

A ROCK IN THE SEA

By: Robert Blaise Maclean¹

“Cia mar a tha se” (pron. “Kyuh muh ra HA Shuh”).

Huh? Did someone sneeze?

Nope. That’s just a friendly greeting in the Gaelic language that you may receive if you visit Cape Breton Island. The Gaelic tongue is one remnant of the culture of the Scottish immigrants who settled there in the 1700’s and 1800’s.

The Celtic culture pervades life in Cape Breton, though it has been seasoned with French, Irish and Aboriginal influences, and is just one of the unique features of the “rock in the sea”.

Cape Breton is located at the eastern end of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia (Latin for “New Scotland”). Despite its small size and population, it has had disproportionate historical and cultural importance, in addition to possessing some of Canada’s most beautiful scenery.

Canada’s original colonists were French, who settled along the St. Lawrence River. Due to its location near the Atlantic mouth of this river, Cape Breton had strategic importance to the French. Thus, France constructed a gigantic European-style fortress system at Louisbourg, located at the eastern tip of Cape Breton. As a naval and military base, it was designed to protect the entrance to



¹ Professor of Facultad de Jurisprudencia

the St. Lawrence; as a town it developed a vibrant fisheries-based economy. Despite the fortune invested in its construction, however, Louisbourg fell to the British for the final time in 1754. The inhabitants were deported to France.

Two hundred years later, however, the Fortress of Louisbourg has risen again, this time as a National Historic Park. The fortress, a number of bastions and a large portion of the town have been rebuilt in faithful accordance with the original plans of the time. Visitors effectively enter a “time machine” which carries them back to an 18th century French colony. There, “soldiers”, in period uniform, guard the fort and patrol the town; citizens, wearing accurately reproduced 18th century clothes, perform the daily tasks of the time. To make the experience even more authentic, you can even visit a restaurant or tavern and enjoy food and drink as it was served in the 1700’s.

Cape Breton’s historical importance did not end in 1754. From the 1800’s until the end of the 20th century, coal mining formed an important part of local life and contributed to the industrialization of the Canadian economy. Although the mines are now closed, the Miners Museum in Glace Bay allows visitors to tour a real coal mine. You will be moved when you see how miners worked in dangerous underground conditions and how, despite challenges and tragedies, they and their families succeeded in building strong communities.

The scenic village of Baddeck, situated along the Bras d’Or Lakes is also a historically important site, as it is the home of Canadian aviation. In fact the first powered flight in the British Empire took place there in February 1909 when an aircraft named the Silver Dart took off from the frozen waters of the Bras d’Or lakes. The Silver Dart was designed and built by Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who maintained a summer home near Baddeck.

Today, a museum dedicated to Dr. Bell’s work is located in Baddeck and provides an interesting perspective on his work, including the development of the hydrofoil and the surgical probe. Count on a full afternoon to explore everything. Don’t forget your camera, not only for the exhibits but for the spectacular view of the lake as seen from the museum grounds.

Of course, scenery is everywhere in Cape Breton, starting with the Bras d’Or Lakes, which run through the middle of the island. It isn’t really a lake - rather, it is an inlet from the Atlantic Ocean which divides the island. Regardless of what you call it, however, it provides an infinite variety of beautiful views - as you drive along it, every turn in the road reveals yet another photographic opportunity.

Cape Breton’s most famous scenic drive, however, is not the Bras d’Or Lakes but the Cabot Trail, named after the famous European explorer. This 298 km route along the east and west side of Cape Breton’s Atlantic coasts is world-renowned as one of the planet’s most breathtaking scenic drives. Start in Baddeck, (which calls itself “The Beginning and the End of the Cabot Trail”) and treat yourself to seacoasts, mountains, valleys and picturesque fishing villages. With a bit of luck you might spot some whales splashing out at sea (though if you want to get up close there are whale watching tours available in Pleasant Bay and Ingonish, two towns located along the ‘Trail).

Of course, there are some people who want more than scenery. Even if whale watching is not your style, there is kayaking, hiking, biking and horseback riding to be enjoyed. Or, how about a two-hour lake cruise on a yacht? The Amoeba offers such cruises three times daily from the Baddeck government wharf.



