

THE SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN TOURISM REGION

A Quebec-inspired vision of regeneration



Ice Fishing Village of La Baie



Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean is an exceptional destination for lovers of adventure, culture and the great outdoors, where majestic nature intertwines with a history rich in traditions and expeditions that have shaped the lives and mindsets of its communities over centuries.

The region is known for its lush, magnificent landscapes: wilderness within protected parks, a spectacular fjord with majestic cliffs, a lake so vast it feels like the ocean, endless

expanses of untouched snow or forest, unique First Nations cultural attractions, and a host of economuseums and gastronomic specialties with blueberries as the star ingredient.

This land of adventure, outdoor activities and leisure pursuits is also recognized for its openness and innovation and has long been used as a testing ground for disruptive ideas that demand creativity.

So, what does it take to become a land of creativity?



Saglac, Land of Resilience

This longing has often been shaped through hardship and suffering, evolving into a shared spirit of resilience and solidarity in the face of adversity.

SagLac is, above all, a remote region with four distinct seasons, offering periods of great abundance but also challenges that make for harsh living conditions.

It has a fascinating history spanning centuries, blending Indigenous heritage, European colonization and industrial development, all of which have fostered a sense of regional pride and a strong connection to the natural world.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region was home to the Innu (or Montagnais), an Indigenous nation within the large Algonquian family, for thousands of years. They lived primarily by hunting, fishing and gathering, and occupied a vast territory surrounding Lac Saint-Jean and the shores of the Saguenay fjord.

Since 1535, the first French explorers were drawn to the region by the “Kingdom of the Saguenay,” described by explorer Jacques Cartier as a legendary land rich in gold, copper and precious stones. Ultimately, it was the region’s wealth of furs, followed by timber and farmland, that attracted settlers to these remote lands, established around small villages.

In more recent times, the timber and aluminum industries bolstered the region’s economic activity.

But above all, the colonial history of SagLac is marked by the trappers sent by the Hudson’s Bay Company, a major fur-trading enterprise, to hunt beavers. Enchanted by the beauty of this exceptional region, they chose to “squat” and set up shop there, living in harmony with the Indigenous populations they worked alongside at the many trading posts.

However, life was not easy in these remote and inaccessible areas. This isolation was compounded by major natural disasters, which deeply affected the mindset of the inhabitants. Heavy rainfall and floods, devastating forest fires, massive landslides, and harsh winters led to widespread loss of life, significant destruction and emergency situations.

These external challenges, deeply ingrained in the collective memory, have instilled in the people of the Saguenay and Saint-Jean regions a spirit of courage, preparedness and cooperation in the face of adversity. Resilience, adaptability, solidarity, and mutual aid have become the foundation of a regional pride rooted in the ability to overcome the harsh forces of nature. A strong tradition of self-sufficiency and resourcefulness has deepened the sense of belonging and the drive to rebuild after disasters, much like “the tree that bends but does

not break.” And despite nature’s unpredictability and occasional devastation, the local people have maintained a deep respect and immense love for their environment, fostering a heightened awareness of the need to live in harmony with these natural elements.

In Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, it is said that the great fire of 1870, which ravaged the entire region, created the perfect conditions for blueberries, a symbol of the land and its people.



Monts-Valin National Park



Monts-Valin National Park

Turning Adversity into Opportunity

Turning challenges into strengths is a defining quality of this region.

Much like in Scandinavian countries, the winter chill can become an asset, obliging people to stay home with their loved ones, regroup, ensure no one is left behind, find alternative ways of heating and lighting when the power goes out, spend time together rather than in front of screens, listen to one another, and connect.

When the Saguenay fjord freezes over, an entire ice-fishing village emerges on the ice, complete with leisure and social activities. Snowmobiling, a true cultural cornerstone, is far more than just a form of

recreation—it is a means of transport, a social, economic and democratic activity, a link to remote communities, and a gateway to pristine territories and places made inaccessible by snow.

