

# Nova Scotia's Cabot Trail

One of North America's  
finest rides

by Jerry Soverinsky  
Illustrations by  
Walter Cumming

The textured, whole-grain roll offered a hearty balance to the delicate, tender meat bulging from within. Coarse black pepper and flecks of sea salt added a subtle boost that enhanced, but did not obscure, its pristine flavors. And washed down with a chilled sparkling water, the lobster sandwich offered the perfect midday refreshment following a vigorous morning bike ride along Nova Scotia's famed Cabot Trail.

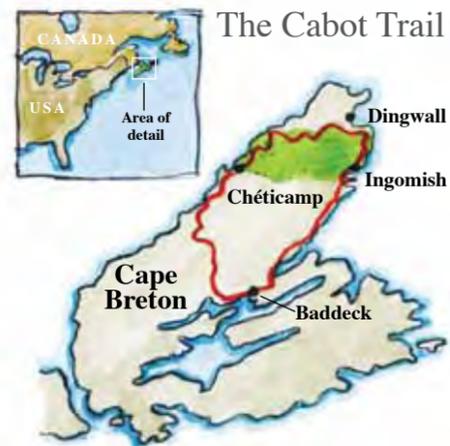
As I sat on a weathered bench, cherishing the remaining bites of the sandwich, my eyes began drifting down a road that hugged a wooded coastline. A bald eagle coasted overhead, and I watched intently as it weaved its way through an undulating procession of turns.

This is a Nova Scotia cycling rest stop. A gas station, no less.

There's something magical about a destination where luxury and unpretentiousness coexist. I seemed no more out of place here with my bike shorts and helmet eating a succulent, gas station-prepared lobster sandwich than did the store's customers, many of them local fishermen, sipping espresso poured expertly by the store's barista-cashier at a communal table inside. And this in a town of maybe two dozen residents.

For cyclists, it is this harmonious integration of seemingly conflicting attributes that makes Nova Scotia an idyllic cycling destination. Whatever your tastes — sim-

ple and rustic, pristine and polished, or some combination of the two — Nova Scotia comes across as all things at once.



#### Easy Come, Easy Go

My six-day cycling itinerary focused on Cape Breton Island and its famed Cabot Trail, a 185-mile marvel of cliffs, mountains, forests, and wildlife.

I was pleasantly surprised to find a reasonably priced (\$325), high-season airfare to Halifax, my trip's starting and ending point. As a Chicagoan, I felt right at home in Halifax, a bike-friendly, waterfront capital with plenty of espresso cafés and a generous assortment of panhandlers (though it took me a while to understand that the query,

"Got a loonie?" was a monetary solicitation and not a question meant to determine whether I was harboring the infirm).

I had decided to forego bringing my bike with me, choosing to work with a local supplier instead. A representative from Freewheeling Adventures, a touring company based 30 miles west of Halifax in Hubbards, met me at my Halifax hotel with a capable, wide-g geared hybrid bike. If you go the bike rental route, I recommend paying for FA's pickup and drop-off service. It will most likely cost more if you take a taxi to Hubbards.

#### The Cabot Trail

Reaching the Cabot Trail from Halifax is doable by bike, although the 220 miles is relatively flat and uninspiring. With a limited time frame, I chose to focus my itinerary on the trail.

There are intermittent bus connections between Halifax and the trail, although I rented a car (Freewheeling Adventures supplied a portable bike rack when delivering my bike). The car allowed me to research and explore many more trails than I could have by bike.

Named for explorer John Cabot who reputedly visited its shores in 1497, the Cabot Trail hugs the coastline of northwestern Cape Breton Island, a meandering loop that reveals awe-inspiring cliff scenery, undisturbed wildlife, and postcard-perfect

fishing villages — and, as if that were not enough, it's home to a national park, too.

Baddeck is the trail's unofficial starting point, the most developed of the loop's towns, and a former summer home to Alexander Graham Bell. My Baddeck hotel manager stressed that a visit to the town's Alexander Graham Bell museum was necessary and, soft ice cream in hand, I heeded his advice.

While the American-born Bell is most remembered for inventing the telephone, he also performed groundbreaking and substantial work with the deaf (his wife was deaf), hydrofoils, and airplanes, much of it from his summer home in Baddeck. The museum is a first-class facility that houses much of his work while providing historical context for Baddeck and the Cabot Trail.

