

# Saguenay River

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## Essence of French Québec

**Original Algonquian name:** Saguenay, probably meaning 'water flows out'

**Current official name:** Saguenay River, from the Native original.

**Source:** Lac Saint-Jean, Quebec

**Mouth:** St. Lawrence River at Tadoussac

**Direction of flow:** east

**Length :** 165 kilometres from Lac Saint-Jean to Tadoussac

**Main Characteristic:** heartland of French-speaking Quebec

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It was called the 'Kingdom of the Saguenay' by French explorer Jacques Cartier. He had interpreted Native descriptions of the Saguenay River in 1535 to mean the Saguenay River basin was the homeland of a rich and powerful people.

There was no 'kingdom' in the European sense, but there was a wealth of water power and forest resources that have made the region's modern-day French-speaking population prosperous and self-assured.

The true nature of the Saguenay's power and wealth would be understood and exploited only recently, four centuries after Jacques Cartier's encounter with its Native people. Today, the Saguenay region is Quebec's most visible model of economic success. It is the most thoroughly French-speaking region of Quebec, and has become the political stronghold of the drive for Quebec independence.

The tremendous flows of the Saguenay and its tributaries provide its people with electricity and jobs. Big, ocean-going ships purr through the lower Saguenay's deep, narrow fjords directly to aluminum smelters and paper factories far into the Laurentian Highlands.

Bauxite ore is shipped from mines around the globe directly to Jonquière where it is refined into aluminum, using huge amounts of electrical power generated by company-owned dams. Using yet more electrical power, paper companies take trees from the surrounding boreal forest and turn them into rolls of newsprint for shipment to publishers around the world.

The full force of the Saguenay's physical power was not witnessed until the summer of 1996. Reservoirs behind the private industrial dams along the Saguenay's tributaries overflowed in unison. The floodwaters washed away homes and killed 10 people.

Unusual torrential rains were the obvious cause. But some local residents complained the flood was caused by poor management of private company dams. Water, they said, should have been released gradually instead of letting the reservoirs overflow.

The provincial government rushed to investigate the cause of the disaster, while money from the federal government and private citizens poured in to help flood victims rebuild their homes and their lives. The disaster was seen by some people as a chance for other Canadians to show that they cared about Quebeckers and wanted them to remain part of Canada.



Quebec's modern independence movement owes much of its strength to the people of the Saguenay region. The first dependable voting support for the Parti Québécois came from the region. It provided the party a solid platform in the provincial legislature from which it argued for Quebec's secession from Canada.

The case for independence was helped by the example of the Saguenay's economic health and virtually unilingual French-speaking culture. The Saguenay region showed the rest of Quebec that French can be a language of economic success, and that economic success can mean increased support for sovereignty.

The most obvious example of that is Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, a successful lawyer who was born and raised in what Quebeckers still like to call the Royaume du Saguenay.

## Saguenay River: Aluminum Toil

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### The river and its people make the modern metal

Quebec's vitally-important aluminum industry owes its existence to the power and depth of the Saguenay River system.

The river's deep channel allows seagoing ships to bring bauxite ore from South America, Africa, and Australia 100 kilometres upstream to an inland port at Port Alfred. Ships also use the river to carry the finished ingots to markets around the world.

Most of all, the force of the Saguenay and its tributaries generates the enormous amounts of electricity required to separate the aluminum from its ore.

If the company had to pay normal rates for the power, it could not function. Instead, the company itself owns and operates six power stations on the Saguenay and Peribonca rivers. The power they produce would be enough for one million homes.

Agriculture and paper making were the mainstays of the regional economy before 1925. It was then that the Aluminum Company of America started building a dam and smelter. To house its workforce, the company even built its own town, today, Jonquière, which was originally named Arvida to honour the company's founder, Arthur Vining Davis.

Just three years later, the United States government ordered the company to break up its monopolistic control of the aluminum market. All of the company's operations outside of the United States were organized into a separate, competing company based in Montreal.

Today, Alcan Aluminium Ltd., has more than 34,000 employees in about 30 countries. It is still based in Montreal and has thousands of owners who buy and sell shares through the stock markets.

For decades, the local workforce was French-speaking and the managers, who lived on la rue des bosses, were English-speaking. This changed as more French-speaking engineers and managers emerged from Quebec universities, and the provincial government demanded that French become the principal language of work in the province.

