

Escale Gaspésie ready to work with Amiral Tourist Train

Gilles Gagné

GASPÉ: - Stéphane Sainte-Croix, coordinator of Escale Gaspésie, is ready to work with the Amiral Tourist Train in order to save the service, considering its importance for the Gaspé and Percé area.

Escale Gaspésie is promoting the potential of the cruise ship industry for the Gaspé-Percé sector and has had success in doing so. Since 2009, the number of cruise ships stopping in Gaspé or Percé went from a couple of calls annually to 23 last year.

In 2015, that number will climb to 32 ships, and these vessels will carry 33,000 passengers. Stéphane Sainte-Croix points out that the Amiral can play a crucial role in the stops that the cruise ships will make.

"It's the only tourist train between New York and Quebec City, the route taken by most cruise ships. It's a source of great interest for most tour organizers but in order to sell the train, we have to make sure that there is one," points out Mr. Sainte-Croix.

"The uncertainty of the last few years hasn't helped in booking the train. Travel wholesalers want to know in advance if certain activities will be available. From 2012 and on, there was always some degree of uncertainty, about the train being ready, the bridge being repaired, or the line being there," he adds.

"Consequently we can't sell the train to its maximum potential if we aren't sure that there will be one. It would be really too bad to lose it. The potential is considerable," Mr. Sainte-Croix stated.

Out of 32 ship stops in 2015, he believes that the Amiral could be used 18 times. "The capacity of the ships goes from 200 to 3,000 passengers. There has to be a way to fill a 225-passenger train



The Amiral passing through Barachois the summer of 2014.

with a 3,000-passenger vessel," he adds.

Escale Gaspésie wasn't involved in the operations of the Amiral in 2013 and 2014. The Gaspésie Railway Society negotiated directly with tour organizers. Escale Gaspésie was busy organizing other activities for passengers who spent some time off ship and linked them up between the cruise ship and the train.

"We can do a lot more. We know all the cruise ship companies and all the travel organizers dealing with them. We have the staff, and we have a promotional budget hovering between \$50,000 and \$75,000 annually to increase our clientele. The train can benefit from these tools. Again, we must make sure that we have a train," explains Mr. Sainte-Croix.

The Amiral was initially supposed to start its operations in 2012 but that train season was cancelled because the passenger cars bought from Montreal's *Agence métropolitaine de transport* had to be modified but financing wasn't available at that time. The cars were modified by Rail GD in New Richmond mainly over the first half of 2013.

That year, the Amiral made

two trips for passengers of the cruise ships and carried 250 passengers, and five in 2014 for 665 passengers. Basically these trips allowed the Gaspésie Railway Society to at least break even. The "regional" trips organized along the other parts of the line mostly lost money. Two trips that would have had 258 passengers were cancelled in 2014 due to mechanical problems.

If Escale Gaspésie gets involved in the Amiral operations, Stéphane Sainte-Croix sees another market that is worth trying to tap into.

"How many tour buses come to our end of the Coast each summer? Hundreds, I would guess (...) That is another potential customer we have to look at. We can put another product on the map. The train can have an incredible impact on this area's tourism industry," he states.

Mr. Sainte-Croix is relieved with the interest expressed by the group led by Gilles Babin, who wants to buy the line between Matapédia and Caplan and who intends to keep the Amiral, although they don't want to operate it.

Mr. Sainte-Croix hopes that the MRCs of Bonaventure, Percé Rock and Côte-de-Gaspé

change their minds about the \$50,000 financial backing, but he doesn't rule it out if a restructuring plan is accepted for the Gaspésie Railway Society.

"Considering the economic reality of the Percé Rock area, it is somewhat understandable, but from a regional perspective, it doesn't give us the most positive signal. I respect that stand but if we (the MRCs) all do that, it will be difficult to get results. It leaves a sour taste in our mouth," he says.

The east end of the Gaspé Peninsula shouldn't miss this opportunity, Mr. Sainte-Croix points out.

"We cannot pass up the opportunities offered by the cruise ship lines two or three times. They are multinational companies operating in 400 or 500 ports world-wide. We have to do our homework. We're again facing some uncertainty regarding the ownership of the line and the train operator. I'm currently selling trips for 2017 and 2018, but I can't really sell the train. It will take the support of the entire Gaspé and Percé tourism sector," he concludes. We must make the train come alive and entice passengers to use it.

This year Escale Gaspésie has a budget of \$400,000, for its operations, staff and promotion. So far, the Federal and Provincial government cuts have not hit the organization.