Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia: A relatively unspolied Canadian oasis

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Visitors hike the Skyline Trail in Cape Breton Highlands National Park, a wilderness plateau etched with deep river valleys that is home to moose, black bears and other wild animals. (Credit: Handout)

The steamy summer months in New York make cooler, more remote parts of the globe attractive, and some of them aren't all that far away. Take Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Through some friends, we stumbled upon a quaint rental cottage there, and spent two weeks exploring the more isolated half of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia.

After a two-hour flight to Nova Scotia's largest city, Halifax, we rented a car for a 3½-hour drive to Cape Breton, a craggy, weathered, secluded island that might well be called the Hebrides of North America. We kept ourselves amused by stopping halfway at a McDonald's and ordering McLobsters (lobster rolls).

They were the first of many on a trip that left us with fond memories of this otherworldly island, which remained cut off from the North American mainland until 1955, when a causeway opened with a bagpiper parade. Early immigrants to Cape Breton from the Scottish Highlands left their mark on the fishing villages of the island's Atlantic side, where signs are in Gaelic and kilts abound, while settlers from France populated towns on the Gulf of St. Lawrence side, where French is spoken widely and Acadian food is served.

The vestiges of those two old-world cultures, combined with heart-stopping scenery, make for a vacation that feels far from North America -- but isn't.

A cliffside drive

For dramatic vistas, from sheer granite cliffs tumbling down to boulder piles and a sea of cobalt blue (that can quickly be whipped into a black froth by inclement weather), a drive along the Cabot Trail (cabottrail.com) is the first and foremost reason to visit. The 185-mile twisting highway inscribes a loop around the northern half of Cape Breton. Hugging oceanside crags, the Cabot Trail also provides access to Cape Breton Highlands National Park of Canada, a wilderness plateau etched with deep river valleys that is home to moose, black bears and other wild animals.

Our cottage in Goose Cove, near the tourist town of Baddeck, was well located on the Cabot Trail.

Things to do

ART HOP Besides the stunning vistas, the Cabot Trail is known for its artisans. Grabbing an Artisan Trail Map put out by the Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design (capebretoncraft.com), we began our slow circuit and discovered leatherworkers, glassblowers, hatmakers, potters, basketweavers, woodworkers, photographers and painters, among others. The Acadian side of the trail is especially well known for the fine rug-hooking done by craftspeople there.

TAKE A DIP Many Cape Breton beaches are rock-strewn, but there are a few sandy exceptions. We found ourselves on a long strip of sand just south of the well-known Keltic Lodge Resort and Spa (kelticlodge.ca) in Ingonish Beach. While the water was bracing (average temperatures range from 48 degrees in June up to 64 degrees in August), the lively surf made for a few exhilarating minutes of splashing around.

TEE OFF If you have any game at all, Cape Breton's golf courses are worth a visit, particularly the upscale Cabot Links (cabotlinks.com), which opened last year in Inverness and is a true links golf course. Cape Breton has struggled economically for decades in geographic isolation, and many residents are hoping that golf may help cultivate high-end tourism. The haunting coastal course, winding through grassy swales and wetlands just a long putt from the sea, may warrant the trip for golf fanatics.

HIT THE TRACK Inverness also has a track with harness racing and betting (Inverness Raceway, 112 Forest St., 902-258-3315), a fun way to while away an overcast day. Nearby is the Red Shoe Pub (redshoepub.com), a former general store that's owned by members of the Rankin Family. (The Rankins are among Cape Breton's internationally known musicians.) Traditional music abounds at the Red Shoe, which publishes its schedule online.

Gaelic culture

You may be lucky enough to hear some Gaelic spoken on Cape Breton, but it's more likely you'll hear the strains of Cape Breton's distinctive fiddle music. Kitchen parties or dances, called ceilidhs (pronounced KAY-lees) in Gaelic, are gatherings where local musicians play the traditional tunes to singing and dancing. Music is the lifeblood of Cape Breton Island, keeping its Scottish culture alive with lively jigs, vigorous reels and melodic waltzes. A native Cape Bretoner suggested checking local papers to find listings for ceilidhs. Today, they are more formalized and held in halls, such as the annual summer Broad Cove Scottish Concert (broadcoveconcert.ca), but traditionally they were more impromptu.

We enjoyed a ceilidh at the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts (gaeliccollege.edu), the only college of its kind in North America. The college educates to preserve Gaelic culture and has a small group of exhibits on Cape Breton's Scottish immigrants. We also observed the 10-minute process of a man being bound up in a true kilt and participated in a "milling frolic," a tradition that involves singing in Gaelic as people sit around a long table and rhythmically pound newly woven wool cloth.

Acadian dining

While much of Cape Breton is Scottish-influenced, the island also has a distinctive Acadian culture. Along with shopping for hooked rugs, whale-watching tours are the most prominent tourist activity in the Francophone region, which spans from the Margaree River north to the village of Chéticamp. On our tour with Seaside Whale & Nature Cruises (loveboatwhalecruises.com), we not only saw fin, pilot, humpback and minke whales very close up, but also harbor porpoises and seals.

Afterward, we visited the Restaurant Acadian (cheticamphookedrugs.com), where servers wear traditional Acadian dress, and the fare includes such Acadian favorites as chicken fricot (a soup of diced chicken and potatoes). The restaurant is part of a Coopérative Artisanale, which includes a small Acadian museum and gift shop.

Although it's over an hour to the southern portion of Cape Breton, a visit to the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site, formerly France's largest military outpost in the New World, is well worth it for another taste of the island's French heritage.

Staff in Colonial garb will greet you as you wander through this restored 18th century fortified town. Dine on beef stewand meat pie in the rustic style of off-duty Colonial soldiers in a period restaurant. This year, the Fortress has many special events planned for the 300th anniversary of the founding of Louisbourg on the Île-Royale, the French name for Cape Breton.

If you go

CAPE BRETON ISLAND novascotia.com, cbisland.com

GETTING THERE Cape Breton's most convenient airport is in Sydney, but flights from New York are not direct and tend to be pricier ($500-$600 round-trip). One option is to fly into Halifax, Nova Scotia, which has direct flights ($400-$500 round-trip), and rent a car for the three- to four-hour drive to Cape Breton. There also are bus and shuttle services between Halifax and various points on Cape Breton.

RENTING A HOME Many home rentals are found through word-of-mouth and local listservs, but Cape Breton homes also are listed on websites, such as Airbnb.com, Cyberrentals.com, Homeaway.com and Vrbo.com. The three-bedroom home this reporter rented is listed on Sabbaticalhomes.com. Rates typically run from $1,000 to $2,000 a week during the high season of July and August, though there are deals to be found, along with more expensive homes based on size and amenities.

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