

TRAIL WORTH TAKING

The spectacular sights of Cape Breton's Cabot Trail

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Listings of the most scenic drives in North America usually rank the Cabot Trail on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island near the top.

We decided to see what all the fuss is about and discovered a rare place that more than met our expectations.

A third of the loop route snakes through Cape Breton Highlands National Park, the most breathtaking part along the west coast where the road winds atop cliffs dropping into the sea.

While coastal scenery is the main draw, the route also goes through the heavily forested interior with a unique mix of northern and southern plant species not found elsewhere in Canada.

The south part features the picturesque Margaree River and Valley, a Canadian Heritage River famous for salmon fly-fishing, and Bras d'Or Lake. It is considered Canada's largest inland sea since it is a salt-water inlet rather than a true fresh-water lake.

Baddeck, the lake's main resort town, is famous as the home of Alexander Graham Bell and a centre for sailing and other water sports.

Scottish heritage flourishes throughout the island with Gaelic still spoken in places. Baddeck even has a roaming bagpiper.

An exception is around the west coast town of Cheticamp, home to a prominent French-speaking Acadian culture.

The seafood doesn't come any fresher, especially lobster. While available at practically any restaurant, enjoying its true islander style means having a lobster boil on the beach.

Parks Canada runs a program where you not only eat on the beach, but also learn everything you would ever want to know about the tasty crustaceans and the importance of the lobster fishery to the local economy and culture. You can even choose your own lobster and drop it into the boiling pot of sea water.

Waiting for supper to cook, it's time for that other quintessential Cape Breton tradition, fiddle music. Our lobster-cooking guide is also adept at playing the fiddle, perhaps not surprising since folks here are practically born with fiddles in their hands.

Don't expect lobster served fancy restaurant style, conveniently pre-cracked and divided into portions. Instead, you learn how to disassemble the creature using a combination of plier-like cracking tools and brute strength. As locals say, eating lobster is both a delicious and messy business.

While the Cabot Trail is only 300 kilometres long, be sure to allow enough time. Anything less than three days would be rushing it. The winding roads are slow and diversions from historic sites to walks, whale-watching and stunning



TOP, CLOCKWISE: The Kidston Island Lighthouse in Baddeck. Perched on a cliff, the historic Keltic Lodge offers spectacular views. Photographing the sunset at White Point.

A Parks Canada interpreter plays the fiddle at a lobster boil.

Prepare for scenic twists along the Cabot Trail. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

viewpoints galore slow the pace even more.

Places to stay range from the historic landmark, Keltic Lodge, perched on a dramatic cliff, to coastal resorts, small hotels and bed and breakfasts and well situated national park campgrounds.

The park has 26 hiking trails, the most famous being the easy Skyline Trail, ending with outstanding

views over west coast cliffs.

On the east coast, we walked part of the Coastal Trail that follows the beautifully rugged shoreline. Then a bit inland, we huffed and puffed our way up the fairly steep Franey Trail, ending at a high vantage point over lush green canyons and valleys.

We soon realized that the Cabot Trail itself should be seen as a

framework for a trip. It's equally rewarding to venture off the main road and explore side routes.

The best place for this is the north end of the island, the most wild and remote region with small fishing villages, few people and a wealth of postcard settings.

For sunrise one morning, we went to Cabot Landing Provincial Park, where the highway's name-

sake, John Cabot, first landed in 1497. The rising sun illuminated the long, red sand beach backed by impressive cliffs, and we had it all to ourselves.

For more information, visit www.cbisland.com.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.