Until the 1980s, the Chicoutimi-Jonquière region was prosperous because of the high-paying jobs in the aluminum and paper industries. But the region was too dependent upon those two industries. When modernization reduced the number of workers needed to run the plants, the region suddenly suffered high unemployment.

Alcan reduced its workforce by 2,400 when it modernized its smelters in response to rising international competition and sinking aluminum prices.

In the Saguenay region today, Alcan still employs more than 6,000 people in well-paid work. Most employees are involved in the refining of ore and the smelting of aluminum. Some conduct advanced scientific research while others run the company's Roberval and Saguenay Railway that ferries ore and finished aluminum between the port and the plants. About 700 people maintain the company's dams and power stations that generate electricity for its regional plants.

Aluminum is the most abundant element in the earth's crust. But it is one of the most difficult to separate from the soil and turn into useful material. The process requires vast amounts of electricity.

First, the ore, called bauxite, is dissolved under heat and pressure in tanks of caustic soda. A compound of aluminum and oxygen called alumina is extracted by the process.

The alumina is dissolved in pots of liquid salt and subjected to an intense electrical current that separates the molecules into the basic elements, aluminum and oxygen. Molten aluminum is siphoned from the bottom of the containers and mixed with other materials to create mixtures, called alloys.

Pure aluminum is three times lighter than steel, but not nearly as strong. Alloys containing just 10 percent of other materials approach the strength of steel with very little gain in weight. Aircraft, for example, are made of an alloy of aluminum, copper, magnesium, silicon, and zinc. Spacecraft use a lighter and more expensive alloy of aluminum and lithium.

The aluminum alloys are cast into ingots or flattened into rolled sheets for transportation to factories that make aircraft, railcars, mountain bikes, pie plates, drink cans, and toothpaste tubes.

To create new markets for aluminum, the company invests in the development of new uses for the metal, particularly in the building of cars. Aluminum cars are more expensive to build, but burn less fuel and last longer than those made of steel.

## Saguenay River: A World Apart

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### The stronghold of Quebec nationalism

Fiercely independent, self-reliant, and hardworking, the population of the Saguenay Region is more than 98-percent Francophone (French-speaking) and less than two-percent Anglophone (English-speaking). The result is a valley culture, society, and economy that has no strong ties to other parts of Canada outside of Quebec itself.

Of all of Quebec's region, the Saguenay has most consistently voted for independence in elections and referendums. It supplies the rest of Quebec and Canada with a steady stream of political leaders committed to making the province a sovereign country, separate from the rest of Canada.

Saguenay region journalist, Yvon Bernier, was asked to explain the region's nationalist fervour. The English translation follows his original French text.

#### **Indépendance: objectif clé des irréductibles "Gaulois"**

*Par Yvon Bernier*

Reconnu comme le château-fort du Parti québécois, il est pratiquement assuré que la région du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean accordera pour une troisième fois d'affilée un large appui à l'objectif ultime de ce parti de "faire l'indépendance" dans le cadre du prochain référendum québécois prévu d'ici l'an 2000.

Le 20 mai 1980 les Jeannois et Saguenéens avaient dit oui majoritairement au projet d'indépendance mis de l'avant par feu René Lévesque. Même si la défaite fut crève-coeur, les irréductibles "Gaulois" ont su attendre la seconde chance de donner naissance à un pays. Celle-ci s'est présentée à la fin d'octobre 1995, et a donné lieu alors que le gouvernement québécois était dirigé par Jacques Parizeau, à une demi-victoire avancent les uns, à une demi-défaite soutiennent les autres.

Devant ce résultat des plus mitigés, les gens de ce coin de pays se sont promis que "la prochaine fois sera définitivement la bonne."

Cette farouche volonté d'indépendance est fondée sur divers facteurs géographiques, sociaux, et culturels.

Il faut savoir que la région du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean a été pendant longtemps isolée du reste de la province de Québec par la chaîne de montagnes des Laurentides et qu'elle a appris sur tous les aspects ou presque à ne compter que sur elle-même. Les habitants du "Royaume du Saguenay" vivent également dans un climat de type nordique rigoureux, propre à forger le caractère. Par ailleurs l'ensemble des communautés qui occupent ce territoire sont presque à 99 pour cent francophones et catholiques.

