

A stone angel in the St. Lawrence

Art patron Jean Gagnon has brought dozens of Quebec sculptors to remote Anticosti Island, where the artists have created stunning works out of the local rock.

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Anticosti Island, Que.

Best known for deer hunting and salmon fishing, remote Anticosti Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence has gained a more arty visitor attraction in recent years. Gardens of stone sculptures, with sweeping water views as backdrops, have sprung up at several locations on land leased by Safari Anticosti Inc., a fishing and hunting outfitter on the eastern end of the island.

The sculptures were created through a kind of arts patronage reminiscent of another century by Safari Anticosti's majority owner, Jean Gagnon. For the past five years, Gagnon has flown in Quebec sculptors to carve the local stone, creating what may be the hottest sculpting scene in Quebec.

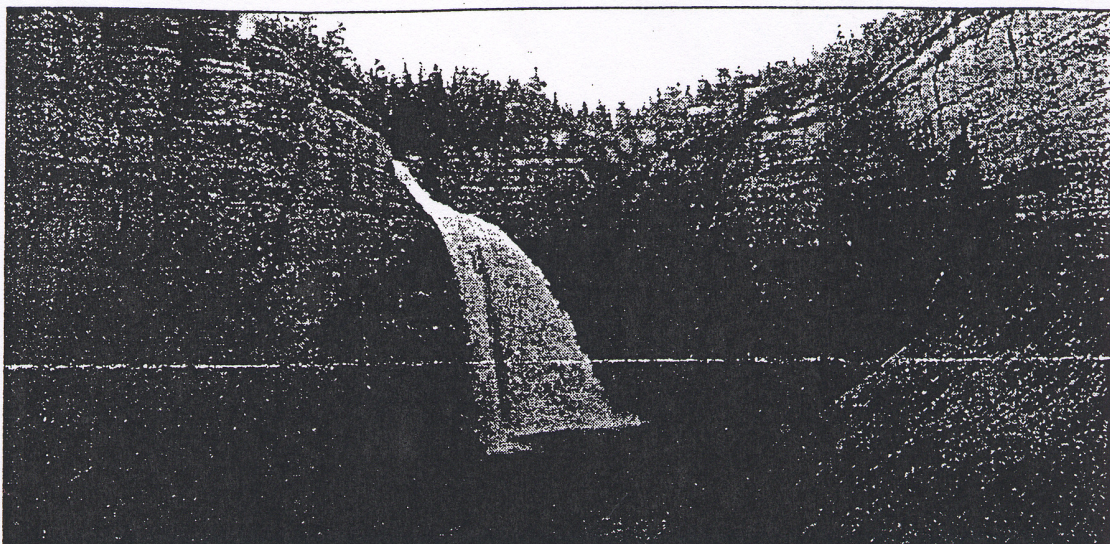
The works are mainly bas-reliefs coaxed from slabs of the sedimentary limestone that forms Anticosti Island. Nature and wildlife provide the main subject matter, apt in that the rock itself is suffused with ancient sea-creature fossils.

Celine G. Lapointe, for one, a widely exhibited painter-sculptor, created a work this year that imitates a merry-go-round with figures that include an eagle, a flower and a cape. Another in the group, Louise Dussault, carved a table-top work called *Mer Nourricière* (Nourishing Sea) in which a mixture of rough and polished areas show the ocean, the beach, the sun and a man with fish.

Gagnon, 54, a Gaspé native, feeds and lodges the sculptors and gives them one week to produce a work. His only artistic command is that the sculpture be on a grand scale reflecting "the immensity of the territory," he said in an interview. The finished carving is owned 50-50 by the artist and outfitting firm.

A brochure from Safari Anticosti lists the sculptures among Anticosti Island attractions — along with waterfalls, majestic capes, birds, whales and lobsters weighing up to five kilograms. The works are part of the outfitter's efforts to build up summer eco-tourism visits to complement its main bread-and-butter business: autumn deer hunters.

