

## AATF EXCURSION TO SAINT-PIERRE ET MIQUELON

With the coming of the *La Semaine du Français* in November of this year, many teachers are turning their attention to French-speaking areas around the world. In this spirit, a group of twenty-eight AATF members took the opportunity to participate in a week-long immersion workshop on the French archipelago of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. The workshop took place July 27 to August 3, 1998, immediately after the AATF convention in Montreal. Although the name Saint-Pierre et Miquelon figures on every list of French overseas territories and departments, it is relatively unfamiliar to most American teachers. It deserves to be better known. The AATF group found their *séjour* on the islands to be an unforgettable experience both professionally and personally, and all of us who participated would encourage other teachers to consider a visit to this fascinating Francophone destination.

Saint-Pierre et Miquelon consists of a group of seven small islands located about fifteen miles off the southern coast of Newfoundland. The northern-most of the French overseas lands, it is one of two regions—the other being Mayotte in the Indian Ocean—which hold the special French status of *collectivité territoriale*. Only two of the islands, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, are inhabited year round, although others may be visited in the summer. The capital city, also called Saint-Pierre, is easily accessible (though bargain fares are unlikely) by regular air service from Halifax, Nova Scotia, St. John's, Newfoundland, and, twice a week, from Montreal.

When the AATF group arrived via Air Saint Pierre on July 27, we were struck by the beauty of the archipelago. As we approached we saw several small islands surrounded by the Atlantic against the backdrop of a clear blue sky. On the ground, we had a panoramic view of the town of Saint-Pierre stretched along a picturesque bay which forms a natural port. Behind the town are rocky hills which constitute the largest part of the island. A pleasantly warm, sunny, and breezy day showed the magnificent scenery to perfection. Our arrival in this picture-postcard weather was a fitting start to a very successful week.

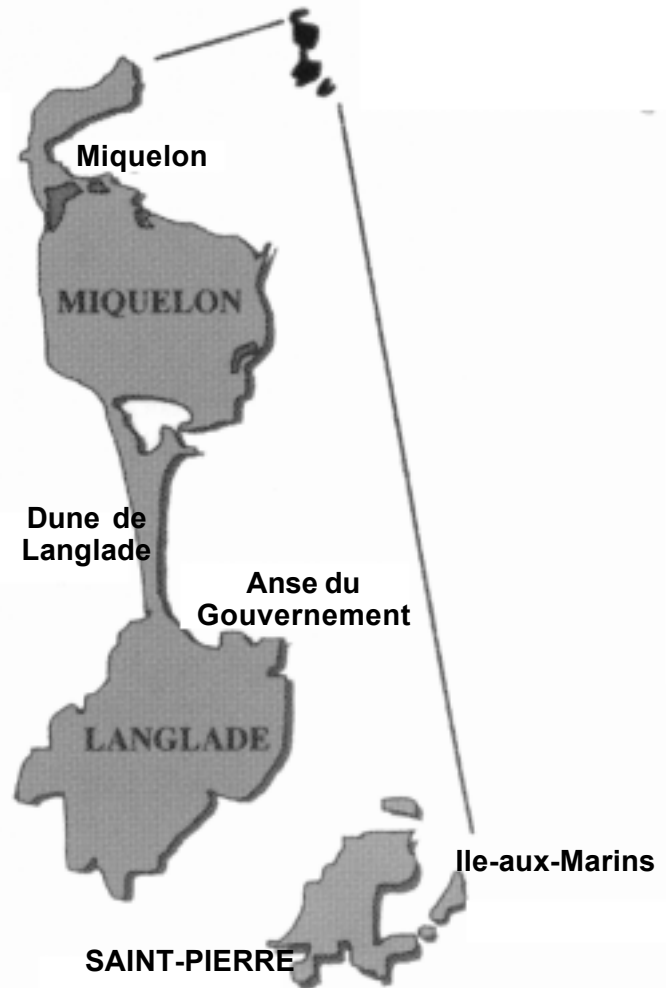
Staff from *Le Francoforum: Institut de Langue Française* which organized our workshop, met us at the airport and transported us to our host families. During the next week our days were filled with a variety of activities. There were lectures on island culture, literature, and history;

abundant conversation and writing activities; a tour of the far reaches of the island of Saint-Pierre (five or six miles out of town); boat trips to three other islands; and even time for hiking, shopping, and sampling island cuisine. Flexibility was the order of the day, since all outdoor activities depend on the weather, as expressed by the island's refrain, "*si le temps le permet*," which must temper any plans. For us, sunny days alternated with heavy fog and a little light rain. Temperatures were in the 70s and 80s all week.

The archipelago is home to 5800 inhabitants on Saint-Pierre and about 600 on Miquelon. The combined area of all the islands is 242 square kilometers, equal to about one and a half times the size of Washington, D.C.

France's history in the archipelago dates from the visit of Jacques Cartier in 1536. There followed seasonal visits and finally permanent settlement by fishermen from Normandy, Brittany, and the Basque country. The archipelago alternated between French and English control until France took possession permanently in 1816. During the era of prohibition in the United States, from 1920 to 1933, the liquor trade brought prosperity to the islands. Local lore reports visits by Al Capone, and a small museum even claims to display a hat belonging to him.

