

# Cape Breton Island out-rivals its competitors



The sights of Cape Breton Island: the boardwalk at Inverness Beach, a puffin on Bird Island and a Highland Village animator. MELODY WREN PHOTOS

**MELODY WREN**  
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia transports you back to a simpler time, one when family holidays were spent carefree, splashing in the sea, eating fish suppers at long tables complete with homemade pie and ice cream. Set against the Atlantic and the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, Cape Breton is a series of small towns and fishing villages with wholesome summer activities and events, delicious local fare and photo-worthy beaches.

Beyond the beach, miles of Cabot Trail take you into the Highlands National Park inviting leisurely hikes and biking. Scenic waterways call for kayaking, sailing and boating and golfers have a choice of some of the best golf courses in the country with swoon-worthy coastal views. Wild lupines line the roads, both coastal and country turning photos into postcards.

Maintained by Parks Canada, the Alexander Graham Bell National Site is worth a visit. Bell was born in Scotland, and bought 500 acres in Baddeck, later in life. A “white glove tour” allow visitors to handle Bell’s personal artifacts including photos, clothes and books. Bell was one of the first men in North America to teach the deaf and he said that he “lived every day twice – first day living it and the

second day recording it.”

The Fortress of Louisbourg on the rocky shoreline east of Sydney, is one quarter of the reconstruction of the original French town and fortifications, the largest of its kind in North America. Soldiers march the top of the walls and cannon fire shakes the ground. You are transported back to the 1700s chatting with sailors, servants and dancing ladies. It is so incredibly realistic, it’s only when you step away that you feel the magnitude of the time warp. [www.fortressoflouisbourg.ca](http://www.fortressoflouisbourg.ca)

Highland Village is perched high on a hill overlooking the bay. Set aside a few hours to walk through this living history museum set with historic houses, a general store, and a blacksmith. Between 1815 and 1870, almost 50,000 Gaelic settlers immigrated from Scotland to Cape Breton. Costumed animators provide valuable insight into the history of the island. While we enjoyed tea and oatcakes in one of the tiny houses, a young girl played traditional tunes on the fiddle transporting visitors back to a much simpler time. [www.highlandvillage.ca](http://www.highlandvillage.ca)

St. Ann’s Gaelic College was an ideal conductor of the history of the island and its accompanying cultural traditions. Visitors come to learn to speak Gaelic, weave, make a kilt with one-week summer courses are offered for children, families and adults. If you go, you can watch

a fiddler and dancing demonstration and learn about the versatility of kilts or participate in a mill frolic where weavers sing Gaelic songs while working on material. [www.gaeliccollege.edu](http://www.gaeliccollege.edu)

We drove along the Cabot Trail for endless coastal scenery through Whale Cove and Margaree Harbour, enroute to Cheticamp. We stopped in Grand Etang harbour as the fishing boats were coming in and took the opportunity to chat with the fishermen who were loading up a refrigerated truck from the morning’s catch (350 lobsters), all heading to New Brunswick.

Cheticamp is home to many art studios but as soon as we entered Cape Breton Highland National Park, it was completely different scenery. We headed to the Skyline Trail for a hike. The roads and trails were densely forested and we spotted a few wild coyotes as we walked the trail, which ended at a spectacular view of the road below winding through the mountain.

Wiling away a sunny summer afternoon on a boat is a favourite pastime, and in Cape Breton, there are many choices.

The Amoeba Schooner sails from the main dock in Baddeck through Bras d’Or Lake, which is an easy way to get the lay of the land and sea in a few hours. Sail past Alexander Graham Bell’s estate and soak in the history behind it all.

A Puffin boat tour took us through Great

Bras d’Or to Bird Island where we saw northern gannets, razor bills, bald eagles and cormorants. I had never seen so many bald eagles in one place. Gray seals sunned themselves on rocks, and dipped their heads in and out of the water playfully near our boat. [www.birdisland.net](http://www.birdisland.net).

The grand finale of boating was boarding a chartered catamaran at Ben Eoin Yacht Club on Bras d’Or Lake. We sailed via Dundee and past Marble Mountain and we docked at Dundee. This beautifully outfitted Alpha 42 was comfortable enough for 12 of us on board with plenty of space to relax, take photos, dine and enjoy the scenery. Catering to every whim, this catamaran is available for private charters with or without Capt. Paul Jamieson.

The cultural mosaic is very much alive everywhere I went, with fiddlers, storytelling, a wry sense of humour and an evident passion for their home. It’s a very sociable society where every other person seems to carry a guitar or fiddle to pull out to play at the slightest prompt.

National Geographic named Cape Breton one of 10 top islands in the world, and as Alexander Graham Bell so eloquently said “I have travelled around the globe. I have seen the Canadian and American Rockies, the Andes, the Alps and the Highlands of Scotland, but for simple beauty, Cape Breton out-rivals them all.” ■

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