Still, Gagnon seems genuinely entranced by the rocks themselves. It is an affection he traces to a time when



Chute Vauréal plunges 75 metres into a stunning gorge.

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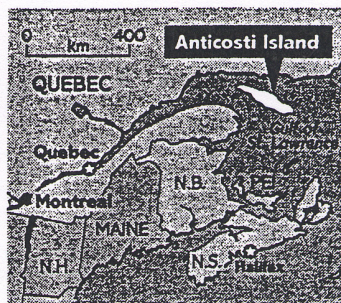


Hugh Barret's *L'ancêtre*.

esting rocks for a sculptor friend. "When you carry rocks on your back, you become attached to them," he said. "And we have such beautiful material here."

That material is often uncovered by Gagnon's bulldozers as they push new access roads across Safari Anticosti territory, which extends over 1,650 square kilometres, or about 20 per cent of the island.

Last June, a new sculpture garden emerged on the northeastern Anticosti coast at Cap de la Table, the site of an abandoned lighthouse station whose buildings were renovated by the outfitter to become a bed and breakfast. Located about 250 kilometres east of Port Menier, where most of the island's 286 inhabitants live, Cap de la Table has a cliff-top setting overlooking open ocean with whales swimming by and seals poking their heads from the water. White-tailed deer wander out of the forest — looking tame and unafraid



The Globe and Mail

Sculptures in the new garden were produced by five Quebec City artists who spent a week here in late June. Among the group was Lapointe, who has done works for Safari Anticosti since 1993. Lapointe describes outfitter Gagnon as a "patron" of Quebec stone sculpting.

She points out as well that the work Gagnon supports is relatively unusual in Quebec, where wood has been the traditional sculpting material; stone art has mainly been limited to tombstones and window frames.

Although the sculptors are well fed during their stay, this is far from a cushy gig. Under the pressure of a week's deadline, they often rise at 5 a.m. and work 12-hour days to complete the cycle of finding a rock, doing the delicate — if noisy — carving by power tools and erecting a completed work that can weigh up to several tonnes.

"It's a sprint," said René Guimont, a Quebec City art teacher who was putting final touches on his profile of a bearded man etched in an enormous chunk of limestone and titled *Pierres Dévoilées* (Rocks Revealed).

In addition to the Cap de la Table garden, sculptures are grouped at the main Safari Anticosti lodges at the mouth of the Salmon River,

beside a stream called Petite Batterie, between the two. The Salmon River sculptures have a particularly striking setting along a walk that skirts a seaside cliff. Capes are visible in the misty distance. In total, there are now roughly 100 sculptures on the island, and Gagnon invites about a dozen more artists each year.

Also reflecting his taste for the unusual — and his determination to broaden the island's appeal — in late June, Gagnon opened a museum honouring Henri Menier, the wildly wealthy French chocolate manufacturer who bought Anticosti Island in 1895 to create a private hunting and fishing preserve.

Menier stocked the island with 200 white-tailed deer from Gaspé. The animals flourished, thanks partly to an absence of predators, and now number about 140,000, providing hunting outfitters with income and the island with a distinctive wildlife image.

Safari Anticosti also operates a fossil museum with sponges, corals, gastropods and other sea life from Silurian and Ordovician times up to 500 million years ago. Sculptors have been at work here as well, polishing and shaping a number of the larger fossils, which were gathered by Pascal Samson, a biology teacher at Collège Boréal in Sudbury.

Samson is a guide/storyteller on week-long eco-tourism packages that Safari Anticosti offers for \$1,299 a person, double occupancy, including air fare from Montreal or Quebec City. Departures are on Saturdays through July and August. Itineraries include hiking, boat excursions and visits to assorted waterfalls, including Chute Vauréal, which plunges 75 metres into a stunning gorge. Reach Safari Anticosti at (514) 441-9560.

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