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Travels with Charlie

New England and the Canadian Maritimes

by

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Several years ago, the Thomasville Entertainment Foundation brought a group of Cape Breton Island fiddlers to our area. Their music is descended from old Scottish and Irish fiddle music with some French influence thrown in, similar to the traditional music of the Southern Appalachians and the Cajun music of south Louisiana. I was intrigued by the music but also by Cape Breton Island for I'd never heard of it. Turns out, it is indeed an island and the northernmost part of the province of Nova Scotia. So this summer, we decided to visit not only Cape Breton but to take a bus tour of the Canadian Maritimes.

Back Bay, and Cambridge. Along the way, we learned that Colonial Boston was quite a bit smaller in area than today's Boston, but in the late 1700's, the decision was made to lower Beacon Hill, where the "new" state house (of 1781) sits, by about sixty feet. Needing a place for all that dirt, it was dumped into the Charles River to create Back Bay.

The first day of the tour was a long, eight-hour bus ride to Fredericton, New Brunswick. The tour once used a ferry from Bar Harbor, Maine, to Yarmouth in Nova Scotia, but the ferry ceased operations a few years ago. A new ferry replaced it this summer, but the tour com-



The tour began in Boston. We've been to Boston several times before, so on this trip, we avoided the usual sites of Colonial and Revolutionary history and instead took walking tours of Beacon Hill,

pany already had signed hotel contracts, necessitating our round-about highway trip. Nevertheless, the road trip was interesting, and we observed, as our tour guide noted, that the further north we drove into Maine the shorter the trees

became. I also saw more deciduous trees mixed in with evergreens and fewer evergreens than I would have anticipated.

Fredericton is the capital of the province of New Brunswick, which is the only officially bilingual province in Canada. Of course, Quebec is officially French-speaking, and in practice bilingual, but not officially bilingual. Interestingly, however, the Delta hotel in which we stayed was not bilingual; at least, the elevators only announced “second floor” and not also “deuxieme etage”. In the morning, we toured the provincial capitol building, and walked a bit around the downtown. Except for the remains of the British military garrison, the buildings mostly date from the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, but architecturally interesting and well-maintained.

The unicameral legislative chamber has two grand chandeliers. The chandeliers being very high up, replacing light bulbs was a challenging task. Some years ago, the chandeliers were taken down. When they were rehung, a mechanized rope-and-pulley system was installed to facilitate future cleaning and light bulb replacement. Unfortunately, the engineers or builders failed to include a clutch with the mechanism; when they were raised, one just kept going until the rope broke and the chandelier crashed to the floor. It took five years to restore it, using unbroken pieces and custom-made replacements, some crafted by the original manufacturer who was still in business. So that the two chandeliers would continue to look the same, the new pieces were intermixed with the older pieces and hung on both chandeliers. (I cannot do justice to the story about this told by our guide/host; ; if you visit the provinci.

building in Fredericton, do not fail to take the guided tour and learn the whole story.)

Our next stop was Halifax, Nova Scotia. Halifax is the largest city in the Maritimes, and one of its claims to fame is that it was the nearest port to the Titanic. The rescue efforts were based in Halifax, the bodies were brought to Halifax, and some buried there, and there is now a Titanic museum in Halifax. It also has the second deepest harbour in the world, behind only Sydney, Australia.

Halifax has a number of old, interesting buildings in its relatively compact downtown, but I was most struck by the number of street people and young people with nose rings, far more than I’m used to seeing in any U.S. city. I noticed the same in Charlottetown, P.E., and some years ago in Vancouver. I attributed Vancouver’s large homeless population to its climate; thinking perhaps it attracts all of Canada’s homeless, but that doesn’t explain the Maritimes.

Halifax harbour is also ice-free. That’s because the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia is actually warmer than the coast of Maine. Why is that so? The coast of Nova Scotia runs southwest to northeast, rather than south to north. This gives Nova Scotia two advantages. First, it has a more southerly exposure, but also the Gulf Stream veers away from the coast as it passes New England so that it is closer to the coast of Nova Scotia than to the coast of Maine. You can check it on a map, but Halifax is as much east of Boston as it is north, and all of the Maritimes are in the Atlantic time zone, not the Eastern.

About an hour’s drive from Halifax is Peggy’s Cove, which many people think is among the most beautiful spots on earth. After looking at the map of Nova Scotia’s coast, however, I realized that there must be tens, hundreds, or thousands of such coves further along. So what makes Peggy’s Cove so famous; what makes Peggy’s Cove such a tourist draw?

My answer is the power of marketing and a little serendipity. First, it is only an hour from Halifax, and easily accessible from the city for individuals and tour groups such as ours. But second, some years ago, it attracted a well-known artist who made it his home and who attracted other artists, many of whom painted scenes of Peggy’s Cove. Bingo! With the right marketing, a major tourist attraction is born.

From Halifax, we headed north through Nova Scotia toward Cape Breton. We saw very little evidence of farming and were told that was attributable to the poor soil that had been scraped clear by glaciers leaving mostly rock and also to the very short growing season. Along the coast, the major industry seems to be fishing and further inland, some lumbering.

As we approached Cape Breton, the topography became more rolling and the trees became a little taller. By the time we reached the Cape Breton Highlands, we were into mountains, the northern terminus of the Appalachians. They are not particularly high (the highest point is 1755 feet), but they are quite rugged. They plunge directly down to the sea, in this case, the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and I found the Cape Breton highlands quite reminiscent of California’s Central Coast.

The Cape Breton communities have retained much of their Celtic cultural heritage. Most communities are Gaelic, descendants of early Scottish settlers, but the town of Cheticamp is Acadian French. The dominant building in town is the Catholic church,

that was carried across the frozen St. Lawrence on sleds, and proudly flies the Acadian flag. The Gaelic and Acadian communities may be only a few miles apart and share the Celtic heritage, but their languages are quite different, fifteenth century Gaelic in one and fifteenth century French in the other.



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After two days on Cape Breton Island, we continued on to the province of Prince Edward Island. I expected Cape Breton to be the highlight of the trip, but instead it was Prince Edward Island (PEI) and its capital, Charlottetown. Both the city and the island are very clean, well-maintained, very attractive, and just quite pleasant. We saw more farming on PEI than anywhere else in the Maritimes, the main crop being potatoes. In fact, PEI is North America's largest seed potato grower; seed potato means it is certified disease-free and can be used to grow the next crop.

The landscape of PEI is characterized by rolling hills and red soil. The color is a bit more subdued than Georgia clay, and it isn't clay. Rather, it has a high iron content so upon exposure to air, the soil "rusts". PEI also has the warmest beaches north of the Carolina's (at least in summer, I presume) because the water on the north shore along the Gulf of St. Lawrence is quite shallow

