

# Homes & Leisure

**Touring** The Gaspé Peninsula on 2 wheels **F5** | **Feature** Metro Home of the Week **F6**



A look-off along the Cabot Trail reveals the region's lush terrain. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

## COMING HOME TO THE CABOT TRAIL

**CATHY DONALDSON**  
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Travel writers often get asked for suggestions of places to visit, hidden gems to explore. This Sydney gal gets quizzed on one Nova Scotia destination more than any other: the Cabot Trail.

I've been hesitant to give advice since it had been ages since I made the trek along the scenic highway, a 300-kilometre route that loops around a large section of Cape Breton, including Highlands National Park.

As a kid, I regularly "did the Trail" with my parents, either in the lushness of summer or in fall, when crisp air brings the hills alive with colour. The Cabot Trail was a fun annual pilgrimage, a way to reconnect with spectacular natural beauty

close to home and occasionally gave me butterflies as we wound our way up steep mountain peaks. Today, the drive — named after explorer John Cabot — continues to be rated one of the world's best road trips and hosts thousands of visitors annually from around the world.

After too many years away from one of my favourite excursions, I eked out a four-day stretch in my schedule to see the Cabot Trail again, as well as a bit of the Ceilidh Trail and my hometown, with my 21-year-old daughter as navigator. It would be Sidney's second time on the route, she was too young to remember much about the first.

What follows is a snapshot of our itinerary. Yes, you can find countless Cabot Trail suggestions in guide books or the internet, but this Cape Bretoner hopes her

outline highlights must-see locales and simplifies your research. This is a packed schedule so you may want to add a few days for a more relaxed pace or to better immerse yourself in the region's rich Celtic, French Acadian and First Nations culture and heritage.

### Day 1

Travel from Moncton to Baddeck, N.S. (about four hours by car) and stay the night in this pretty village on Bras d'Or Lake (We bunked down at a nearby family cottage.) If you get an early start on the road like we did, grab lunch when you arrive in Baddeck at one of its quaint restaurants or cafés, then work off the meal with a little retail therapy or stroll along the picture-perfect waterfront.

Prefer a hike in the woods? Try an

adventure to Uisge Ban Falls, just outside Baddeck. Sidney and I did the above (minus the Falls) and still squeezed in a couple of hours at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum National Historic Site, home to models, photo displays, artifacts and other details about the fascinating life of the communication and transportation pioneer. I love the Bell Museum and enjoyed it even more on this visit — admission is free in 2017 as part of Canada's 150th anniversary celebrations.

Before you head to your lodging for the night, stop by Baddeck Lobster Suppers for a meal. If you don't have room for the yummy lobster or snow crab, at least have some seafood chowder or the mussels. You'll thank me. If you're planning travels for 2018, make a reservation in January for a table next year at The

Bite House, a 12-seat restaurant in a century-old farmhouse on the Westside Baddeck Road. I've yet to go but the word-of-mouth reviews are amazing!

### Day 2

There are various ways to continue your trip but my fave is to take the Trans-Canada Highway from Baddeck to the Englishtown ferry. It only takes a few minutes to cross the channel at the mouth of beautiful St. Ann's Bay but I still get a kick out of the cable ferry ride, friendly staff directing cars aboard, waiting for my little ticket stub after paying the \$7 fee and feeling the boat nudge along the underwater line to the Jersey Cove shore.

PLEASE SEE → **CABOT, F8**

# Coming home to travel along Nova Scotia's Cabot Trail one more time

## CABOT → F1

After the ferry, follow Route 312 to Ingonish. Take a breather when you reach Cape Smokey Provincial Park atop Smokey Mountain. Relish the sights from the cliffs to the sea at an area picnic table or consider hiking Smokey Trail, a rugged 10-kilometre jaunt. My co-pilot and I soaked up the scenery before snaking the car down the other side of the mountain towards Ingonish. There, we scanned for eateries and discovered Main Street Restaurant & Bakery, where we gobbled up tasty seafood chowder and buttery tea biscuits on the outdoor terrace.

Just a minute's drive away, the Cape Breton Highlands National Park came into view. We had ordered a free National Park pass for 2017 but if you don't have one, no worries—as with National Historic Sites, admission to National Parks in Canada is free this year. Inside the Highlands Park, hang a right to Ingonish Beach and take a saunter from the parking lot boardwalk to the sandy shoreline. During our visit, swimmers were having a blast playing in massive waves.