The inhabitants maintain close administrative ties with France, and French culture is immediately apparent in island life. The residents speak with the accent of the *métropole*; their schools are



administered by the French minister of education; their young people go to France for university studies; the *Saint-Pierrais* depend on *la poste* and *France Télécom* for communications, and they receive radio and television via *Radio France Outremer*, the French overseas broadcast service. The French *franc* is their monetary unit, and the archipelago is scheduled to adopt the Euro at the same time as the *Hexagone*. The airport customs officers and local gendarmes are indistinguishable from their counterparts in France. In fact, these officials come from France for three-year tours of duty on the islands. A wide selection of French print media is available at a *Maison de la Presse*, although the daily newspapers arrive up to a week late, and islanders prefer to read their own weekly *Écho des Caps*. Beyond administrative connections, the *Saint-Pierrais* do not seem very interested in the happenings of metropolitan France, and they feel that the residents of the *métropole* know virtually nothing about them.



Life on Saint-Pierre et Miquelon is a fascinating blend of French and North American culture, and daily routine differs markedly from that of France. Most consumer goods and durable items, such as automobiles, are shipped from Canada. Island residents are accustomed to instant coffee, cheese spread, sliced white bread (for toast—otherwise, there are *baguettes*), peanut butter, Jello, and similar grocery products. Their architecture, dictated by the climate, consists of structures built of wood to better withstand the harsh winters of the North Atlantic. Most buildings date from this century. Many houses are brightly painted in gold, green, blue, or pink to liven up dreary days. Our summer visit, when the weather was generally sunny and the temperature perfect, cannot give a true idea of life during the ice, fog, and wind of winter, but it seems that residents spend much of the year indoors. Even in summer, street life is nearly absent; residents take advantage of good weather to go camping, to grill steaks on the barbecue, or to go hiking on the rocky hills of the islands, but



not to stroll in the streets or pass their time at outdoor cafes.

One of the most refreshing aspects of a visit to Saint Pierre et Miquelon is the absence of some of the annoyances of modern life. Though there are many cars—one for every two inhabitants—there is not a single traffic light. Also absent are billboards and ostentatious signs. Crime is virtually unknown. Fast food franchises have not yet arrived. At this date, there are no automated teller machines, soda machines, or cell phones, yet island homes are equipped with microwave ovens, dishwashers, and cable television, and a *télécarte* lets you make a direct call home.

Our workshop included visits to several

of the islands. We spent one afternoon at the small *Île aux Marins*, ten minutes by boat from Saint-Pierre. This windswept, rocky island was once home to several hundred people. In 1960 it was deemed too isolated and dangerous for winter habitation. The church, cemetery, school, and town hall are preserved as historical sites.

A day-long excursion took our group to two other islands. The largest island of the archipelago, Langlade, is completely undeveloped. It is visited in summer by hardy campers and hikers and by naturalists attracted by its variety of flora and fauna. Our group saw dozens of seals relaxing on a sand bar, and whale bones litter the coast. The island of Miquelon, attached to Langlade by a narrow sandy isthmus, is an hour by boat from Saint-Pierre. Its 600 inhabitants enjoy the governmental services of any French village and are even linked to the Internet. However, seeing the French flag flying over this tiny, isolated village on a



remote island in the North Atlantic, one cannot help but think how far it is from Paris.

Today the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon find themselves at an economic crossroads. With fishing resources depleted, there is a moratorium on commercial fishing. Tourism has yet to be developed on a wide scale, and such development would probably be unwelcome, as a large influx of tourists would radically transform the life of the islands. Of the very few who come now, most seem to arrive by passenger ferry from Newfoundland. One unique source of some income to the archipelago is the right to issue its own postage stamps, valid nowhere else. These stamps, depicting scenes of the islands' history, and culture, are very distinctive and collectible.

The teacher's link to Saint-Pierre et Miquelon is *Le Francoforum Institut de Langue Française*. Established in 1993 as a new economic initiative, *Le Francoforum* offers North American teachers and students of French an opportunity for total French language immersion. A superb new building, small but efficient, houses several classrooms, a library, computer

resources, and pleasant gathering space. The *Francoforum* staff arranges short-term stays, reasonably priced. They offer language practice at various levels for individuals and groups, combining the classroom setting with activities in the island environment. Lodging and all meals are arranged with local families or in family-run pensions. Individuals or groups (about 25 maximum) may arrange a *séjour* at mutually convenient dates by contacting *Le Francoforum* at Boulevard Port-en-Bessin, B.P. 4382, 97500 Saint Pierre et Miquelon, France (telephone:011-508-41-24-38, fax: 011-508-41-39-29, e-mail: [forumspm@cancom.net]). Mail is very slow, and a phone call or e-mail for information would be recommended.

The AATF group had wonderful experiences both inside and outside the classroom, thanks to *Francoforum* directors Alexis and Marie-Pierre Gloaguen, who came to Saint-Pierre from France in 1993. No one in the 1998 AATF group will forget their expertise and their tireless work, together with their able staff, to make our workshop a success. For French teachers, a visit to Saint Pierre et Miquelon is a unique opportunity to immerse oneself in an enclave of French culture and to become acquainted with the self-contained maritime life of a beautiful island group. It is unlike any other place in the Francophone world.

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