

Travelling to or from the Gaspé can be difficult

DIANE SKINNER

Over the years it has become more difficult and costlier to travel to and from the Gaspé Peninsula.

The train, which at one time ran every day and provided more amenities, such as a dining car open to all, now only gets travellers as far as Matapédia or Campbellton, New Brunswick. Bus travel is difficult for many who have any mobility challenges. Travelling by plane has become very costly, and more so since the pandemic. Bathurst, New Brunswick, airport is on the verge of closing this summer because it has been operating on a deficit.

It seems travellers are no longer using the airport as much as they did before the pandemic. Currently, Air Canada offers four passenger flights weekly. Before March 2020, Air Canada offered multiple flights per day! Explicitly, before the pandemic, 40,000 to 50,000 passengers per year used the Bathurst airport. That number is currently at 15,000 a year mainly due to the limited schedule. The timing of those flights is a challenge for coordinating with other connecting flights.

I recently spent six hours at Pierre Elliott Trudeau Airport (also known as Dorval Airport) in Montreal, landing there from Toronto at 2 a.m. and departing at 8 a.m. That experience was not as pleasant as it sounds! More about that further down in this article. Flying to the Town of Gaspé is enormously expensive. More about that also. Please read on.

These travellers share their travelling challenges and frustrations and, certainly, there are many more distressing accounts.

Darlene Gallon-Chang

Darlene travels home from the west coast each summer to visit her parents Doreen and Vincent Gallon who live in New Carlisle. She dubs her trip “The Long Way Home.”

“Coming from Vancouver, it is like the movie, Planes, Trains and Automobiles. There’s a lot of planning that goes into this ‘Down Home’ trip. Also, it is more costly than travelling to Asia! On some trips, you even have to rent a hotel depending on your connections. If you can get to the Bathurst Airport and don’t have someone to pick you up,



Rob Hackett is astonished at the cost of flying to the Gaspé Peninsula

Photo: Courtesy of Rob Hackett

well now, you must rent a vehicle but we do it because we want to get where our family is.”

This year Darlene plans to travel to Quebec City and will be picked up at the airport by her sister who is travelling from Ontario to the Gaspé by car. They will have to stay in a hotel that night (about \$200), plus the cost of gas and food. Flying to Bathurst from Vancouver (no direct flights) would cost \$1,210 per person and to rent a car would cost \$2,099 at a rate of \$131 per day.

Mitchell Fournier

Mitchell Fournier, who travelled from Montreal to Gaspé with his wife and child, purchased tickets at a cost of \$500 per person. Mr. Fournier was feeling so frustrated about multiple delays that he posted comments on Facebook about the difficulties and challenges of flying to his home in the Town of Gaspé.

“For three days in a row our flights have been cancelled from Montreal to Gaspé.” He adds, “PAL airlines, something must change. You provided everyone with hotels, food, a taxi and even clothes for the inconvenience. What a waste of money and our time, especially when there is a plane that leaves from Quebec City to Gaspé half-empty, in a time when we are trying to be more ‘green’ (environmentally conscious). This makes no sense to me. For us, it’s not so bad but for doctors trying to get to Gaspé to help sick patients this is unacceptable. We are going back in time for transportation services.” (To PAL airlines) “Don’t book flights if you don’t have a pilot available. It would be best to have three

flights per week that you can respect rather than flights every day that you cancel. Flights leave at hours when travellers can’t even catch connecting flights. What can we do as a population to fix this problem? If it keeps on like this, we won’t be able to develop our community as we are already considered to be an isolated region and the situation just keeps getting worse.”

Rob Hackett

Rob Hackett is originally from York Centre sector of Gaspé. Mr. Hackett currently resides in Lacombe, Alberta, and works all over western Canada. The last time he visited the Gaspé Peninsula was in 2020 when he flew out of Gaspé the day before the COVID restrictions began.

Rob informs us about that trip. “I flew out of Calgary directly to Gaspé and at that time Air Canada was the airline. It cost close to \$2,300 round trip, per person, and the rental car for 14 days was another \$1,400. In the 17 years that I have been flying back and

forth, the plane is never empty, always full. The runway at Gaspé needs to be extended to allow for larger planes so that Air Canada or WestJet could fly in. At the Bathurst, New Brunswick, airport you can’t even rent a car, so my next option is Fredericton! The challenge of travel to Gaspé is dollars and cents. For anyone, it feels like once you hit Quebec City any place east of there, we are forgotten in time.”

Rob used to travel home once or twice a year and states that in 2002 a round trip cost \$1,200. Today that same ticket is \$2,800! According to him the train is not the answer and that money should be put towards lengthening the airport runway to allow larger planes to land in Gaspé.

Anne MacWhirter

Anne MacWhirter and her husband Gordon MacWhirter are owners/operators of Gîte Macdale Bed and Breakfast in Hope. Anne reflects on the challenges that seniors face in getting to medical appointments in Montreal or Quebec City.

“In the Gaspésie, there is no life without a car. Even if you have a car and happen to be over a certain age, when medical trips become more frequent, it’s not a pleasant situation. Gone are the carefree days when we thought nothing of driving to Montreal or Quebec in one day. Now, especially for medical appointments, it takes planning to find a driver to take you to your appointment and to remain with you to drive home again. Most times, an overnight stay is needed because of fatigue.

Of course, we do have a daily bus service but that’s not for everyone. Going alone re-

quires a great deal of autonomy: changing buses, managing luggage, etc.

The train did provide a safer way to travel when faced with a long journey, comfort, a dining car, and great service. Now, a person still has to arrange transportation to Matapédia or Campbellton, and then find someone to get up before day-break to fetch you on the return trip!

The best plan is to remain healthy and be able to avoid the hassle of long-distance travel. Sadly, many aren’t so lucky.”

Diane Skinner

I will not mention the incredible challenges of getting to the Gaspé during COVID. I will briefly comment on taking VIA rail in December 2022 when the train was full, delayed, and my seat was under dripping water all night in a very cold train car. (That train is always freezing overnight.)

My most recent travels here from Ontario were a challenge due to the very inconvenient scheduling of flights into Bathurst, New Brunswick. I flew from Toronto at 12:05 a.m. and arrived in Montreal at about 2 a.m.. Air Canada assured me that I could wait in the airport until my connection from Montreal to Bathurst departed at 8 a.m., the only flight available departing for Bathurst. That was not true. At 2:30 a.m., airport security asked all weary travellers to leave the arrivals area and exit to the departures area. There were fewer places to sit and we had to go through security again early that morning – which was a “madhouse”. Not pleasant at all. The cost of a one-way ticket, including taxes, and airport improvement fee was \$498.17!