



CHANTAL BRIAND

Paradise

France's Most Dramatic Little Secret: The Amazing History of St-Pierre & Miquelon

From major booze artery during Prohibition to key World War II stronghold, this small archipelago off Newfoundland holds its French identity dear.



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This summer I drove to Europe—but I didn't put my car on a transatlantic ferry. I walked through Canadian immigration and emerged on the other side in France.

One of the world's oddest geopolitical quirks, [St. Pierre & Miquelon](#), is a small archipelago floating just a short boat ride off the coast of [Canada's](#) Newfoundland. It's a destination that's so unexpected, you practically rub your eyes with disbelief at the signs for the France-Canada border crossing overhead.

And there's no mistaking that you're in [France](#) once you arrive: North American decals are swapped for EU license plates, baguettes are strapped to the backs of bicycles, and not a lick of English is spoken.

The story of how St. Pierre came to be, like most islands in the New World, started in a Dickensian fashion, moving back and forth between French and British rule through a repeated series of colonizations, scorched-earth seizures, and recolonizations by the opposing forces.

A corollary to an early 1800s peace accord in [mainland Europe](#) finally promised the tiny islets to the French for access to the cod supply along the British-dominated Grand Banks. A permanent colony was erected on St. Pierre in 1816.

The original fuss over St. Pierre was largely due to its natural harbor on the east side of the island—one of the finest deepwater docking areas in the entire region, which could handle large trawlers and fishing vessels without much manmade manipulation.

The irony, however, was that the harbor's positioning was on the windiest, foggiest and rockiest part of the island, making living conditions for the early fishermen unbearable. Miquelon next door—to add insult to injury—benefited from a milder microclimate and plenty of arable land, but didn't have a port big enough to sustain the maritime industry.



STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN

For a full century, catching cod supported the windswept colony of transplants from Brittany, Normandy and the Basque region (who are all dutifully represented on the islands' current official flag) as they fished from the seemingly endless bounty. Daily catches were salted and shipped across the globe, putting St. Pierre on the map as the cod capital of the French-speaking world.

Its temperamental weather, too, earned St. Pierre a second moniker: the cemetery of shipwrecks. There were so many wrecks during the height of the fishing industry, locals believe that the vast amounts of drowned detritus created the 12km-long isthmus connecting the northern part of Miquelon—Grande Miquelon—to the southern portion, Langlade.

Despite the harrowing conditions, the Saint-Pierrais had several generations of great success in the fisheries, never imagining a more lucrative industry than cod. But in the early 1920s a new economic opportunity brought the locals more financial prosperity than anyone had ever dreamed.

When the American government passed the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the sale, production and transportation of alcohol, St. Pierre became the unofficial entry point for all US-bound liquor.

Canadian spirits, Caribbean rums and French wine were all siphoned through St. Pierre, making the archipelago such a crucial cog on the smuggling machine that fish factories quickly became storage facilities, and distilleries quickly opened—even Al Capone spent a bit of time in St. Pierre calling the still-open Hotel Robert home.

The movement of alcohol became so omnipresent in St. Pierre that most fishermen and shipbuilders gave up their maritime jobs for more lucrative opportunities working for American gangsters. And after a full decade of the Prohibition bonanza, the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933 sunk the black market overnight, leaving the island on the brink of economic ruin.

But the islands' most colorful moment in history was still yet to come. Despite the incredible surplus of cod that gave rise to the islands' permanent settlement, and the favorable geopolitical positioning during the Prohibition era, St-Pierre proved even more important and strategic during the Second World War.

Sightings of skulking Nazi U-boats were not uncommon in many of the coastal communities along the Eastern Seaboard during war time—especially in Canada's Newfoundland—and they're still very much a part of local lore even today, coupled with the haunting hypothetical: what if the Axis powers had set foot in North America?

Well, in St-Pierre, they did.

When Nazi Germany seized the northern part of France, the southern region, Vichy France, became a separate and internationally recognized government in its own right. And although it was not technically an Axis member, it readily collaborated with Nazi Germany, carrying out many of the Reich's wishes.

St. Pierre, the seemingly forgotten French colony, was now under Vichy rule, and was suddenly catapulted into the spotlight when both the Axis and the Allies realized that the islet was now the most geographically significant stronghold for the entire European front of World War II.

The Axis saw great potential in using the island as a base to communicate with their marauding submarines by radio. Its eventual purpose would be to serve as a launching pad for a full-on continental invasion.

The American Allies were bound by an accord of diplomacy with Vichy France, so it was De Gaulle's exiled Free France government—supporters of the French resistance—that executed a covert mission to St. Pierre to remove any possibility of the island becoming the Axis' linchpin.

The islands were quietly "invaded" on Christmas Eve 1941. The bloodless coup was considered a serious international incident, and was the first major play for Free France, occurring very early in the war, as the power for the Third Reich was still very much on the rise.

Today, the fiercely French-allegiant St. Pierre & Miquelon has faded back into the obscurity befitting a tiny archipelago floating off the hinterland of Canada's easternmost province—its geographical positioning now much more a reward for intrepid travelers than the center of gravity of world trade or warfare.

And what a reward it is: St. Pierre sells its colorful history with thick brushstrokes that match the vividly painted box-houses lining each street. And for better or for worse, the faraway collectivity of 6,000 inhabitants vigorously clings to every stereotype associated with its mother country: a stingy work ethic shuts public works down around 4pm, but on the plus side you can't swing an éclair without hitting a delicious bakery.

In a way, soporific St. Pierre is actually the European holiday of your dreams: nary a boring church tour in site, world-class hiking at your doorstep, great food, and plenty of friendly small-town locals coming up to say hello—mostly to ask you what the hell you're doing there...

What to see

If the term 'guided tour' makes you cringe, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the offerings from the [local tourism authority](#). Short outings, like a history-cum-architecture walking tour, do a worthy job of recounting St. Pierre's fascinating past; there's a Prohibition tour for booze buffs, too.

The tourist office also sells a small guidebook to the islands' best hikes—walk #7 to Anse à Henry (figure two hours round trip) is a great introductory trek to St. Pierre's stunning northern edge where you'll often find a cloudless microclimate that was, according to archaeological remains, a small proto-Inuit settlement many thousands of years ago.

Make sure to stop by the post office (which currently doubles at the immigration office at the port) to purchase a few local stamps. They're considered a much-coveted treasure in the philatelic community.

Where to eat and stay

A far cry from the fast food at the ferry port in Newfoundland, St. Pierre promises all the offerings you'd find in any provincial village of mainland France. [Le Café du Chat Luthier](#) (the "Lutheran cat"—a play on the word chalutier, meaning "the trawler" in French) attracts plenty of locals who come for the huge array of dishes, from sushi to pizza. [Atelier Gourmand](#) on the main seaside drag satisfies with a classic French menu that's heavy on local fish. Next door, [Hotel Robert](#), known to locals as the Hotel du Vieux Port, has a cluster of no-frills rooms that leave a bit to be desired, but were famously home to Al Capone during his visits.

How to get there

A short 30-minute [ferry ride](#) aboard the Cabestan connects St. Pierre to Fortune in Canada's Newfoundland, a four-hour drive from St. John's. Flights also directly connect St. Pierre to St. John's, Halifax and Montreal.