

# TRAVEL & LEISURE

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SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 2008

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## Smitten with Sugarloaf

Local families continue love affair with mountain



BY CATHY DONALDSON  
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

If there was a prize for most enthusiastic supporter of a ski resort, Dieppe's Shirley St. Pierre might just win top honours.

For the past 18 years, the mother of three who works as a nurse specialist for a medical supply company has coordinated a group of area families that has made an annual March Break trip to Sugarloaf, Maine.

Organizing everything from accommodations and related details to handling the deposits for the local contingent — which totalled 140 people

last year — Shirley is arguably one of the majestic mountain's biggest fans.

"My husband, Kim, and I were introduced to Sugarloaf by our friends, Ted and Carol Nicholson (of Riverview)," says Shirley. "We went one year — we weren't great skiers or anything — and it seemed like such a great family holiday. We just kept going back because why mess with a good thing?"

In addition to the Nicholsons, Jim and Grace Moore of Dieppe and Brian and Joyce Wright of Riverview were among the initial group to make the trek to the hill affectionately known as

➔ See SUGARLOAF, G4

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# Gardening expert lists his 10 favourite public gardens in Canada

THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO — With a “phenomenal rose garden” featuring 54 rose beds, the Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens are among a list of floral attractions highlighted by Canadian Geographic Travel magazine.

The 40-hectare site in Niagara Falls, Ont., maintained by students at the Niagara Parks School of Horticulture, is also notable for vegetable gardens designed to “maximize production and esthetics,” the magazine says in its March issue.

Mark Burleton, manager of grounds and greenhouses for the National Capital Commission in Ottawa, chose the site as one of his 10 favourite public gardens in the country.

Burleton’s list includes two attractions in Vancouver — the 22-hectare VanDusen Botanical Garden in the heart of the city, and the UBC Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research, featuring one of the best Japanese tea and stroll gardens outside Japan.

Also on his list: Rideau Hall and Maplelawn Garden, both in Ottawa; Mackenzie King Estate in Gatineau, Que.; Les Jardins de quatre-vents in La Malbaie, Que.; Montreal Botanical Garden; New Brunswick Botanical Garden in Saint-Jacques, N.B.; and Milner Gardens & Woodland in Qualicum Beach, B.C.

Maplelawn, an exceptionally well preserved 19th-century walled garden in Ottawa’s west end, has been designated a National Historic Site.

“Maintained by volunteers, the perennial plantings alone are worth a visit,” the magazine says.

# Blend your travels with volunteering

## ■ Painting, helping kids to read is life-changing for hard-working volunteers

BY LINDA BARNARD  
THE CANADIAN PRESS

RAROTONGA, Cook Islands — The commute to work is a 20-minute bike ride along a narrow seaside road, the white beach and the turquoise Pacific on one side, and palm trees, small houses and green mountains on the other.

The workday’s start is announced by the hollow beats of a log drum, and we slip out of our shoes, tuck a flower behind an ear and greet the supervisor with a traditional kiss on the cheek and the words “Kia orana,” which means “may you live on.”

We are nine women in paradise, aged 30 to 70+ — widows, single, married, from Canada and across the U.S. — who have come to this perfect South Pacific island some 4,500 kilometres south of Hawaii for what would be a life-changing experience for many of us.

Some of us are based in local schools, helping the kids with reading. Others paint walls. Several volunteers help create a school library in a classroom at Takitumu School — to the delight of the principal who had been waiting for three years for the donated books and was unable to find the time to make the sign-out slips and envelopes and do all the cataloguing.

We all had different reasons for wanting to experience this idyllic spot so far from home, from a notion inspired in childhood, to a fascination with the words to the South Pacific show tune “Bali Hai.”

But a common goal had brought us here: to have a meaningful holiday, blending tourism with volunteering.

Global Volunteers’ motto is simple: to wage peace through service. Like the others in my group who had flipped through the group’s magazine or visited the website, the Cook Islands provided an irresistible draw.

It’s not cheap — the service

program fee, which includes simple, shared accommodation, meals, airport transfers and the daily help and guidance of an in-country manager, was US\$2,395 for three weeks and \$2,195 for two, plus airfare. In our case, that meant a flight to New Zealand, connecting to Rarotonga — for me, a 40-hour journey with layovers.

U.S. residents can write off a portion of the program fee and airfare on their income taxes. And while Canadians can’t, Global Volunteers expects to establish an office here within six months, meaning Canadians could soon enjoy the same kind of charitable donation tax break.

