

Herald Travel

TRAVEL TIP OF THE WEEK

Exploring your destination on foot is an amazing way to sneak in some exercise while traveling. Grab a map, get lost, get found, and take in the sights, smells, and sounds of where you are. This is a great way to find hidden gems that aren't in the travel guides. (escapere.com)

Returning as a 'tourist' to hometown of Sydney

CATHY DONALDSON

While it's been a busy year of travel within Canada and beyond for this writer, one of my most memorable destinations was closer to home. It was my hometown — Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Sure, I'd visited family in Sydney regularly since I went down the road to a Halifax university in my late teens. I returned often in the decades that followed, too, whether that involved a flight from Quebec or British Columbia, or a drive from my current address in Moncton.

What was unique about the recent trek was that I would write

about Sydney from a travel perspective for the first time, which required me to play tourist rather than be the kid who grew up at the bottom of Hardwood Hill, off Cottage Road, beside the ballpark.

The last time I'd written about the city was 28 years ago when I was a young reporter sent from Halifax to pen a news piece on the closure of Sydney Steel's open hearth and blast furnaces, and the plant's modernization to electric arc technology. (The upgrade wasn't enough to save the debt-ridden plant, which closed for good in 2000.)

I thought about my hometown's history as my husband and I headed to the "steel city" for a

weekend excursion last month. As we crossed the Canso Causeway to Cape Breton and drew closer to Sydney, I mentioned the depressing atmosphere in the community after the plant closure and reflected on how much brighter the future seemed now, with talk of everything from the development of a second berth for the burgeoning cruise ship industry to a massive container terminal.

With that sense of optimism, hubby and I began our "Sydney as tourists" trip. To do it right, we had agreed to book lodging instead of crashing with my parents, as per the norm. Though it was Thanksgiving weekend and rooms were in short supply, we lucked

into a spot at The Hearthstone Inn, a Kings Road hotel I knew in its previous life as the Quality Inn.

The Hearthstone was undergoing a refresh so I was pleased to land a nicely renovated room with a nautical theme, including a real lobster trap attached to the wall above the TV. If I wasn't hungry for local seafood before I arrived at the hotel, I was then.

After a good night's sleep and a yummy hot breakfast at the Hearthstone, we hit the minivan to begin sightseeing. We made our way downtown, passing businesses on George Street near bustling Casino Nova Scotia, which lies adjacent to Centre 200, home rink of the Cape Breton

Screaming Eagles major junior hockey team. A quick stop at the ever-popular Tim's and we continued on George, then to the north end of Charlotte Street, pausing to admire homes dating back more than a century.

One of the most interesting structures in that area's seven-block Heritage Conservation District is Cossit House, built in 1787. Now operating from June to October as a museum depicting 18th-century life, the one-and-a-half storey, wood-framed building was originally constructed with timbers transported from New England and assembled on the

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TRAVEL

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property. Following the American Revolution, Reverend Ranna Cossit—the house's original owner—was assigned to the British colony in Cape Breton, became the region's first Anglican minister and played a key role in Sydney's social and political development.

From Cossit House, hubby and I backtracked to St. George's Anglican Church, which I probably hadn't given a second look in my youth but whose exterior I now found quite lovely. The stone, Gothic Revival-style church, built between 1785 and 1791, is apparently in need of repairs and only used for special occasions. Fundraising efforts are reportedly underway to keep it open more regularly, including for tourists from visiting cruise ships.

We drove down the hill to a place I knew in my youth as the government wharf. The piece of real estate has changed dramatically over the years, especially in 2005 when the Joan Harris Cruise Pavilion opened and the Big Fiddle arrived.

Never set eyes on the Big Fiddle? The 17-metre (60-foot) painted steel statue — designed and constructed by Sydney artist and welder Cyril Hearn — is believed to be the largest illuminated fiddle in the world and looks authentic, complete with an enormous bow. An accompanying plaque says the statue recognizes the "pre-eminence of fiddle music and the fiddlers, past and present, who have contributed so much to the musical heritage of Cape Breton Island."