However, this land of abundance also faces uncertainty, and heart and reason sometimes clash. Just like other regions, it must strengthen the economic potential of its population, attract investment, retain its young people, and make up for its dependence as it lacks the diversification required for self-sufficiency.

Tourism is part of the solution. When tourism shares the wealth of the land with the forestry and mining industries and is committed to restoring and revitalizing natural environments and local communities, all while offering enriching experiences to travellers, this leads to regenerative tourism.



Regenerative Tourism, an Ambition for the Entire Saglac Region

The initial spark for this initiative came from the vision and leadership of Julie Dubord, General Manager of the Tourisme Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean regional tourism association (ATR). With a lifelong attachment to her region, which holds a special place in her heart, Julie has chosen to focus her future efforts on expressing its collective identity while embracing new ideas. As a partner of [Adventure Travel Trade Association](#), Julie and her team have taken part in various international conferences that have led them to explore the concept of regenerative tourism in greater depth. This inspired her to lead her region through this fundamental transformation. With her unwavering passion, this woman on a mission met with many of the region's stakeholders, leading in-depth discussions on the

area's future. Sustainable development was a key topic, reflecting the region's core values. But as tourism embraces sustainability more and more, why not push the vision even further, adopting a more creative, forward-thinking and innovative approach? How can we build a future that is comfortable, dynamic and business-driven, that fosters a shared sense of purpose and ensures enjoyment for locals and visitors alike? How can we avoid repeating past mistakes and instead make choices that are healthy and future-proof?

This reflection led to the creation of the destination's [2022-2030 strategic itinerary](#) (in French only) for the region, based on a regenerative vision popularized by the video [Imagine Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean in 2040](#) (in French only).

The journey toward regenerative tourism in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean tourist area seeks to unite all stakeholders and now serves as a foundation for decision-making, guidance, collaboration, and support for regional initiatives.



Recognizing the Value of Landscapes to Better Preserve them

Beyond tourism, the beautiful Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region sustains various industries, including aluminium and timber, both deeply rooted in its history. However, at times, the interests of different sectors may clash. How can we ensure that all stakeholders contribute to preserving the beauty and biodiversity of these magnificent places while sustainably enhancing the quality of life?

SagLac has an abundance of hydroelectricity, which enabled the aluminium industry to take root, and for nearly a century, the Alcan company contributed to the development of the region, nicknamed Aluminium Valley. The challenge of working together shaped the industry's history, fostering constructive partnerships among stakeholders. However, following Alcan's sale to mining

giant Rio Tinto, a gradual disconnect emerged between the host community and the company. As collaborative structures weakened, so did the influence of local voices on the company.

After decades of relying on this dominant industry, local residents began to recognize another reality that could eventually conflict with their vision for the land and its future. The need for diversification became clear, sparking discussions on social acceptability and the pursuit of a constructive coexistence that respects the needs of businesses, communities and the natural environment alike.

With foresters, whose business is embedded in local history dating back to the early days of colonization, there can also be real conflicts over recognition and use. On the one hand, the forestry industry sees trees and forests as products to exploit, and its practices generally consist of cutting down and replanting—when reforestation takes place—fast-growing single species. This approach disrupts ecosystems and alters the region's beauty. In contrast, the tourism industry seeks to enhance the value of its landscapes, wilderness

and nature-based experiences—two often conflicting approaches that can create significant tensions.

In addition, the awareness of the economic vulnerability of certain forestry companies and the potential impact of their decline on host communities has prompted them to take a step back from these activities.

However, as in many regions, where today's immediate economic interests take precedence over long-term, more abstract aspirations, tourism sometimes struggles to be heard because of the lack of influence and consideration for tourism activities in the face of manufacturing and forestry giants, backed by substantial financial resources, a strong economic impact, long-term concessions, and minimal restrictions. At the same time, successive governments prioritizing short-term economic gains over future-oriented initiatives have offered little support. This has led Tourisme Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean to commission a groundbreaking study to assess the [economic and social value of its landscapes](#) (in French only).