After a few photos, Sidney and I hit the road again, this time to nearby Middle Head Trail, whose parking lot is just beyond the Keltic Lodge. I heartily recommend the four-kilometre hike, which follows a narrow peninsula separating two ocean bays, ending on cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, Cape Smokey and Ingonish Island. Magical!

Emerging from the trail with tummies rumbling and too early for our dinner reservation, we dropped by Andrew's Pizzeria in Ingonish for a slice. My dad had mentioned a former Sydney neighbour, Andrew Huntington, had opened the restaurant a few years ago. Nice guy and good pizza. Revived, my youngest and I checked into our hotel for the night—the historic Keltic Lodge Resort and Spa. It was a thrill for me to stay here for the first time, even lovelier to have one of my daughters join me. The sprawling property, opened in 1951, is an ideal stop-over for a Cabot Trail tour or any getaway, its 120 rooms ranging in style and price. Our Junior Suite was in the Keltic's Main Lodge, which had the feel of the stately railroad hotels found in other National Parks. While the Lodge has been lovingly renovated, it retains its classic charm, with touches like original hardwood floors and rich accents. All rooms featuring excellent water views. Vistas continued to impress as we entered the Lodge's Purple Thistle Dining Room, where we feasted on poached lobster, followed by delicious salmon with mussels and chive butter. There's nothing like eating from the sea by the sea.

## Day 3

Drive from Ingonish to the Skyline Trail on the western side of the Cabot Trail. There are so many terrific side trips to do along the way, such as to Neil's Harbour, Meat Cove and more. But to fit in all we wanted to do, we set a fairly direct course to Pleasant Bay and on to our inaugural ramble along the Skyline.

I won't lie. There is considerable road construction under way in the northern section of the Cabot Trail and travellers can expect delays. Good driving music, ample snacks and awesome surroundings kept us upbeat during waits. Of course, we didn't just stop for roadwork. But other breaks on our circuitous path were far more fun, breathing in the beauty at captivating look-offs on MacKenzie Mountain and French Mountain.



Just inside the start of the Cape Breton Highlands National Park in Ingonish, a spectacular beach welcomes swimmers and those just out for a stroll along its sandy shoreline. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON



Cathy Donaldson enjoys kayaking with her daughter, Sidney.

PHOTO: SIDNEY DONALDSON

Just past noon, we finally reached the parking lot for the Skyline Trail, a seven-kilometre hike in the Highlands National Park, near French Mountain's summit. (Pack water, snacks, a light jacket and don decent footwear.) We saw more than 100 fellow hikers along the route, which culminates in a boardwalk and series of stairs leading to wooden landings that feature some of the best views of the Trail. Thankfully, we reached the final landing just as the sun broke through the clouds, though brisk winds had us holding tight to our hats. Our camera shutters clicked wildly as we recorded images of the dramatic cliffs and the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence below. I beamed with Cape Breton pride at every shot.

Once back in your car, plan stops at pretty La Bloc and in Cheticamp, where the mountains soften to a gentler landscape. We were a bit too hungry to do anything but eat at the latter, so I missed places like Les Trois Pignons cultural centre and gallery, where I'd previously marvelled at amazing hooked rugs by artisan Elizabeth LeFort. This time, Sidney and I ventured promptly to the Happy Clam Café and Grill for a stellar grilled cheese and pesto chicken sandwich. Cheticamp, the largest village on Cape Breton's Acadian coast, is a great place for an overnight stay, or follow our lead and continue the shoreline drive from Margaree Harbour onto Route 219, part of the Ceilidh Trail. I opted for this path, keen to reach Inverness because of fond, childhood memories of its warm, sandy beach. That beach is still there and well worth a visit, easily found at the end of well-named Beach Road #1.