Les gens habitent ce territoire depuis à peine plus de 150 ans mais leurs racines y sont profondes. Cette vitalité régionale se manifeste également de façon remarquable en dehors du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. Plus que tout autre région périphérique du Québec, elle a fourni à ce jour aux grands centres urbains un nombre marquant de personnalités.

Au plan politique, la région a fourni bon nombre de politiciens qui occupent des postes clés.

Le premier ministre du Québec Lucien Bouchard lui même est natif de St-Coeur-de-Marie, Lac Saint-Jean.

## **Independence: key goal of these diehard "Gauls"**

*By Yvon Bernier*

Recognized as the stronghold of the Parti Québécois, it is practically certain that the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region will, for a third time in a row, show wide support for the party's ultimate objective of independence at the time of the next Quebec referendum which is expected to happen before the year 2000.

On May 20, 1980, the majority of the people of Lac Saint-Jean and the Saguenay said oui to the plan for independence put forward by the late René Lévesque. Even if the overall defeat was heartbreaking, these unshakable "Gauls" wait for a second chance to give birth to a country. This chance came at the end of October 1995 and gave the government led by then Premier, Jacques Parizeau, what some called a semi-victory, and others termed a semi-defeat.

Faced with this unclear result, people of this corner of the country promised themselves that the next time they would win, "once and for all."

This determined desire for independence is based on several geographic, social and cultural factors.

The Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region was for a long time isolated from the rest of Quebec by the Laurentian mountains and learned to rely on itself for most things. The residents of the "Kingdom of the Saguenay" lived in a rigorous nordic climate which builds a common social character. Finally, the communities of the region are nearly 99 percent French-speaking and Catholic.

These people have occupied the region for barely 150 years but their roots are deep. The vitality of the region extends beyond it. More than any other outlying region, it is the origin of many Quebec celebrities.

Politically, the region has provided a good many politicians who hold important positions. The Premier of Quebec, Lucien Bouchard, is himself originally from the Lac Saint-Jean town of St-Coeur-de-Marie.

## Saguenay River: Sad Ballerina

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### Beluga whales face extinction from pollution

Each summer, about 200,000 tourists head for Tadoussac to watch an aquatic ballet performed by four different species of whale.

The dancers are among the oldest mammals on earth and some of them, the blue whales, are the biggest animals of the planet. They move without apparent effort and appear to be in the best of health, except for the tiniest members of their troupe.

Unlike their big cousins who migrate to other oceans, the white beluga whale stays year round in its home waters of the St. Lawrence estuary and the fjord of the Saguenay. As a result, the little whale never escapes the flood of pollution collected from the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River, and the Saguenay itself.

The whales live on plankton, small shrimp called krill, and fish. This food is contaminated with mercury, lead, and a poisonous alphabet soup of chemicals including PCBs, DDT, and PAHs. These industrial pollutants become more concentrated in the whales as they grow older.

Even worse, the chemicals concentrate in the milk of mother whales. Baby whales are poisoned from birth. There were an estimated 5000 St. Lawrence belugas a century ago. Today the pods total only 500 animals.

Since 1986, scientists and volunteers have been collecting dead belugas for analysis. Each of the 29 animals examined so far has had at least one tumour, some of them cancerous. Similar tumours have not been found in whale populations in other parts of the world.

Faced with threat of extinction of the St. Lawrence beluga, the governments of Canada and Quebec are moving to halt industrial and domestic pollution and to stop harassment of the whales by ship and small boat traffic.

There is some hope, but no guarantee, that the troupe's annual performance will continue to star its beloved little ballerinas in white.

## Saguenay River: Left Behind

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### Arctic life survives deep in the fjord

The Saguenay fjord is so rich in unusual life that the governments of Quebec and Canada have joined to make it a unique, underwater national park.

One of the objectives of making the fjord and part of the St. Lawrence estuary into a park is to protect its delicate marine life. Park status will permit greater control of activities such as whale-watching, fishing, hunting of birds and seals, and ship traffic.

Tour boats are now required to stay a safe distance from whales to reduce stress on the animals and reduce the incidents of physical injury from collisions between boats and whales.

The mouth of the Saguenay is the only place in the world with four different species of whale. The blue whale — as long as two tractor-trailer trucks — and the fin whale are found alongside the much smaller minke and beluga whales.

The belugas are in many ways the most interesting. Most belugas live in the Arctic. But the belugas of the Saguenay fjord and St. Lawrence estuary remain all their lives in these southern waters.

