

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

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65



A Natural Course

Untrammelled parks, adorable cafés, spectacular beaches: Canada's Cape Breton Island has everything you could ask for in a fall weekend getaway.

Lola Augustine Brown shares her ideal itinerary.

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ETTING TO CAPE BRETON Island is always transportive. It's a scenic 2½-hour drive from where I live in rural Nova Scotia. Coming from urban Halifax—as many do—there are more distinctive changes, as the city streets give way to rolling hills.

No matter your departure point, the most striking shift hits you at the

end of the mile-long Canso Causeway, which connects the mainland to Cape Breton. When my view fills with windswept shores and lush forest, that's the moment I know I've arrived.

The classic way to see the best of the island is the Cabot Trail, a two-lane highway that loops around the island's north and connects its wilderness areas and several of its historic towns. Gaelic people from Scotland arrived in the 1700s, and the area's Celtic roots are

displayed everywhere. Live music always includes a fiddle and drum, and the road signs appear in both Gaelic and English—except in the Acadian part of the island, where they're in French. Traditional and Indigenous Mi'kmaq fishermen live in small villages, some of which butt up against world-class resorts.

But Cape Breton remains a sleepy delight Canadians turn to when they need a break from it all. It still feels rural and remote, though these qualities are mostly preserved in what locals and “come from away” folks offer visitors: quaint cafés and B&Bs, boat tours, and breweries. I discover something new every time, especially in the fall, once the summer rush has abated.

FRIDAY

On my latest trip to Cape Breton Island last October, I began with a visit to **Big Spruce Brewing** (bigspruce.ca), Nova Scotia's first organic craft brewery. In 2009, Jeremy and Melanie White, who had honeymooned on the island years earlier, bought a run-down farm near Bras d'Or Lake—online, sight unseen. They found that hops were a good ▶

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The dramatic Cabot Trail loops around the cliffs of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.



► crop for the land, so why not try making beer? I sampled their Kitchen Party Pale Ale, which paired perfectly with deep-fried pepperoni, a regional pub specialty.

Then I drove northwest, following the winding Cabot Trail, then took Route 19 until I reached Inverness, a historic coal-mining village that, with the opening of the Cabot Links Golf Resort in 2011, has found new purpose as a leisure destination. My target: Inverness Beach, known for its abundance of sea glass, pieces of which I squirreled away in every pocket of my coat.

Overlooking the beach are the luxe private villas at **Cabot Cape Breton** (cabotcapebreton.com; doubles from \$210), designed by famed Halifax architect Omar Gandhi. This golf resort—which includes Cabot Cliffs, the top course in Canada—is perhaps the most spectacular stay on the island. Across the street, in the relaxed brewpub at **Route 19 Brewing** (route19brewing.com; entrées \$14–\$24), I had the fattest lobster roll I'd ever laid eyes on.

SATURDAY

On the way to Chéticamp, the Acadian pride becomes palpable as the historical flag appears

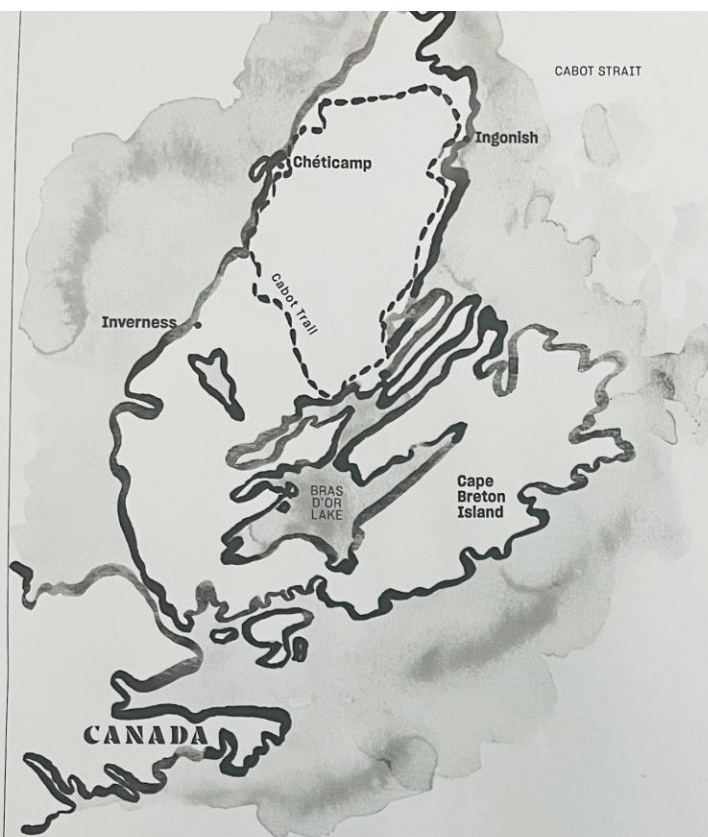


▲ From left: A view of the Gulf of St. Lawrence from L'abri, a café in Chéticamp; Cabot Cape Breton's executive chef, Malcolm Campbell, preps a waterside dinner on Inverness Beach.

