the last two were crystal clear. We spent a day in Havre Saint-Pierre, a quaint Acadian town on the gulf's



north shore in the heart of the archipelago, and had the chance to explore two of the archipelagos' islands: Île Quarry and Île Niapiskau. Breathtakingly beautiful and geologically fascinating. Both offered guided visits by Parcs Canada which we really appreciated as we learned so much. Impressive monoliths were formed thousands of years ago with the retreat of the last ice age, and the islands' micro-climate led to a rich variety of plant life (such as Labrador tea leaves) as well as scrawny evergreens that live to 200 years, twice as long as those on the mainland.





At that point it was Aug 1st, exactly one month since the Pointe-Claire departure, and it was time to start making our way back west, which we did along the northern coast for several days. Our first stopover on the return path was Sept-Îles, roughly 100 nautical miles west of Mingan. It took us 24 hours to get there and we experienced our first overnight sail with three-hour shifts; that worked well for us. We sighted numerous whales along the way, one being no more than 50 feet away whose breath (not so pleasant) was

well detected. Upon approaching Sept-Îles we were greeted by a handful of very playful Atlantic white-sided dolphins swimming and jumping around Exilés for about 10 minutes at sunrise. In Sept-Îles we met Michelle, a charming sailor from Sainte-Anne-Des-Monts on her Beneteau First 28; we shared some tips and one that proved useful was a weather forecasting app called Windyty which I used on the rest of the trip. Île Grand Caoui (spectacular anchorage) and Baie Trinité (pictured on right, a small fishing town in desperate need of some TLC) were our next stopovers, and from there we recrossed the Gulf of St-Lawrence, but this time heading south to



Matane. Lots of fog and lots of commercial traffic. We spotted several cargo ships with the FindShip app while we had cellular coverage near the coast, and from there we calculated and recalculated all the potential intersection points. Once we were well in the gulf and without cellular coverage, we contacted various ships on VHF radio when we estimated we were close



enough for a safety call. Each ship immediately responded to our call with the utmost courtesy and confirmed they had us on radar. Note to self: need AIS receivers and/or radar next time we're in these waters. Matane was a really enjoyable stop where we ended up sending three days: quaint little marina, fellow sailors who welcomed us with open arms, fantastic microbrewery called "La Fabrique" which offered the best shredded pork burger we've ever had, and to top it off we watched a movie on each of the three nights we were there (including the latest "Mission

Impossible"). Not too bad... It was hard prying ourselves away from Matane but we needed to get going. The trip's toughest hop was probably from Métis-Sur-Mer to Gros Cacouna: 80 nautical miles, 20 hours, dense fog, cold, damp. The cabin heater helped a lot when taking breaks down below. We arrived at 0430 and fell asleep as soon as the anchor was set in the well protected port of Gros Cacouna.

The next day we met up with Ben on “Renaissance II”, the Alberg 29 which accompanied Exilés to Tadoussac the previous year, while anchored at L’Île Du Pot À L’Eau-De-Vie (arguably one of the nicest anchorages on the St-Lawrence). We enjoyed catching up and sharing a meal in Exilés’ cockpit. The next morning Ben continued on his eastward journey while we proceeded on our westward return a day later. I laughed myself silly while re-reading an old Farley Mowat classic, “The Boat Who Wouldn’t Float”; I highly recommend it. The Perseid meteor shower was at its peak while we were anchored off one of the Pèlerin islands on Aug 13 and we were rewarded with a clear night sky. It’s hard to believe that all these “shooting stars” are no larger than tiny little grains of sand. From there we sailed past the Kamouraska islands (protected bird sanctuary) and made it into Parc Nautique St-Jean-Port-Joli via the strong flood current of La Traverse de Saint Roch (buoy H79 on right), one of the most treacherous passages of the St-Lawrence due to its strong tidal currents. St-Jean-Port-Joli is a nice little town where we enjoyed local beer and good food, but like last year we missed the increasingly popular



“Chants des Marins” festival by just a few days since we had to be in Québec City by the weekend for the next crew switch. We left early one evening on a rising tide to anchor near Le Pilier de Pierre (aka “Stone Pillar” or “The Rock”), a small rocky island just a few miles away where I couldn’t resist pouring myself a scotch on *the rock*... Once at the Marina Du Port De Québec, Robert took the bus back to Montréal after four great weeks of loyal service, making room for Paul who joined his dad for the last leg to Pointe-Claire (by far his longest sailing trip).



Despite Paul’s first day being on land, it was nonetheless a highlight: swimming in the marina’s pool, microbrewery festival right next to the marina, superb coffee at Café Cantook, evening beer on a small street terrace at “Le Pape Georges” and spectacular fireworks accompanied by an outdoor orchestra to conclude the day. Great sail from Québec to Portneuf with an easterly wind and flood tide. We had planned to anchor in the Sorel islands but the forecast called for 30-knot gusts so we kept going until past midnight to take refuge in Marina de Saurel; this was a good call as the winds gusted true to forecast the next morning. Rather than battling



the elements we treated ourselves to a splendid breakfast at “Chez Mimi” (Paul appreciated our server’s smile and tipped her rather handsomely). By the afternoon the winds dropped to about 20 knots and we felt we could get going given it was blowing from a favourable direction. Like any long keel sailboat, Exilés is a challenge to reverse and maneuver in a tight marina, and that day was certainly no exception! We managed to exit the marina with no elegance whatsoever but at least without breaking anything. The good thing was that there was no one in sight to witness our acrobatics, other perhaps than the young marina attendant who couldn’t fathom why we failed to reverse effortlessly like all the power boaters in the marina... From Sorel we experienced great sailing to a peaceful anchorage off Île Saint-Ours. We reached Longueuil the next day but not before quite late, so more nightly navigation which can be a little tiring in the narrower waterway with busier traffic.



On Friday Aug 24 we made it through the Montreal locks and ultimately to Pointe-Claire by supper time. After 55 consecutive days of living aboard Exilés in a manner that felt increasingly “right”, I had very mixed feelings about returning to the landlubber grind. However Robert and several club members were there to greet us, the beer tasted particularly sweet (thanks Mike) and I began thinking I could survive the transition after all, at least for a little while.

This 1,200 nautical mile adventure was a hit on many levels as we witnessed spectacular landscapes and marine life, gained a rich set of sailing experience, ate (and drank) like kings, met people who added a whole new level of colour & life, and confirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt that Exilés is a well-suited little sailboat to take us anywhere safely and comfortably. However my proudest achievement, other than executing this two-month St-Lawrence circumnavigation as planned, was that each of the four crew members who joined me along the way are all keen to return and repeat a similar experience (some wishing to undertake even more ambitious exploits). We now all have great memories and stories to tell, and more to follow as we’ve only just scratched the surface. As with every year at this juncture, plans for the next adventure are already brewing, so stay tuned!



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