In the deep, cold waters of the Saguenay fjord live fish that are found elsewhere, only in Arctic waters. These fish include the Greenland halibut and the Arctic cod. They live in isolation from the populations of the far northern seas and probably survived in the Saguenay's cold depths when the ending of the last Ice Age, 10,000 years ago, warmed the surrounding waters.

The purity of the Saguenay water was spoiled in the 20th century, first by pollution from paper mills and then from aluminum smelters.

Creation of the Marine Park will not eliminate the industrial poisons already contaminating the fjord and its aquatic life. The park's presence will, however, make industries, governments and individuals more aware of its value and ecological fragility.

## Saguenay River: Rumours of More

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### **Fur traders hear tales of distant wealth**

Europeans came to North America in search of gold and a direct route to the wealth of China. It was for fish and fur that they stayed.

Fur was an important item of clothing in the late 1500s. It was warm, it durable, and it was beautiful. Only the rich could afford the luxury of fur, but their demand was insatiable — especially for beaver.

The beaver had become extinct in Europe, so when the presence of plentiful beaver in North America became known, fur traders soon followed.

Tadoussac was a traditional meeting ground for the Algonquian and Iroquoian First Nations. It naturally became the centre of the early French fur trade in North America.

By the end of the 16th century, hundreds of fur traders sailed there every summer to bargain with the First Nations for furs. The First Nations in return, were eager to acquire European goods, particularly products made of metal.

It was here that Jacques Cartier visited in 1535 and first heard from First Nations traders tales of a rich "Kingdom of the Saguenay."

## Saguenay River: Tide of Destruction

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### Flash flood ravages a valley

The images are unforgettable: neat, white frame houses with the traditional curved eaves of Quebec roofs, trapped in a raging torrent.

The Saguenay River, tamed by a network of government and company dams, suddenly rebelled against its servitude. An unusual deluge of heavy rainstorms filled the river's drainage basin with an unmanageable runoff. Almost simultaneously, the dams of the Saguenay and its tributaries overflowed.

The town of La Baie nestles in an arc around a bay of the Saguenay. On the morning of July 19, 1996, many of its citizens watched their televisions in anticipation of the opening of the Olympic Games in Atlanta. Quebec singer Céline Dion was to sing at the opening ceremonies and most Quebecers felt they shared in the honour. Few of La Baie's residents gave much thought to the weather forecast which warned of another day of heavy downpour.

By mid-afternoon, saturated hillsides began to slide. Later that night, the first deaths occurred when two children were buried under a mudslide that engulfed their family's home.

The morning light revealed four more victims whose cars had plunged into a water-filled crevice in the roadway. A sailboat in the St. Lawrence River near the Saguenay's mouth at Tadoussac was capsized by a violent rush of water. Three people were killed.

By the time the flood subsided, 10 people were dead, 15,000 were evacuated from their homes, and 250 houses were carried away. Roads and railway lines were washed out. Gone too was the fish ladder at La Baie constructed to allow salmon to climb past a sawmill dam on the Ha! Ha! River. The courses of the Saguenay and its tributaries were permanently changed.

In the region's largest city, Chicoutimi, the raging waters threatened to collapse the beautiful stone buildings of an historic paper mill.

In Jonquière, modern paper mills and aluminum smelters were temporarily shut down because the flood damaged their power and water systems. Tracks of Alcan Aluminum's railway were left suspended in air over a section of washed-out roadbed. Damage to provincially-owned power stations totaled \$60 million.

The Canadian Army quickly set up tents to house evacuees. Donations of food, clothing, blankets, and cash were collected across the country for delivery to the flood victims. Some Canadians outside Quebec expressed the hope that their donations would show Quebecers that Canada was a generous and secure society, even for the region where support for Quebec independence has been most intense. In Montreal, a group of Canadians who arrived as refugees of the war in Vietnam, raised funds for the flood victims, saying they wanted to repay the generosity of Quebecers who welcomed them 20 years earlier.

Downstream, the surface of the Saguenay was carpeted with the debris of broken houses and lost furniture.

Once the flood waters receded, victims began to question whether the disaster was entirely a natural catastrophe, or one made worse by poor management of the Saguenay region's complex network of dams. Should the dams have been opened to release the rainwater gradually before they overflowed?

The Quebec government ordered an investigation which, several months later, concluded that much of the region's network of dikes and dams was obsolete and in need of urgent modernization.