The first of its kind in Quebec, this initiative reinforced the tourism industry's vital role in decision-making regarding regional development. Created to establish a

sustainable vision of the destination that takes account of the region's distinctive features and elements, the study has enabled regional landscapes to be inventoried, qualified and classified according to their environmental, cultural/heritage, aesthetic/emblematic, and social value, in addition to assessing their total economic value.

On one hand, the study equipped regional and local stakeholders to better evaluate the impact of various projects on the region, support the preservation of quality environments and landscapes, and ultimately strengthen the region's tourism performance.

It also positioned Tourisme Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean as a key representative in addressing land-use conflicts between tourism and other industries. The study mainly serves as a decision-making tool that captures the region's complexities and has been warmly received by local decision-makers. By quantifying this intangible value, the study has enabled a consistent argument for the ATR to enhance infrastructures or preserve the landscape as an economic driver for the region, by giving justification for the elements that hold deep meaning for residents and fuel their sense of pride.

Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park





Blueberries in Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean Region

A Region Strongly Committed to Regenerative Tourism

The 2022-2030 strategic itinerary for the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean destination solidifies its commitment to regenerative tourism under the slogan “The power to act together for tomorrow.”

The goal is to establish a vision, general direction and framework, defining the “who” and “why” while allowing the “what,” “where” and “how” to take shape as the adventure unfolds. This approach ensures the itinerary remains open to opportunities and challenges encountered along the way.

Covid has only reinforced the relevance of this goal. No amount of strategic planning could have fully prepared the people of Saguenay and Lac-Saint-Jean who, like many others, were hit quite hard by the crisis. However, the pandemic also highlighted the region’s remarkable resilience, solidarity and resourcefulness.

The itinerary aims to promote tourism across the entire SagLac region, develop seasonality, and unite all key players in a dynamic, communicative ecosystem. It also seeks to ensure universal, welcoming access for both visitors and locals. This is Julie Dubord’s driving passion. How can Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean become a place where everyone—regardless of constraints, aspirations or how they identify—feels welcome and at home?

By embracing the principles of a regenerative economy, Tourisme SagLac hopes to showcase, preserve and strengthen the unique history and culture that have shaped the region’s reputation, not only to enrich the tourism experience but also safeguard a rich legacy for future generations.

The itinerary is designed to foster integration, inclusion, equity, adaptability, and openness across the tourism industry, starting with its ATR.

Local businesses have welcomed this approach with enthusiasm and an immediate openness to its possibilities. A true societal project, regenerative tourism offers a vision of hope and a renewed thirst for entrepreneurship and hospitality.

Communauté Tourisme Acœur is a good example of an initiative driven by regenerative principles. This human resources lab is a supportive community dedicated to training and uniting those working in local tourism (entrepreneurs, managers, administrators, employees, socio-economic organizations).

It encourages the entire ecosystem to work together, actively participate in the regional projects of other stakeholders, and take meaningful action to foster connection, all driven by strong governance. Locals and visitors alike are invited to embark on this journey, with awareness-raising activities or ecological or social involvement as part of the tourist experience.

Tourisme Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean also provides guidance to entrepreneurs on an individual basis, helping them maintain or reignite the passion that first inspired them, through Oriance—a game-changing initiative providing encouragement—which has enabled the modernization of local business models.

Another example of this regenerative approach is the focus on developing experiences and infrastructure that improve access to nature. Building on the findings of the landscape value study, particular attention is given to the responsible and sustainable management of projects within these famed landscapes, which are recognized for their significant economic and social value, not only to enrich the tourist experience but also for future generations in the region.

Tourisme Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean is taking action by aiming for a radical, forward-thinking transformation of industry players in a socio-ecological, interdisciplinary and structural way. Whether guiding business tourism by helping hotels and convention centers adopt sustainable practices and embrace circular economy solutions, supporting start-ups through incubators or enhancing the Saguenay port of call—which has recently earned Biosphere certification in sustainable tourism—the emphasis is on ecosystem collaboration in a region committed to breaking free from sectoral and geographical silos.





Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park

Key Sectors to Drive Regenerative Tourism

Despite a bold vision for the future and all these great initiatives, putting them into action remains a challenge. The road ahead is not without obstacles, and major issues—such as sustainable mobility and accessibility—continue to exist for this vast territory, far from major urban centres. Options like slow tourism and more stationary experiences are being explored, but there is still a long way to go, especially in a country and province with limited train and public transportation.

Moreover, many regenerative initiatives evolve into “sustainable” approaches that often end up being basic ecological measures. To establish the approach without making it too disruptive and facilitate widespread adoption, Julie Dubord intends to engage the entire industry. Through meetings, training, dialogue, and guidance, she seeks to inspire a shift that ultimately aligns with the intrinsic values of local tourism organizations.

For example, ecotourism is deeply rooted in the region. Generally driven by companies with a strong ecological and social conscience, and often reflecting the lifestyle choices of their founders, this sector is a key ally in the necessary shift toward regenerative tourism. Committed to leaving no trace behind and treating nature as a living entity, these organizations serve as the best ambassadors for the necessary transformation of tourism offerings, enriching visitors’ experiences with a sense of respect and wonder.

Another example is economuseums, which are known for turning intangible heritage into tangible capital that drives economic activity. An impressive undertaking! Their services enrich the way of life in often remote communities, fostering a deeper sense of cultural identity, recognition and pride.

Both tourism sectors are also known for their resilience and adaptability, particularly to climate change and natural shifts. Experiences that align with regenerative tourism! Of course, they are not the only ones embracing this approach. Accommodation providers,

restaurateurs and operators of leisure and cultural activities are integrating ecosystem-based thinking into their businesses more and more. They prioritize local and seasonal resources, adopt circular practices and develop identity-driven products.

But intention always comes before achievement. Regenerative tourism is no easy feat, and reality does not always—at least not yet—align with the ambition that drives it. But guess what? The itinerary offers a happy and healthy vision to unite stakeholders across the region. Not everyone is ready yet, and some grey areas remain in the wonderful world of tourism, but the region is seeking to focus on the authenticity and quality of those who have embarked on this journey, one step at a time.

Allowing ourselves to make mistakes, explore, innovate, uncover new findings, and experiment are all part of the journey. Just as in life, we learn by doing. The ATR moves forward in concentric circles, starting with its closest stakeholders. The MRCs play a key role in the regional regenerative tourism initiative. Closely connected to the ATR and actively engaged in committees, they contribute to the vision by providing tourism support funds and working together to enhance the region's overall appeal. The Chamber of Commerce is another vital partner in reinforcing the collective effort. Additionally, a dozen or so committees work year after year to generate ideas and projects to tap into the region's rich potential.

Over time, the ATR has found itself invited to decision-making tables and involved in more and more conversations that extend beyond tourism, about the

region's future and strategic direction. This is the “foot in the door” policy, where, without forcing or imposing a presence, the door is gradually opened to a more holistic vision of a shared future. Tourisme Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean contributes by making suggestions, resolving conflicts, inspiring, proposing solutions, and finding common ground. In short, the ATR's mission is to ensure that all stakeholders recognize their shared aspirations for happiness and prosperity, even if these take different forms depending on the entity. The focus is on fostering unity around a common vision. It strives to break down silos and highlight shared realities that may have previously gone unnoticed, as each entity once operated within its own “bubble.” Ultimately, Tourisme SagLac seeks to foster awareness of every organization's role within a dynamic, thriving ecosystem, and of the potential for action and interaction to build a prosperous and supportive common future.

The Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean tourism region is now focused on amplifying and showcasing the progress made in recent years to fulfill its vision of regenerative tourism. Rather than being deterred by the challenge of transforming tourism organizations and structures, it aims to support individual and collective efforts, one step at a time, by leveraging the strengths of its partners and seizing opportunities as they arise. It adapts and evolves, much like an ecosystem responding to its environment. The ATR's first mission is to transform itself from within. But this journey is also about partnership, dialogue and involvement, with the common good and collective prosperity as guiding principles—like a living, life-size lab in this breathtaking landscape.

