

# The Canadian Beaver

By ReadWorks



The town of Tadoussac, in northern Quebec, Canada, lies between mountains and the shoreline. It's located just where the Saguenay Fjord runs into the St. Lawrence River. A fjord is a small arm of the sea in the middle of high rocks or cliffs.

Every year, from the month of May, when the cold has passed, until October, hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Tadoussac to go whale watching. They pile into kayaks and small motorboats and search for hours in the hopes of glimpsing a gigantic tail or fin. The waters around the small town are full of them; baleen whales gather to eat the krill, small shrimplike things that live here in abundance. Tadoussac's water conditions make it the perfect meeting place for these enormous animals.

Those visitors who choose to stay on land, however, might meet a different, furrier kind of creature. Working away in Tadoussac's forests are Canadian beavers, those broad-tailed rodents with the big chomping teeth. The beaver is an important part of Canadian culture. It even appears on the face of the country's nickels!

The Maison Majorique, a little house with a red roof that is Tadoussac's only youth hostel, offers free beaver-watching tours that leave from its reception area every day at 5 p.m. In the late afternoon, the web-footed animals wake up and begin to work through the night. For more than 20 years, the tours have been led by the same woodsman, an older man named Coco. With a head of wild white hair and a matching beard, Coco knows the wetlands around the hostel as though they were his home.

"I prefer the forest to the sea," he says, explaining why he would rather take tourists into the woods than bring them out on the water to see the whales. Coco's beaver-watching tours begin at L'Anse-à-l'Eau, a quiet lake surrounded by dark green fir trees. Also encircling the lake

are five different beaver homes, each one made of piled logs. The walk all the way around the lake takes about two hours with stops. Alone, Coco hikes the trail in just 45 minutes.

The path winds its way around fallen trees and every so often comes out at a rocky lookout over the lake. From there, you are likely to spot a beaver parent or pup—usually just a smudge of brown fuzz and a wide, scaly tail like the blade of a canoe paddle gliding across the water. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you might catch the entire family at work, carrying pieces of wood from the forest to their lakeside lodges. They swim back and forth, and haul bits of trees that look much too heavy for their small bodies.

"You can get within two meters of a beaver if you conduct yourself properly," Coco says. "Don't walk on your heels or your toes," he instructs. "Keep your feet flat on the ground." The sound of voices has no effect on the beavers, especially from way up on the path, but the vibrations of the ground easily scare them off. It's extremely important to step very lightly.

Normally, Coco doesn't speak much, but he has answers to any and all beaver-related questions that participants might pose. Along the trail, he points out abandoned dams and teeth marks in logs. Having watched the animals for most of his life, he is familiar with almost all of their habits—and there is a lot to learn. Only a single beaver family, for instance, can live in one territory, and one territory can contain more than one lake. At the age of two, beavers are expelled from their home by their parents and forced to find their own habitat. Beavers can stay underwater for as long as 15 minutes. They're nocturnal, and they mate for life.

Though beavers are his favorites, Coco doesn't like to dismiss the massive marine mammals that distract from Tadoussac's forests. "The whales bring the people," he says. He only wishes that the people would spend some more time away from the sea, exploring the wetlands and the lives of the furry, wood-gnawing, dam-building critters that have become his friends.