

SUNDAY SELECT

Sunday
September

4
2022

Exploring the Cabot Trail and Cape Breton



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Peggy exploring the Cabot Trail and Cape Breton.

Courtesy photo

Exploring the Cabot Trail and Cape Breton

By Peggy Newland

"There's another pod," a woman with binoculars shouts, and everyone in the CAT ferry lounge, including the band, heads to the expansive windows. Puffs from blowholes, a black flip of tail, and some distant breaching off the coast of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and we are in whale country. The mood is celebratory as the sea shanties begin again, and we all sing along to "Randy Dandy O."

My husband and I are on a weeklong jaunt to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, for a bicycling and hiking extravaganza, along the beautiful rail trails and mountain peaks of this Atlantic Canada Province. Although we could spend a summer exploring the southern and eastern coastlines, we take the long journey to the "Celtic Shores," via Good Cheer Trails/backroads, passing pastoral farmlands, river valleys, and quaint Lunenburg, Peggy's Cove, and Mahone Bay. We, of course, pause for dips and picnics along pristine beaches. We finally arrive in Cape Breton early evening at Glenora Inn and Distillery and the place is hopping with the music of a local ceilidh duo. The expansive gardens along a streambed are ablaze with butterflies. Brian orders a ten-year whiskey while I sip local wine, and we dine on fish and chips, and a couple of sticky toffee puddings, as the music lulls us. At sunset, with sipping whiskeys in hand, we hike up a glen through fern forest and then call it a night, keeping the windows open to a babbling brook.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast, we pack up our bicycles and spend the day riding from Mabou to Port Hood's beaches on the Celtic Shores Coastal Rail Trail. We follow meandering tributaries that take us over ravines into lush forests and past flower-filled meadows. Canadian geese float along rivers with families of merganser and as we careen down into Port Hood, we spy a muskrat sunning itself along the banks. After some chowders, a dip in the sea, and a boardwalk ride through sand dunes, we hoof it back and head to the beautiful beaches of Inverness for the afternoon. The Gulf of St. Lawrence waters are warm, yes, warm, and I float to my heart's content in gentle waves.

Our next resting place is in the funky/casual/ceilidh themed town of Cheticamp. We find a gem of a place—The Archie & Isidore—which is elegantly comfortable and perfectly located for walking the town, looking for music. We find a local spot, Le Gabriel, and they have a Sunday Night jam band, so we sit with families singing Gaelic tunes as we nosh on crab rolls, mussels, and enjoy local brews.

The next morning, after some in-room pastries and coffee, we cycle over to Pointe Enragee Lighthouse, before hitting the "ooh's and ah's"

Cape Breton Highlands National Park—a beauty route along the extensive Cabot Trail network. Winding roads lead past rust-covered cliffs and rimmed valleys, and hawks are abundant, riding the thermals over forested canyons and rocky coastline. We stop at every pull-off and take short jaunts up Le Buttereau, Cap-Rouge, and then decide to hike the 7 km Skyline Trail. It's early, so we're without crowds, as we hike through boreal forest and over a ridgeline, down terraced boardwalk steps to 360-degree panoramic views of sea, cove, and mountain. After hiking, we're hungry, so we grab some lobster rolls by Pleasant Bay and begin the start of many swims at beaches and lakes, on our way to Ingonish: Dingwall, White Point, Black Brook Cove, Lakies Head, Warren Lake and finally, the mesmerizing freshwater lake/sandy coves of Ingonish Beach. Jump in the ocean/float in the lake/repeat, is a blissful ending to a busy day of exploring.

We clean up after checking into the historic Keltic Lodge—a classic, whitewashed inn, perched on the edge of a spruce-lined headland. Our room overlooks Mount Smokey and has Adirondack chairs facing west for sunset, so we are set for cocktail hour before a seafood dinner of mussels, salmon, and chowder on the inn's outdoor deck.

The next morning, after a buffet breakfast, we hike out the backdoor of our room down to Mink Cove, Whale Rock, and over to Steering Island. A misty morning adds intrigue as we stroll over moss trails, and wildflower-covered ledges. The afternoon is rainy, so we bypass a gondola ride up Mount Smokey, and head over to Pictou for our last night. The sky clears as we drive into the Pictou Lodge Beach Resort.

"Bike ride to town?" Brian asks.

"Swim when back?" I suggest.

And we have a plan.

We find the Jitney Trail, which is part of the Trans-Canada Rail Trail system, and ride along Northumberland shores and past a harbor filled with sailboats until we are in rolling farmland, windblown meadows, and pine forests. Upon our return, we leap into the warm, yes warm, waters overlooking Caribou and Munroe's Islands, in our bicycle shorts, and we float in the waves until dinner. Our room is log-cabin cute, and the restaurant, is basically sitting in the Northumberland Strait. We dine with wraparound views and start with a board of Nova Scotian cheeses, and then decide on Brussels sprouts salads with warm bacon dressing. Salmon on a plank for Brian, while I choose a seafood casserole of halibut, shrimp, haddock, and scallops. A perfect ending for our final day in Nova Scotia. Especially when you throw in homemade blueberry pie and ice cream!



if you go

The Cat and Bay Ferries Limited. www.ferries.ca. 877-762-7245.

Ask about spring/fall special rates. Bar Harbor to Yarmouth, NS: 3.5 hours of whale watching fun.

Glenora Inn and Distillery. Glenville, NS www.glenoradistillery.com
902-258-2662.

Daily Ceilidhs (local music) in the Washback Pub 1-3 PM and 8-10 PM. Open May-late October. Whiskey tastings.

The Archie & Isidore Hotel. Cheticamp, NS. www.archieandisidore.com
902-224-2700.

Porch-side sunsets and unique rooms. Check out the music scene in town.

Keltic Lodge at the Highlands. Ingonish Beach, NS. www.kelticlodge.ca
902-285-2880.

Historic resort, surrounding by ocean and hiking trails. Swimming at Ingonish Beach and connected freshwater lake. Ask about spring/fall special rates.

Pictou Lodge Beach Resort. Pictou, NS. www.pictoulodge.com
902-485-4322.

Sandy beaches along the Northumberland shores, and proximity to Prince Edward Island ferry. Classic log cottages and excellent sea-to-table dining. Spring/fall specials.