

Autumn's best in Canada

[by Ruth A. Hill]

If you go to Cape Breton Island during foliage time, it's easy to find unity with the area's most famous resident, innovator Alexander Graham Bell.



"I have traveled around the globe," he once said. "I have seen the Canadian and American Rockies, the Andes, the Alps

and the Highlands of Scotland, but for simple beauty, Cape Breton rivals them all."

Bell's ardor for the region led him to establish his retreat, Beinn Bhreagh, on the shores of Bras d'Or Lakes. He lived and worked there for decades, and his descendants still enjoy his legacy and favorite scenery.

The pleasures of my autumn ramble through portions of Canada's Nova Scotia and New Brunswick provinces in the first couple of last October's weeks peaked along the island's Cabot Trail in northern Nova Scotia. It was there that I made acquaintance with what must be one of the globe's best destinations to follow fall foliage. The spectacular beauty of the region scored high with me because it offers the bonuses of relief from New England-size crowds and prices during the same season, and its still-vibrant Gaelic and Acadian cultures.

To all that, add the hues of one of North America's most anticipated annual musical events - the Celtic Colours International Festival, a nine-day collage of toe-tapping song, dance and workshops - and one has a touring palette without peer. This year's festival will be held on

Oct. 7-15.

What sets the fall scenery of Cape Breton apart? It has the splendid colors of an inland Vermont or New Hampshire forest, along with the coastal contours of a rugged Maine or California coastline. The compression of dense, vibrant color cascading down steep cliffs to the sea offers breathtaking vistas from the many roadside "look offs" on the 184-mile Cabot Trail, which meanders through Cape Breton Highlands National Park. A North Carolina couple I met summed it up best in comparing the island's northern topography to their home state. "We have both seacoast and mountains, but they are hours apart," they declared. Along the trail, one also experiences deep river valleys and occasional sightings of wildlife such as bald eagles, moose, black bear and whales.



Man-made attractions also enhance the Cape Breton byway. In Baddeck, the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site

enlarges Bell's popular profile as inventor of the telephone. An example is a full-scale reproduction of the pioneering hydrofoil he built during World War I. Though the Bell mansion is not open to the public, it may be visible if one does a boat cruise on Bras d'Or Lake.

The upscale Keltic Lodge at Ingonish Beach

resides on a rocky cliff inside Cape Breton Highlands National Park. Its famous 18-hole Highlands Links attracts golfers from around the world, especially for the rugged scenery. The Middle Head Trail, a 2.5-mile path from the lodge to a windswept headland, provides views mindful of the Scottish Highlands. The Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts at St. Ann's is dedicated to preserving Celtic arts and crafts, and the school's museum highlights the 200-year history of Scottish settlement on Cape Breton Island. In Cheticamp on the western shore, the local Acadian culture is prominent in a stunning collection of hooked rugs and antiquities at the Les Trois Pignons museum.

For serenity and commanding vantage on Cape Breton foliage, I stayed in the environmentally friendly Chanterelle Country Inn about 10 miles north of Baddeck. From the inn's verandah, breakfast coffee was especially energizing amid the panorama of fall color, the North River and St. Anne's Bay.



Innkeeper Earlene Busch - originally from Colorado - maintains a "green" environment with alternative-energy sources, organic soaps,

cleaners and Cape Breton-fresh cuisine of locally grown produce, meats and seafood. Chanterelle mushrooms collected on the property are sure to turn up in soups and other menu selections.



My approval wasn't the only stroke I noted on Busch's culinary skills. One of Halifax's premier chefs, Dennis Johnston of the city's popular restaurant Fid, and his family were also in residence and dining on the same menu.

During my night at the inn, I delved into local North River culture where Gaelic speakers are easy to find. In the tiny North River Community Hall, Angus MacLeod led a musical troupe in a program of traditional tunes in one performance of the Celtic Colours festival lineup. It was a fascinating folk highlands contrast to the following evening's entertainment near Mabou. There, at the much-larger Strathspey Place performing arts hall, a quartet of professional Scottish instrumentalists delighted an audience of about 500 with contemporary renditions.

Most visitors to Cape Breton and other areas of Nova Scotia touch Halifax, the capital, at one or both ends of their tours. As the largest city in the Atlantic provinces, it has over 300 years of heritage, some of the region's best restaurants, night life and other urban amenities.

Before my return flight home, I visited The Halifax Citadel, one of Canada's most-visited National Historic Sites. Overlooking the harbor and the center city, it brings 19th century British military life in full focus via exhibits of artifacts, kilted soldiers who drill and play bagpipes and cannon fire that marks the noon hour. The Maritime Museum of the Atlantic is also one of the city's most popular stops because of its gallery about the Titanic disaster. Halifax was the nearest city to the North Atlantic site where the ship went down in 1912, and a number of the victims were brought to the city for medical help or burial. Two Halifax cemeteries hold graves of known and unknown Titanic victims. Pier 21 is Canada's parallel to Ellis Island in New York's harbor, and I learned stories there of immigrants, wartime evacuees, troops and war brides who passed through its doors between 1928 and 1971. Cape Breton is probably the icing on the Maritimes' foliage cake, and it can be a nice climax to

a larger leaf-peeping feast that includes a driving start from the "crown" of Maine (Aroostook County), through the St. John River Valley in New Brunswick. Small villages, covered bridges and centuries of heritage enhance the visitor's seasonal sojourn through the Madawaska region into Edmundston and Fredericton.

With plenty of time to contemplate the panorama from both the road and the water - in a canoe or pleasure cruiser - the tour will be a triumph. Predicting peak color anywhere is an imprecise endeavor, but a late-September beginning, with a plan to reach the Cabot Trail the second or third week of October, is a good bet. That way, you arrive on Cape Breton for one of the world's most dramatic displays of color, the music festival and the scenery that drew not only Alexander Graham Bell but also generations of Celts who found a home in the New World.

IF YOU GO

For Nova Scotia trip planning, call (800) 565-0000, www.cabottrail.com or www.novascotia.com. For information on New Brunswick, contact (800) 561-0123 or www.tourismnewbrunswick.ca. For information on the Celtic Colours International Festival visit www.celtic-colours.com.

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