Photo by: Brooke Oland. Lighthouse at Baddeck, Cape Breton in early morning. Baddeck is located on the Bras d'Or lakes (sp. Brazos dorados). This un-retouched photo explains the source of the name: in early morning or late evening, it can appear golden.

Did someone mention “golf”? Cape Breton features many golf courses, but five of these are numbered among Canada’s finest. The Highland Links course, part of Cape Breton Highlands National Park in Ingonish was designed by renowned course designer Stanley Thompson. It is rated as one of the best in the world (Golf Digest placed it at #42 in the Best 100 courses outside the United states, and Golf Magazine ranked it #79 in the world...period). The ocean views, the mountains and glens, and the sculpted fairways have been known to distract even serious golfers from the business at hand-working around a world class golf course in par.

Bell Bay Golf Course in Baddeck was awarded the title of Canada’s best new course when it opened in 1997, and 13 years of maturity have only made it better. It is regarded as championship quality

and hosts various national tournaments. Bell Bay’s sister course, Dundee, is located on the opposite side of the lake and provides unforgettable views of the lake and surrounding mountains. The fourth, La Portage, is located in the Acadian village of Cheticamp located along the Cabot Trail. The fifth is simply called The Lakes, and as you may imagine features wonderful lake views along the fairways. These five courses have led Cape Breton to be recognized as one of Canada’s top quality golfing destinations.

But, “A fella’s gotta eat, doesn’t he?” Right you are. You will not starve in Cape Breton, where seafood is, obviously, a specialty. Lobsters, mussels, clams, salmon and other varieties of fish are widely available. The seafood is locally caught and served fresh. Baddeck Lobster Suppers, for example, features a meal of lobsters, mussels,

clam chowder, potato salad and dessert. You get one lobster, but the mussels and chowder are “all you can eat”, so help yourself. Other restaurants and dining rooms offer lobster, salmon and other seafood delicacies. If you don’t want seafood all the time, do not worry: there are first class meals everywhere, and every place offers children’s menus for children’s appetites.

Perhaps we should end where we came in-with the culture. The Celtic culture, and its hospitality, is everywhere. You even see it on the highways where the road signs are bilingual-English and Gaelic. There are nightly “ceilidh’s” (musical gatherings) in many communities where you can listen to traditional fiddle music accompanied by piano, guitar, step dancing and even the bagpipes.

Cape Breton is the home of some of the leaders of the “Celtic Revival”-the late John Allan Cameron, the Rankin Family, The Barra MacNeils, Buddy MacMaster and Natalie MacMaster are just a few of the hundreds of accomplished Celtic musicians born and raised in Cape Breton’s Scottish environment. And it’s not just Scottish names to be found at the forefront-names such as Chaisson (French), Prosper (Aboriginal) and O’Neil (Irish) are found among Cape Breton’s Celtic music leaders.

Cape Breton’s leadership in the world of Celtic cultural events is highlighted by the annual Celtic Colours festival held every October. For a week, every year, Celtic musicians from around the world join their Cape Breton brethren and provide daily concerts in communities all across the island. This world famous festival is named not only for the Celtic culture on which it is based, but for the spectacular fall colours of the trees, as the leaves change into their autumn shades of red, yellow and orange.

Two other institutions, the Gaelic College of Arts and Crafts and St. Ann’s and the Celtic Music Interpretive Centre at Judique allow visitors to experience the music and learn about the culture at the same time. The Gaelic College, in addition to concerts (the largest being the week-long Gaelic Mod in August) offers courses in bag-piping, drumming, highland dance, and the Gaelic language. The Celtic Music Interpretive Centre also has regular concerts and classes in fiddle music and step dancing. Every Sunday, from 3-7 pm, it features a “ceilidh” in which a number of musicians perform in an informal setting. You can watch, listen, eat a meal, have a beer or-if you feel like it- participate in a square dance. Just be sure to get there early-it fills up fast.

Finally, if you go and someone says “Cia mar a tha thu” remember to answer “Gle bha. Tha thu?” (“glay vah. Ha oo”) It means “Fine thanks. And you?”

