

St. Pierre and Miquelon: How to Spend the Weekend in France Without Leaving North America

by Karen Burshtein

Don't be fooled by St. Pierre and Miquelon's proximity to Canada (it's 13 miles or a 45-minute ferry ride from Fortune, [Newfoundland](#))—the tiny archipelago is France's last foothold in North America. Euros are the currency. Brie, baguettes, boulangeries, and *bouteilles de vin* are staples. If the straight out of St.-Germain-des-Prés French accents don't get you, everything closing down at lunchtime will. Just as the town church bell rings noon, you hear the vroom of Renaults and Citroëns racing down St. Pierre's narrow streets. Within five minutes, it's like a ghost town as everyone sits down to quiche or croque monsieurs at home. Still not convinced? Check out the guillotine in the L'Arche Musée, the only one in North America (it was used just once, in 1889).

St. Pierre and Miquelon is not just otherworldly because of its lunar landscape (the bog, the subarctic meadows, and the craggy coast recall parts of Newfoundland or Iceland), but because it's also an actual bit of living France on a windswept archipelago in the North Atlantic that so few people know about. Visitors have described it as surreal. The whole time you're there, you might feel like an extra in some French seacoast saga.

The islands were once a kind of cod El Dorado, luring fishermen from Brittany, Normandy, and the Basque country to its shores. They were already fishing the waters before French explorer Jacques Cartier landed on St. Pierre and Miquelon in 1563, claiming the territory for the king of France. The British and French fought over the islands for the next few centuries before France finally fully negotiated ownership in 1816. After the cod-fishing industry faded, St. Pierre reinvented itself as a giant booze depot during Prohibition. In fact, it became the biggest alcohol warehouse in North America where the henchmen of Al Capone would pick up legally imported French wine and Canadian whiskey to be smuggled into the U.S.

Today, 6,000 French citizens live on St. Pierre, with 600 more on the wilder, naturally spectacular Miquelon. Together, the islands are a hidden gem, with colorful rows of houses and its history of fishermen and rum running. Plus, they offer some of the finest French seafood anywhere. "You can't even find us on a

map,” says Patricia Detcheverry, who runs [a website](#) about living in St. Pierre and Miquelon as well as St. Pierre’s most charming hotel, [Nuits Saint-Pierre](#). “But we’re really a unique place.”

The resident cat at Les Nuits Saint Pierre Hotel

The resident cat at Les Nuits Saint Pierre HotelPhoto: Courtesy of Karen Burshtein

Embrace the quiriness of these funny little islands. Just don’t make the mistake of saying, “Wow, this is just like France.” You will quickly be reprimanded: “This is France.”

How to Get There

Options are a 45-minute flight from St. John’s, Newfoundland, via [Air Saint Pierre](#). The airline also flies from Halifax and Montreal, but the flight is often more expensive than a trip to mainland France. If you’re coming by car, drive to Fortune, along the scenic regional Heritage Run Highway, aka Highway 210. Then take the [45-minute ferry](#).

Arriving at Saint Pierre and Miquelon

Arriving at Saint Pierre and MiquelonPhoto: Courtesy of Karen Burshtein

Three days and two nights is a reasonable stay, but “everything depends on the weather” might be the unofficial motto of SPM. When rain falls or fog rolls in, things can stop, including the little Cessna plane that flies between St. Pierre and Miquelon, or the ferry that runs on alternate days. (Typically, the months of June through October are least affected.) Even if you can get out to Miquelon on such days, there’s no guarantee you can get back. If possible, it’s a good idea to factor in another safety day on a visit. Even if you can’t make it out of St. Pierre to the other islands, you’ll find lots to keep you busy in the capital.

Where to Stay

The [Nuits Saint-Pierre](#) is the archipelago’s chicest place to stay. You can expect breakfast with fresh croissants, pain au chocolate, baguettes, and creamy French butter. The excellent café au lait is an added delight.

On Miquelon, stay at the [Auberge de l’île](#).

The Nuits Saint-Pierre hotel

The Nuits Saint-Pierre hotelPhoto: Courtesy of Karen Burshtein

What to Do

St. Pierre is more focused on history and its excellent museums. L’Arche Musée offers an [architecture walking tour](#) that’s worth signing up for. On Miquelon, there’s exquisite nature. Begin your visit at the slick new interactive nature

interpretation center. Then bike, hike, or drive around the island and discover its magnificent beauty and often unforgiving climate. Pet horses run wild on Miquelon in the summertime, while a large lagoon known as the Grand Barachois hosts a large population of seals. Private scuba diving along the isthmus is said to be incredible, as hundreds of shipwrecks lie scattered around its treacherous shores.

Live “le French way of life” while you’re here with wine-filled lunches, afternoon games of pétanque, daily visits to the boulangerie and patisserie, and long leisurely walks along the harbor. Take a minivan tour with [Le Caillou Blanc](#). Guide Jean Claude Fouchard tells great stories of St. Pierre and Miquelon through the ages, including its heady last fishing days when nightlife was hopping, and the dance hall was packed every night.

Hand-fishing for sea urchins on l’Île aux Marins

Hand-fishing for sea urchins on l’Île aux Marins
Photo: Courtesy of Karen Burshtein

For a great postcard view over St. Pierre, hike up to the l’Anse à Pierre.

[The Heritage Museum](#), a passion project by the owner of the chic gift shop La Maison du Cadeau in St. Pierre, is a great small museum. One floor is devoted to virtue and traces the important Catholic history on the island. Another floor is devoted to vice, exploring its bootleg history. A third floor tells the story of the island’s fishing history.

Take the 10-minute ferry ride from St. Pierre to see the remains of [l’Île aux Marins](#), or “Sailor’s Island,” a village that was once home to 700 fishermen. Some St. Pierrais have summer cottages on this carless, roadless island, and many others come here to hand-fish sea urchins and pick wild berries.

Where to Eat

There’s a burgeoning artisanal food industry on Miquelon. Geese are being raised for foie gras, goat cheese is made on the island, and scallops abound. These restaurants take full advantage:

[Le Feu De Braise](#) in St. Pierre has steak au poivre as good as any Paris bistro and Miquelon scallop/shrimp brochettes.

Pick up a baguette sandwich or sit down for a quiche or delicious patisseries and a cup of tea at [Les Delices de Josephine](#), an inviting tea salon from the same owners as the Nuits Saint-Pierre.

Morning at the Nuits Saint-Pierre hotel

Morning at the Nuits Saint-Pierre hotel
Photo: Courtesy of Karen Burshtein

[Crêperie du Vieux Port](#) serves up cod omelets, Breton crepes, and French onion soup with a view over the harbor.

Where to Shop

There's a wide selection of reasonably priced wines from almost all regions of France as well as local foie gras at shops across the island. Find chic French lifestyle products and fine foods at [La Maison du Cadeau](#).

The island's supermarket Marcel Dagort in St. Pierre is a funny mix of French and North American products, and there are even a couple of French pharmacies with some favorite beauty staples such as Klorane dry shampoo, Fluocaril toothpaste, and [Homéoplasmine](#).