This time, instead of camping afterwards as I had in my youth, I had the chance to check out the luxurious Cabot Links golf resort for a night. I'm not a golfer but I'd been intrigued by reports of how my sleepy little Inverness has been transformed into a top golfing destination frequented by luxury travellers. As we pulled into the resort's entrance, tucked between the coastline and the picturesque town, I was at first surprised by the sleek, modern styling of the 72-room Cabot Links Lodge, a contrast to the rugged landscape. But when Sidney and I found our room, I better understood the complimentary design, particularly the use of floor-to-ceiling windows that allow for a sweeping ocean backdrop and great vantage points to the 36-hole links course. After a quick wardrobe change in our spacious, contemporary room, we swapped views of golf greens for sunset oranges during a mellow kayak around Inverness Harbour. (See Eagle Eye Outfitters on Central Avenue in the heart of Inverness if you're keen to kayak, bike, take part in a whale-watching tour or do a variety of other activities.)

Back at Cabot Links, my paddle buddy and I continued our resort exploration, including to gorgeous nearby sister course, Cabot Cliffs, before returning to the Panorama Restaurant for dinner. A professional, welcoming staff served us superb local fare, including a tangy beet and goat cheese salad, a classic, east coast chowder and a wonderful mussel and shrimp linguine, dappled with snow peas, tomatoes and cured bacon. A special meal to end a beautiful day.



There are 26 trails within the Highlands National Park, including the four-kilometre Middle Head Trail. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON



Sidney Donaldson captures a shot of the breathtaking Skyline Trail.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

## Day 4

The next morning, we were back to the sunny Panorama for a first-rate buffet breakfast, munching as we peered outside with fascination as a groundskeeper meticulously worked his magic on a lush green with a cool motorized roller. The thought of playing a round beside the ocean on such an incredible course inspired Sidney and I to discuss future golf lessons though we agreed it's a place we'd happily return to without ever picking up a club.

On our way out of Inverness, I popped by the Downstreet Coffee Company for a hot drink before hitting the road. Café by day and rustic wine bar by night, Downstreet had a fresh vibe and menus worthy of more investigation. Another place I'll be visiting again is the Dancing Goat Café and Bakery in the Margaree Valley, a stop when we headed back onto the Cabot Trail towards Baddeck. From scones to pies and a whole lot more, this place came well recommended—and for good reason. We left with a bundle of baked items that disappeared in a flash. If you can, also pop by the Margaree Salmon Museum in Northeast Margaree, a quirky spot with exhibits relating to salmon angling as well as a neat collection of fishing tackle, photos and memorabilia of famous anglers.

We forged on from there through Middle River, eventually rejoining the Trans-Canada Highway near the Red Barn Restaurant and Gift Shop, where we came away with more baked goods, this time scrumptious cheddar and chive biscuits. While our expedition along the Cabot Trail (with a Ceilidh Trail tangent)

had drawn to a close, the cheesy treats sustained us for another side trip: a night in Sydney to visit family preceded by one of my all-time favourite hikes—the Louisbourg Lighthouse Trail.

Sidney and I remarked on how much we enjoyed our Cabot Trail escapade, and how the magnificent landscape, especially its shoreline sections, reminded us of our voyage along California's Pacific Coast Highway a few years back. Our Atlantic coast odyssey confirmed, however, that Cape Breton's version will remain my drive of a lifetime.

## Cathy Donaldson

is a writer based in Moncton. She travelled the Cabot Trail as a guest of Destination Cape Breton, Cabot Links and the Keltic Lodge.

## Answer to puzzle on page F2.

FAUVE	SAKI	CHIS	SAVE
ANTIS	LURID	ROWA	CLIP
QUEST	FORPRO	SAL	ODDS
STPIERRE	EATNO	TRIO	
TREATIS	NOTANO	PTION	
AFRO	EXERTON	ANOINTS	
QUARTZ	KAL	BASSES	
URN	VERSE	COURSE	THORN
ALTAR	AID	SLAKED	MAO
SOAPS	VENN	OMANIS	
ACTION	TIME	ADONLY	FILE
CREAMY	ORDS	ULTRA	
EEL	AGENDA	USE	TRASH
SELIG	MOTEC	CONTROL	UTA
PRICEY	AVA	NECTAR	
ONTOAST	APERCUS	AONE	
WARDFOR	INFORMATION		
EVAN	LUMET	PATRICIA	
SIVA	ACHES	FORTHES	STARS
TEEN	TKOD	ORION	ABBOT
OSLO	ESTS	GEAR	YESNO