Canadian Elaine Bryck, 51, a retired brewery employee who splits her time between Fort Erie, Ont., and winters in Tucson, Ariz., left Bob, her husband of 31 years, at home and went off after adventure in the South Seas.

“I searched the web for an organization that focused on the ‘mature’ participant,” she says. “When I stumbled upon Global Volunteers and saw they had a program in the South Pacific, I knew that was the one for me. I’ve been fascinated with the South Pacific ever since I was a kid enjoying Tahiti Treat pop at my grandmother’s in Northern Ontario.”

Some of Global Volunteers’ programs have been running for years.

“I often hear people say, ‘I got back a lot more than I gave,’” says volunteer manager Kristina Hill, who is just back from a three-week stint volunteering in Tanzania.

“They learn so much; they grew so much. I really think it’s a great way to travel. You get to a part of the country tourists don’t get to visit.”

“I really didn’t know what to expect,” says Denise Costa, 30, a U.S. defence department employee from Baltimore, who worked at St. Joseph’s School in Rarotonga’s main town, Avarua, teaching young children computer skills.

“But it’s been awesome. It’s been life-changing, that’s for sure. For Americans, when you travel to a typical all-inclusive resort, the only time you leave is on organized tours. You don’t experience the

people.”

It’s a vastly different life for city-dwellers — there’s a single, two-lane, 32-kilometre-long ring road that circles the island, and no traffic lights. The entire place closes on Sunday for the Sabbath and you’re not considered dressed unless you wear a flower behind your ear, men as well as women.

Country managers act as guide, team leader and facilitator, combining just the right amount of hand-holding with room to let us feel we were experiencing the island and integrating into the community on our own. And while we were there to volunteer, there was enough down time built in to truly make it feel like a holiday.

Our country manager, Taiana Kingston, 47, has spent a year working for Global Volunteers. She did everything from picking us up at the airport (and draping fragrant flower leis — what Rarotongans call leis — around our necks), to helping us learn snippets of the Maori language, explaining customs and easing us into island life and work with grace and good humour. She also helped us set goals as a team.

After a day of orientation, Kingston took us on a tour of the various work sites to help us choose where we wanted to volunteer. Several schools, the Red Cross, the library and the island’s conservation area were all looking for help. It was so different from home — chickens wandering in the yard at the Red Cross, schools with no interior hallways and barefoot pupils, and the brilliant turquoise ocean forming the backdrop at the playground.

We ate breakfast — fruit, pancakes or omelettes, toast and coffee — and dinner together in a common room at the hotel, and then packed our own lunches before setting off to work. Dinners — delicious, plentiful meals of local fresh fish, chicken or lamb with side dishes and desserts — were sometimes catered by a resident. Or we went out as a group to eat and listen to music or watch a dance performance at a restaurant.

Lilia Javier, an energetic 70-something retired phys-ed teacher from New York City, was delighted

to teach dances from her native Philippines to pupils at St. Joseph’s school. On previous Global Volunteers trips, Javier has been to Turkey, Poland, China and Ecuador.

“I was bored,” she recalls of what prompted her to sign up in 1999. “I have to be with people. My philosophy of life is joie de vivre.”

Javier, who was my roommate, could often be heard humming “Bali Hai” as she pattered around our kitchen. The island custom of not being really dressed without a flower in your hair delighted her and she often had an exotic bloom tucked behind one ear.

“I came here to know the culture, to be with the locals, to be with the students,” she says.

There was plenty of opportunity for all of that. One night we joined locals from toddlers to seniors at the auditorium for the weekly uru (hula) dance practice. There’s a reason they’re known as the best dancers in the Pacific and we gamely tried to match their movements as a group of drummers and musicians played from the front row of the bleachers.

Soon there was a rhythm to our days. Breakfast and a journal reading from the daily diary we took turns keeping (a wonderful remembrance of the trip), work until about 2 p.m., and afternoons free to explore on our rental bikes, take the bus into town, snorkel or swim. Dinner was a time to gather and talk about the day. And with a 6:50 a.m. call for breakfast, we were in bed early. Weekends were free time.

The opening of the new library made the local news and was celebrated with a huge party where the Global Volunteers were honoured with mounds of fragrant leis piled around their necks.

“This trip was very different from any previous trips I have taken,” Bryck says. “Being involved with the community and immersed in another culture was very rewarding.”

I think of our team goals and how we accomplished them all: to learn from others, develop friendships, support the community, experience personal growth and to have fun.



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## Sugarloaf has something for everyone

► Continued From G1

“The Loaf.”