I headed back to my hotel in the early evening, feasted on a lobster dinner (as a lifetime midwesterner, I quickly seize any opportunity to dine on sub-\$20 fresh lobster), and dozed off to sleep, eager to start exploring the trail the following day.

#### Miss A Minute, Miss A Lot

Despite its relatively short overall length — indeed, one could cycle the entire Cabot Trail in two challenging days — I recommend allocating five to seven days to maximize enjoyment and properly engage in the region's outdoor activities.

To be sure, the Cabot Trail is a travel

## Nuts & Bolts: Cabot Trail

**Getting There:** Fly into Halifax, which offers numerous car rental options and shuttle services to the trail's starting point in Baddeck ([www.cabottrail.travel/getting-around.cfm?id=81](http://www.cabottrail.travel/getting-around.cfm?id=81)).

If you're driving to Baddeck, follow I-95 north to the U.S./New Brunswick border, connecting with Trans Canada Highways #2 and #104. Bay Ferries (888-249-7245, [www.caferry.com](http://www.caferry.com)) connects Bar Harbor, Maine, with Cape Breton. Acadian Bus Lines (800-567-5151, [www.acadianbus.com](http://www.acadianbus.com)) offers regular service throughout Nova Scotia.

**When to Go:** May through the first half of October, when high temperatures range from 57 (May) to 73 degrees (July and August), and average monthly rainfall varies by less than an inch.

**Bike Shops:** Though cycling facilities are scarce along the trail, The Outdoor Store (902-295-2576) in Baddeck offers last-minute cycling equipment. If you rent a bicycle through Freewheeling Adventures (see below), they offer assistance with breakdowns and other equipment needs during your trip. There are several full-service bike shops in Halifax and Sydney.

**Going Guided:** Freewheeling Adventures (800-672-0775, [www.freewheeling.ca](http://www.freewheeling.ca)) organizes both self-guided and group tours throughout Nova Scotia. The company provides personal assistance and years of local know-how.

anomaly. Although nearly everyone speaks glowingly of the region as the province's true sightseeing gem (Cape Breton has been ranked the most scenic North American island), there are virtually none of the roadside stands hawking personalized travel-memory tchotchkes (no oversized Cabot Trail-embazoned pencils or place mats,

for instance) that dominate other notable travel destinations. And it was remarkably tranquil and gently traveled during my late July visit, a curious calm that belied the region's virtues.

Barely three hours into my first day's ride, I was startled as a red fox darted across my path, settling yards away as he





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surveyed the terrain. As I coasted to a stop, I'm certain we made eye contact, a momentary connection that quickly dissipated as he scampered off into the woods. I paused for a few seconds, straightening my helmet as I prepared to resume my ride. That is, until a moose caught my eye, foraging in the tall grass 50 or so feet in the distance, a roadside guardrail the only human-made barrier separating us.

After a minute or two, my eyes drifted off into the distance (there's only so long you can watch a moose standing in tall grass), stopping abruptly at the sight of a distant pilot whale performing arching dives into the rugged Gulf of St. Lawrence.

#### What the . . . ?

Let's see if I have this straight, I thought. Red fox, moose, pilot whale, all within a five-minute time span and less than 50 miles into my first Nova Scotia ride. It was like Disney's Animal Kingdom Park, a compressed, fabricated wildlife immersion — except this was all real, and seemingly all for me.

I reached Chéticamp, a lazy fishing town just south of Cape Breton Highlands National Park (and part of the Appalachian mountain range) in the late afternoon, asked my motel's owner where I could find the town's best lobster dinner, and set off for exploration.

A cashier at the town's Les Trois Pignons Cultural Centre offered me a rapid-fire French greeting, and my blank expression must have clued her in that I had no idea what she was talking about.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were Acadian," she replied apologetically. And with that, I purchased an entry ticket and began my introduction into the area's multicultural heritage.

Beginning in the 17th century, French colonists began settling in Acadia, an area

that today includes Cape Breton. By the mid-18th century, the British controlled the region and events led to the Great Expulsion, which killed nearly one-third of the Acadian population and caused many



to flee and settle elsewhere (a significant population settled in Louisiana and are the ancestors of today's Cajun population). Others were deported to France.

The Acadian culture in Nova Scotia today has been enthusiastically rejuvenated, with the LTP museum serving as an important historical resource. There's a substantial exhibit devoted to one of the area's notable artists, Elizabeth LeFort, whose remarkable rug-hook tapestries earned her the favor of American presidents, British royalty, and the Pope.

