



OH, FIDDLESTICKS

Autumn's soundtrack encourages a colourful exploration of Cape Breton Island

Two days before I arrived, Sydney, Nova Scotia, was in a blackout. The remnants of Hurricane Matthew had dumped 225 millimetres of precipitation on the Cape Breton city over the previous week—almost double the entire monthly average.

But this post-Thanksgiving morning reveals skies sunny and bright. The streets are dry. The lights are back on. In fact, there is little trace of Matthew's wrath. Cape Breton's fall colours are beginning to beam through the green broadleaves that blanket the hillsides. And the fiddles? Well, the fiddles are a-playin'.

Celtic Colours isn't a nickname for the hills of Cape Breton as they turn from verdant to crimson. It's a festival o' fiddles that takes over the island's churches and elementary school gymnasiums every October; a kind-of goodbye to the season before Cape Breton Island is entrenched in a sleepy winter. These nightly jigs, step-dances and brokenhearted ballads will serve as my backdrop as I scoot about Cabot Trail—the scenic roadway looping this pastoral island—searching for action that doesn't necessarily involve stomping around on stage at a local community centre.

An hour's drive northwest along the convoluted roadway leading from Sydney takes me to North River, home to North River Kayak. Owner and operator Angelo Spinazzola awaits.

"I was out 'till two last night," he explains as he guides me through a collection of rustic cottages he's built to further expand his tourism product after 24 years of running paddling trips. "How could I not? Live music every night. Hope you like fiddles!"

With an East Coast Music Award to his name, Angelo is a well-regarded musician in his own right. And the Celtic Colours Festival is a big deal on the island, whether one is performing or attending. But I'd rather kayak than step-dance. So we push off into the brackish outflow of North River, paddling onto St. Anne's Bay along a shoreline of trees that seem to be getting more vivid by the hour.

"By the time you leave, it will be hitting full colour," Angelo explains, noting the foliage had really only begun to show when I arrived and the full dramatic seasonal transition will likely happen in less than a week. Trees of gold; beaches of red; kayaks of yellow; sea of blue. We stop for shore-lunch near a wooded waterfall that practically cascades into the ocean. These are the true Celtic Colours—fiddles be damned.

Later, after gorging myself at a community lobster dinner in Neils Harbour, I struggle to stay awake through a concert at North Highlands Elementary School. The music and dancing was lovely—but combining West Coast jet lag, a belly full of lobster and a soothing Irish ballad is like washing down an Ambien with an Alexander Keith's. I'm out.

I LOVE WHALES. I love the ocean. I love seeing whales on the ocean. And I've been fortunate in my life to have had many happenstance, chill-inducing views of humpbacks and orcas from aboard sport-fishing boats and ferries. But commercial whale watching has never been of great interest. It's too—purposeful. (Porpoiseful? Nevermind...) However, I'm immediately attracted to the atmosphere aboard Oshan Whale Watch's classic fishing dory-turned-passenger-cruiser. Rather than a laundry-list liability disclaimer as I've seen on other tours, Captain Fraser is pretty much cool with me doing whatever I want onboard his boat. As we float into the frigid Gulf of St. Lawrence, dolphins dancing at our side, Fraser encourages me to climb atop the cabin for a better vista—something that involves stepping onto the gunwale and Spidermanning around the bridge to scramble onto the rooftop... while we

Above:
Kayaking near North River; Pilot whales pose off the north shore.

run at full throttle. It's actually the most exciting part of the day; a day that sees more dolphins than I can count, a minke or two and dozens-strong pods of pilot whales huffing and puffing and posing for photos for much of the trip. I recall the mischievous twinkle in Captain Fraser's eye when he had earlier said: "We might see a whale, who knows?" We saw 30 if we saw one.

LATER THAT DAY, we're back into Cape Breton Highlands National Park—the number-one draw to the region at this time, even in the face of nine days of nonstop music. The park occupies about 20 per cent of the entire island, stretching from coast-to-coast. The Acadian forest is ablaze by the time we round the island's northern tip, headed through the Francophone community of Cheticamp and into the national park. When we'd cruised out of the park boundary on the east side, leaves were amber; by the time we re-enter on the west, they've turned deep crimson. Skyline Trail offers the best and easiest viewpoint of it all, likely the most impressive vista offered by a 45-minute hike in all Atlantic Canada. With more time, Fishing Cove Trail beckons with an overnight trek. I

gaze with envy at a group of road cyclists enjoying Cabot Trail at an even slower pace than I.

October is a musical month on Cape Breton, no matter how you explore. A hike around Louisbourg Lighthouse. Then fiddles. A walk through the breezy grounds of Fortress Louisbourg. Fiddles to follow. Roadside lunch break? I eat fresh fish cakes while step dancers perform on stage (to fiddle music). As we near Sydney again, passing a rainbow over Bras d'Or Lake that rivals the golden foliage, I chuckle to think of my kayak guide's prophetic words: "... *Hope you like fiddles...*"

The occasional hurricane outflow notwithstanding, Cape Breton Island is alluring in autumn. Rolling landscapes beg for hikes through forests so impossibly bright they seem coloured by the crayons of an over-imaginative toddler. Rusty shorelines and secluded beaches encourage long days in a kayak. Cabot Trail is, arguably, Canada's best cycle-touring route. The Gulf of St. Lawrence is rife with whales and seabirds. Plus, a unique soundtrack hustles you around with its endlessly—and I do mean endlessly—cheerful melody.

"There's something I want you to see," our driver says as we pull into the Port of



Cape Breton Highlands National Park offers free admission throughout 2017. pc.gc.ca/capebreton

The Celtic Colours International Festival runs from October 6 to 14, 2017. celtic-colours.com

Sydney, en route to the airport on my final day. Behold, the world's largest fiddle. It stands 18 metres tall and broadcasts a nonstop jig. A testament to the sounds of the island; my ubiquitous soundtrack; the harmony that rang through my head for five days of coastal exploration. I can only laugh at the sight. Just like all the Cape Bretoners I met and the gorgeous island landscape itself, this music brings a smile to the face of everyone around it. Fiddle-dee-dee. ✕

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