“At one point, somebody said that if you book as a group you could get a much better rate so we started doing that,” says Shirley. This year, the group was smaller, about 40 in all, with some staying four nights and others five. Many opted to travel to warmer climes this year as a result of the strong dollar, says Shirley.

“But I would say every one of the families who called to say they were doing something else this year has said they’re coming back next year and not to take them off the list,” she says.

So what has made Sugarloaf such a popular destination for New Brunswickers?

“It’s an unbelievable family vacation,” says Shirley. “You go out all day, get roses in your cheeks, come back hungry and tired but you just have that glow of being outdoors all day long. When the kids were little, it was so nice that you were all in the same room and you could all just go to bed together at 8:30 or 9. You don’t often have that time when the phone’s not ringing and there’s not a constant reminder to get another load of laundry in. It’s just good fun.”

Located in Carrabassett Valley, Maine, and surrounded by the state’s Western Mountains, Sugarloaf is considered one of the top winter resorts in the world and has been a favourite destination for families for years.

Sugarloaf is Maine’s second highest peak next to Mount Katahdin (5,280 ft.) and rises to 1,291 metres (4,237 feet), with a vertical drop of 860 metres (2,820 ft.), the highest in New England after Vermont’s Killington.

In operation since 1954, the resort — now operated by Boyne USA — offers 15 lifts including two high-speed quads, so there’s no worry about waiting in line forever. There are also two high-capacity quads, eight doubles, one triple and one surface lift. (In total, the mountain has a lifting capacity of more than 20,000 passengers per hour.)

Over 1,400 acres are skiable and, for the truly experienced, there’s even a lift-service and skiing above the tree line.

For the advanced, there are high, open snowfields or runs such as Bubblecuffer or White Nitro.

Of the 72 kilometres of downhill ski trails, our family tends to stick to the beginner and intermediate runs. One of our favourites is the longest trail at Sugarloaf — Tote Road — which stretches out five and a half kilometres from summit to base.

Sugarloaf’s northern Maine location means lots of snow — an average annual snowfall of 240 inches — and a long ski season too. The hill is generally open until mid-April, with a closing of late April projected for this year.

In addition to 134 downhill ski trails, Sugarloaf offers 100 kilometres of cross-country

trails, snowboarding, skating on an NHL-size skating rink, snowshoeing and turbo tubing.

When you’ve had your fill of skiing for the day, there’s no shortage of things to do — if you still have energy.

From lively restaurants and pubs, to unique shops and a Village Market, there are plenty of nooks and crannies to explore. And the comfy base lodge is a great place to hang out, grab a bite and reconnect with your clan after a few runs.

For those who might have a few aches after pounding down the hill, consider soothing your muscles with a swim in one of the resort’s pools, a soak in an indoor or outdoor hot tub — or book a massage.

Need more exercise? Check out the Sugarloaf Sports and Fitness Centre.

When it comes to accommodation, Sugarloaf offers a wide variety of lodging options, from hotels and inns to slopeside “ski-in, ski-out” condos.

During our recent March Break visit, we bunked down in a unit in the Sugartree condo complex. The unit was very family friendly, with a cozy TV area, kitchen, Murphy bed, and bunk beds, which were a hit with my daughters.

Through the years, Sugarloaf seems to have really tuned in to the needs of those with children.

“Sugarloaf offers endless opportunities for families to enjoy their vacation together,” says the hill’s marketing coordinator Jami Badershall. “But we also offer individual activities. There are daily Perfect Turn clinics for children and adults, or if the parents want an evening alone, the kids can go to Movie Night or Kids’ Night Out. Our terrain is family-friendly, and everyone can ski and ride together, or if some want to ski black diamonds while others want to stick to the beginner slopes, you can each go your separate way and then meet up for lunch, maybe at Bullwinkle’s, our on-mountain restaurant.”

Canadians made up 10 per cent of the mountain’s total visitors during the peak winter season last year, says Sugarloaf’s director of sales Scott Lee.

This year, as in many past, the local group of ‘loafers’ took part in a variety of events, such as the annual meet and greet night organized by the hill’s administration, as well as cooperative dinners, wine and cheese affairs, and other casual gatherings.

Long-time travel group member Ted Nicholson of Riverview gathered at Sugarloaf this year with his wife, two sons and a son’s girlfriend. Ted is already looking to the future and he expects Sugarloaf will continue to be an important family tradition.

“My wife and I made a plan a long time ago that we would try to ski as long as we could,” says Ted. “I’m hoping that I can take my grandchildren some day. I can just envision that as being a lot of fun.”

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