Leaving Chéticamp, you reach the park entrance to the Cape Breton Highlands National Park after just a few miles. Even if you intend to focus solely on cycling, stop at the visitors center to pick up an armful of maps that detail the park and its amenities as well as for a mandatory visitor's pass.

The park is massive, overlapping nearly one-third of the Cabot Trail and filled with endless recreational opportunities. Although you can undertake hiking itineraries of every fitness challenge, I chose to incorporate a walk along the Skyline

Trail, one of the park's most popular (and easiest) plateau routes whose trailhead is just 12 miles from the park entrance. The 4.3-mile loop offers breathtaking vistas from a viewing platform. It was the perfect mid-morning break before I resumed my ride along the trail.

As you continue clockwise along the trail, a detour to Meat Cove is essential, a 36-mile out-and-back that takes you — figuratively — to the ends of Nova Scotia, or so it seemed.

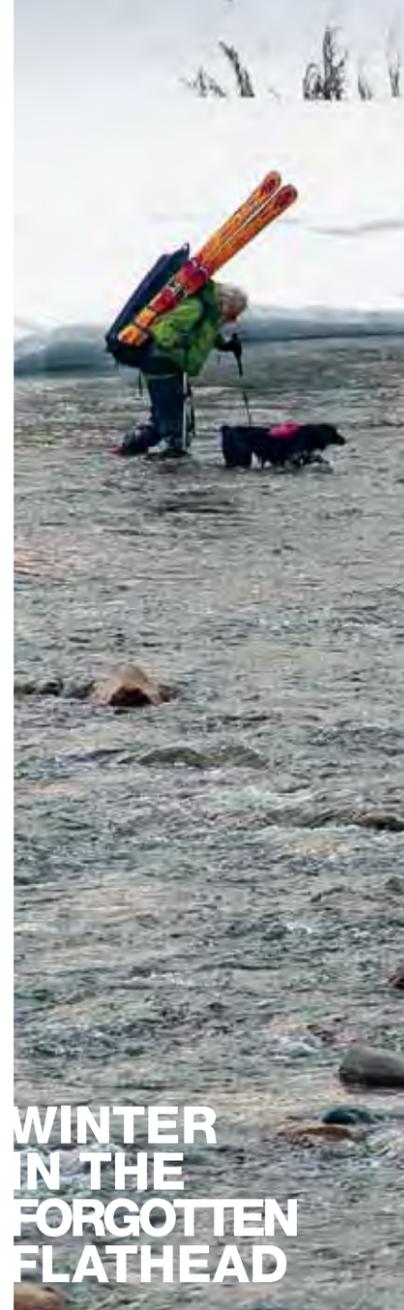
The approach to this fishing community of 80 or so is breathtaking if not a bit precarious, with a steep downhill cascading along a winding dirt road. There's virtually no commercial activity in the village, and a spartan campground is the primary lodging facility, so your reward is one of beauty, not luxury. But if you don't mind roughing it a bit, primitive camping along a grassy perch whose rocky banks fall precipitously to the icy waters of the Cabot Strait will provide a night to remember. And hiking enthusiasts who enjoy a physical challenge can take advantage of several itineraries, from short afternoon jaunts to multiday treks.

Retracing my path back onto the trail and now heading southeast, I settled next in Ingonish Beach at the famed Keltic Lodge, an indulgent resort that provides spa services, especially welcome after a visit to rustic Meat Cove.

Golf enthusiasts should plan an extra day or two here, with its on-site Cape Breton Highlands Links Golf Course offering a "mountains and ocean" challenge that attracts golfers from around the world.

Set aside time to visit Cape Smokey Provincial Park in nearby Ingonish, where a six-mile round-trip trail traces the edge of a granite cliff that rises dramatically over the Atlantic Ocean.

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## WINTER IN THE FORGOTTEN FLATHEAD

Bruce Kirkby makes a rare winter traverse of an iconic and threatened wilderness straddling the U.S.–Canada border.



## DELIVERY IN PATAGONIA

After undergoing a miscarriage just two days before she is scheduled to fly to South America to compete in one of the world's most challenging adventure races, Chelsey Gribbon finds herself running on empty in Patagonia.



## TREKKING THE VOODOO TRAIL

James Michael Dorsey encounters fetishes, blood sacrifice and Tabasco sauce in his pursuit of enlightenment about one of West Africa's most popular religious practices.