with increasing frequency, either painted on buildings or hanging from colorful, weather-beaten houses. I headed straight for the Gypsum Mine, a flooded quarry with stark-white walls surrounded by spruces, birches, and firs. A dip in the frigid lake is worth it, as is the steep climb up the side of the quarry (assisted by ropes attached to the rock face) that ends with gorgeous water views.

Mr. Chicken (15546 Cabot Trail Rd.; 1-902-224-2975; entrées \$8–\$11) in Chéticamp is a local fast-food favorite for chicken poutine, but I was eager to eat at **L'abri** (labri.cafe; entrées \$12–\$23), which had been booked solid during my previous trip, despite the fact that it had opened just 18 months earlier. L'abri is owned by Basil Doucet and Jaron Felix. After growing tired of their busy careers in Toronto and Halifax, the friends returned to their hometown to start an upscale restaurant riffing on Cape Breton cuisine. I savored the superb Cajun haddock cakes as soft French music lilted through the air.

It was great fuel for my next excursion: hiking Cape Breton's Skyline Trail, a five-mile loop through scrubby terrain that leads to a headland boardwalk. After living in Nova Scotia for almost 15 years,



I spotted my first moose, looking majestic as it grazed on shrubs.

Supper that night was at the **Rusty Anchor Restaurant** (therustyanchorrestaurant.com; entrées \$11–\$21), in Pleasant Bay, known for hearty seafood and cheery service. I gorged on Northern Emerald oysters and a juicy bacon cheeseburger. Later I checked in to a spacious geodesic dome just down the road at **True North Destinations** (truenorthdestinations.ca; doubles

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The entrance to **Salty Rose's & the Periwinkle Café**, which also serves as a craft shop and two-room inn.



from \$160), where I found a perfect post-hike reward in my hot tub overlooking the thrashing Atlantic.

SUNDAY

From Ingonish Beach, I whipped across the ocean on a whale-watching tour with **Keltic Express Zodiac Adventures** (capebretonwhalewatching.com). I hoped to see Minke whales or the odd humpback, but despite Captain Kinnon MacKinnon's best efforts to track them down, I saw neither. I was too impressed by the three immense sunfish I did spot to be disappointed. Ingonish is one of the Cabot Trail's most rewarding stops, with stylish boutiques along the portion of the road that runs through town. At **Groovy Goat Farm & Soap Company** (groovygoat.ca), I snuggled both bunnies and baby goats, and at **Leather Works by Jolene** (leather-works.ca), I bought a buttery-soft, sunshine-yellow purse.

Lunch was a snow-crab sandwich at **Salty Rose's & the Periwinkle Café** (saltyrosesandtheperiwinklecafe.com; sandwiches \$11–\$22), a gallery-bakery combo owned by cousins Caitlyn Purcell and Sarabeth Drover, who offer decadent egg sandwiches and orange-scented granola topped with edible flowers, alongside art, crafts, and jewelry. I was sleeping upstairs that night, in one of the café's three vintage-chic rooms with 1970s-inspired wallpaper (doubles from \$160). After checking in, I took a long walk along Ingonish Beach, a strip of soft sand edged by piles of pink and gray stones, and basked in views of the historic **Keltic Lodge** (kelticlodge.ca; doubles from \$200) set on the cliffs above, where I later ordered a Dark & Stormy in the elegant Highland Sitting Room.

MONDAY

I drove to **Cape Smokey Provincial Park** (parks.novascotia.ca) to walk to the cliff tops and get one more look at the highlands before heading home. On my way out of town, I stopped at the **Wreck Cove General Store** (wreckcovegeneralstore.com) for a final lobster roll—the best in all of Cape Breton, islanders say. Co-owner Jenn Partland credits the shop's 40-year-old recipe: a no-nonsense mix of knuckle and claw meat, Miracle Whip, salt, and pepper.

As I took my last bite, I felt a deep sense of appreciation settle in. There's something immensely satisfying about places that know how to keep things simple and unfussy. And that's exactly what Cape Breton does best. 🌐