(Though Sydney was founded in 1785 by Joseph Frederick Walle DesBarres and first settled by Loyalists from New York State, immigrants from the Scottish Highlands arrived 20 years later. They brought their fiddle music, which has since been shaped by Cape Breton musicians of many cultural backgrounds.)

While the Big Fiddle is gigantic, it paled in comparison to the 15-deck Norwegian Jade anchored a few metres away. Passengers continued to stream from the

vessel, either pausing for Fiddle photos or venturing into the cruise pavilion, which boasts a visitor information centre and market featuring the work of more than 50 crafters and artisans. Some travellers continued on to the city's waterfront boardwalk, ventured to shops on Charlotte and vicinity, or took an excursion outside the city, such as to the Fortress of Louisbourg or the Alexander Graham Bell Museum in Baddeck.

Before leaving downtown, we drove along the Esplanade — bordering Sydney Harbour — toward the Imperial Oil fuel tanks near Victoria Park. I made hubby pull over since I didn't know much about the "park," other than the fact it's a military base.

Victoria Park is the oldest continuing military establishment in Canada, with personnel on site continuously since 1785. "Imperial troops, then the colonial militia, followed by the Canadian army and now units of the Canadian forces, have been stationed at Victoria Park throughout its history," I read out to hubby, seated in the van with the window down.

Next stop on my throwback tour was Open Hearth Park, a true greenspace, though it didn't used to be. Opened in 2013, the park is located on the former site of the steel plant, specifically the now-remediated tar ponds and coke ovens. After a massive hazardous waste cleanup that spanned decades and cost millions, the toxic mess was sealed in cement and topped by a 39-hectare park that includes sports fields, a playground, walking trails, even artwork commemorating the history of the steel plant. I was awed by

the transformation and wished my late grandfathers, both of whom worked at the plant, had lived to see the makeover.

After another Tim's stop, hubby and I made more trips down my memory lane: "shooting the drag" (a.k.a. taking a drive) on Sydney's version of main street — Charlotte Street; strolling through

Wentworth Park; and cruising by my old high school, Sydney Academy.

My dad joined us for a drive around Membertou, a First Na-

tions community off Kings Road. I'd heard about its booming economic development, a departure from a more dismal situation years ago.

It didn't take long to notice the growth. Modern structures dot Membertou's landscape, including the Trade and Convention Centre, which connects to a Hampton Inn via a raised pedway, the Entertainment Centre and the Youth Centre. We stopped to peek inside the new Sports and Wellness Centre and wandered through its spacious hallways, past a YMCA, community rooms and a walking track. Impressive, indeed.

While the waterfront revitalization, closing of the steel plant and progress at Membertou might be among the most striking visual changes to Sydney, a surge in the number of decent eateries is what my taste buds consider most notable.

Prior to leaving Moncton, I'd asked childhood friends via Facebook for suggestions of newer (or new-to-me) places to grab a bite and was flooded with feedback. I settled on three: Governor's Pub and Eatery, for a delicious turkey dinner with all the trimmings; Flavor on the Water (cruise pavilion location), for a scrumptious carrot cake and amazing views;



The Norwegian Jade is one of many cruise ships that have visited Sydney as the city's cruise industry continues to grow.

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and Hardy's Seafood Delight, for awesome fish and chips and a delightful conversation with owner Kevin Hardy and his right-hand man, Joel Teston. Other restaurants given a thumbs-up by friends included Lebanese Flower, Naru Sushi, The Olive Tree, A Bite of Asia and Mian's.

For the record, I visited some

old faves as well: the Bonnie Prince Restaurant and Lounge; Napoli Pizzeria; and my mother's kitchen, for her usual outstanding lemon meringue pie.

Cathy (Krawchuk) Donaldson is a Moncton-based travel writer. She was a guest of Destination Cape Breton, which neither reviewed nor approved this article.

ESCORTED VACATIONS SALE

BOOK BY NOVEMBER 30th

5-DAY CHRISTMAS WITH THE BOSTON POPS PREMIUM CONCERT TOUR

16-DAY HAWAIIAN ISLANDS NCL CRUISE TOUR
MARCH 22ND - APRIL 6TH, 2018

ONLY 4 CABINS LEFT!

LAST CHANCE!