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Heading south along the Cabot Trail, a stop at Wreck Cove's gas station to sample its lobster sandwich is far from a culinary whim. The sandwiches have been sin-



gled out in guidebooks from as far away as Germany and Japan, and the store's owner, Marcelle, has created a welcoming general store that appeals equally to both locals and passersby.

Another 20 or so miles ahead as you approach St. Ann's Bay, the trail heads briefly inland and away from the coast,

and I stopped for a guided kayaking expedition at North River Kayak Tours. Angelo, the company's 30-something owner, is a Cape Breton native and a kayak instructor by day, musician by night (You can also rent kayaks if you want to do your own exploring.)

My short-lived transition to the sea returned me to my bike in the late afternoon for a short ride across the North River to the Chanterelle Country Inn, which overlooks St. Ann's Bay.

The relatively secluded inn is situated on 150 chanterelle-mushroom-enhanced acres. Its gracious owner, Earlene, is a Boulder, Colorado, transplant. The inn is notable as much for its restaurant that serves "Cape Breton Fresh" fare made from organic, locally-grown food as for its environmentally friendly inn, which draws water from a well fed by a natural spring, and whose mission "is dedicated to making as small a footprint as possible on the pristine North River." My evening was memorable, both for the top-notch cuisine as well as the undisturbed serenity, with a group of hummingbirds just off the dining room providing a tranquilizing symphony as they nourished themselves from strategically placed feeders.

### All Good

I returned to Baddeck the following day, the end to a remarkable week spent biking, hiking, kayaking, and golfing amid the most dramatic scenery imaginable (and all fueled nightly by plump, lobster-rich dinners). Despite the passage of several months, I continue to reflect warmly — and frequently — on my experience.

The entire region seems so at ease with its appeal that it comes off as indifferent, exhibiting a duality of warmth and reserve that is yet another Nova Scotia paradox.

But make no mistake, this is not detachment. It's a genuine sense of security from people who appreciate their surroundings and welcome the opportunity to share them with visitors. Its residents seem equally content and well adjusted enough to keep it to themselves if no one's around.

Having spent a cumulative four-plus years traveling the world by bike, I can say this is a definite tourism oddity, which is all the more reason that a trip to Nova Scotia and the Cabot Trail should rank high on the list of any cyclist's aspirational tours. **AC**

*Jerry Soverinsky is a freelance writer living in Chicago and a former European bike tour guide. He is the author of Cycle Europe: 20 Tours, 12 Countries.*

## Open Road Gallery

# COLD COMFORT

by Greg Siple

### BICYCLE ECLECTIC

Adventure Cycling's traveling exhibition of photographs from the National Bicycle Touring Portrait Collection is on the road again. You can see the show at the Yakima Valley Museum in Yakima, Washington, from July 9 through October.



ALLEN BLACK STOOD OUT FROM THE REST OF OUR VISITORS IN 1999 for two reasons. First, he was riding a recumbent tricycle, and second, he stopped in on October 9. This is late in the season, even for a west-bound cyclist, and Allen was headed east to York, Pennsylvania, from his home on the Oregon coast.

He recently told us, "One of the main reasons I went with this bike was its load capacity." And he took full advantage — but there was a problem.

"I had about 75 pounds of gear on the 39-pound trike and that weight, plus mine, caused incredible starting torque on the drive axle."

He was leaving Helena, Montana, about 100 miles east of Missoula, when the axle failed.

"Since this was a custom-built component, I couldn't just go to a bike shop and get another one," he said. So he ordered a new axle from the manufacturer and made the repair himself.

Then he began to face the consequences of a late start.

"I ran into my first 'plains' snowstorm as I passed through the Black Hills and into northwest Nebraska. (A woman seeing me struggle to get into my foul-weather gear stopped and offered a ride. It was a sweet offer, but she was driving an AMC Pacer.) In Kansas I encountered a weather inversion and it never got above freezing. I didn't realize how many calories it requires to pedal six to eight hours a day when it's that cold. It was quite a chore just getting enough food to keep going."

Tens of thousands of calories later he was only 90 miles from of his goal of York, and Thanksgiving with family, when his hydraulic disk brake developed a leak. Losing his main brake in the middle of the Pennsylvania mountains, and facing grades of 10 percent or more, prompted him to take a lift the rest of the way for an extended Thanksgiving.

"I had lost more than 26 pounds on the ride, but gained back 10 pounds during the visit," Allen said.

He considered selling his trike at the end of the journey but instead bought a used pickup truck to carry his three-wheeled chariot home to Oregon.

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