



Sailing *in* Cape Breton

On Bras d'Or Lake the greatest challenge is deciding where to go next



A view of the lakes from the top of Salt Mountain, in Whycomomagh Bay. The hike to the top is just a couple of kilometres...straight up.



Exploring in the dinghy is one of our favourite pastimes.

BY LINDA KENYON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS HATTON

I know I'm supposed to be sitting straight-backed on the hard pew, eyes front, focused on the plain white walls and the unadorned pulpit, contemplating my sins as Gaelic psalm singing plays softly in the background. But my gaze keeps drifting out the window to the wildflowers blowing in the wind on the top of the hill.

I get up and walk to the other side of the empty church, leaning against the glass so I can see the Bras d'Or Lake far below me, stretching into the distance. A tiny sailboat tacks towards the Barra Strait Bridge. "Careful of the current," I want to say. The wind is against the tide in the narrows.

We've come to know this lake pretty well, sailing from place to place in our 43-foot steel sailboat. It's a sturdy craft made for the ocean, which is where we're headed, even-

tually. But first we're spending the summer exploring these beautiful inland waters.

Technically, the Bras d'Or Lake is not a lake at all, but a vast, intricate inlet off the Atlantic Ocean; that may be why sailors and even tourism sources call it Bras d'Or Lakes. Whatever you call them, these waters are a sailor's dream. Surrounded by the rolling highlands of Cape Breton, the winds are gentle, for the most part, the waters calm, and there are endless coves and tiny islands to explore. The greatest challenge is deciding where to go next.

We had a taste of what these waters would be like as we entered the Lennox Passage, just off the Strait of Canso, which separates Cape Breton from the mainland of Nova Scotia. We anchored for a night, then another night, then another in a completely secure, completely deserted anchorage. I think we could happily have spent the

summer there. Reluctantly, we moved on.

We enter the Bras d'Or Lake through St. Peters Canal at the southernmost end of the largest body of water. Prior to the opening of the canal in the late 1800s, small vessels were pulled on skids over this narrow strip of land by ox team, following a well-worn portage path. The canal, with its single lock that raises or lowers you depending on the tide, is much more convenient.

On the other side of the canal, we wind our way through a long inlet before we reach the lake. As we leave the inlet, we notice an island in the distance with a little settlement on it. Chapel Island, the guide book says, a traditional gathering place of great spiritual significance for the Mi'kmaq people. You can see a white church spire from a distance, but you can't see the church itself for the jumble of cabins lining the shore. Looks interesting. But it's a sunny

day and the wind is fair, so we raise sail and promise ourselves we'll come back later to explore.

Our first anchorage, Cape George Harbour, is the prettiest anchorage in Bras d'Or Lake, we've heard. To our surprise, it is almost deserted. There is a sailboat on a mooring ball at the head of the bay and a couple of motor boats beached on the sand bar for the night, but other than that, we have the anchorage to ourselves. As dusk falls, we sit in the cockpit, surrounded by the song of wood thrush in the deep forest that surrounds the bay. A heron lands on the shore beside us. A kingfisher flashes blue then gone, its indignant call shattering the peace.

"Why are there no mosquitoes?" I whisper to Chris.

"Shhh!" he says. "Don't mention it! I don't

A woman in a red dress and white blouse is walking away from the camera on a gravel path. She is carrying a wicker basket in her left hand. In the background, there is a round stone house with a grassy roof, known as a black house. The house is built with grey stones and has a small dark doorway. The house is situated on a grassy hillside overlooking a large body of water. The sky is overcast.

*A pleasant walk through pine woods brings us to a round stone house
with a thatch roof, a black house, it's called.
We've travelled back in time to
Scotland in the late 1700s.*

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think they breed on salt water.”

The next day we hike out to the light-house at the end of the cape, along a pebble beach, then follow the trail into the woods. Again, no mosquitoes, though there are deer flies aplenty. The motor boats have left by the time we get back to the boat, so we cool off with a swim off the sand spit.

“Let’s just stay here,” I say.

But after a couple of nights, we move on, choosing our next anchorage based on which way the wind is blowing. This is how we will spend the rest of the summer.

One day the wind is so light we put up our spinnaker. The huge, light foresail — more of a balloon than a sail, really—fills with air and we ghost happily along the sparkling waters. The wind is from the south, and we seem to be heading for the Barra Strait. We decide it’s time to pass through the narrows and explore the northern part of the lake.

As we approach the swing bridge that will let us pass through the strait, we spot another white church spire high on the top of a hill. This must be the highland village we’ve read about. But there’s no time to admire the view. Suddenly we’re in very confused waters, and the current is pulling us toward the bridge. We snuff the spinnaker and motor through the narrow opening, heaving a sigh of relief when we get to the other side and are in calm waters again.

We decide to tie up at the public wharf in Iona, on the other side of the strait, and walk up to the highland village. It’s a bit of a hike—about 2½ kilometres in the hot sun—but well worth the trek.

Once we enter the historic village, a pleasant walk through pine woods brings us to a round stone house with a thatch roof, a black house, it’s called. We’ve travelled back in time to Scotland in the late 1700s. There is a sort of sleeping closet along one of the walls. Really, it’s like an armoire you sleep in, two compartments each about the size of a single bed with double doors on them.

They look quite cosy — a great improvement over sleeping on the floor around the fire in the centre of the room. The walls inside are black with soot. There is no fireplace, no chimney — the fire is made in the centre of the room and the hope is that the smoke will somehow find its way out through the peat roof.

As you walk through the village, you travel forward in time. The Scottish people emigrate to Cape Breton, build log cabins, then more and more refined houses. We come to a fine farmhouse with a pump in the yard and a cast iron cookstove from Lunenburg in the kitchen. The woman of the house has been making pies, using apples she has stored in her basement — by July she is almost out — and strawberries and rhubarb. She gives us a small slice of each.

We climb back up to the church for one last view of the lake before we leave the village. It’s late afternoon by the time we reach the public dock, where we find a group of native children diving into the deep water behind our boat. The Highlanders weren’t the first to come here, I remind myself as we motor away.

No visit to Cape Breton, by land or by sea, is complete without a stop at the town of Baddeck, the summer home of the island’s most famous resident, Alexander Graham Bell. It’s also the sailing capital of the lake.

We arrive during regatta week in early August and have to pick our way carefully through the outer bay where a serious race is underway. We watch the two lead boats slice around a marker then break out their spinnakers for the downwind leg. They bowl along, just yards apart from each other, first one boat pulling slightly ahead, then the other. We give them a wide berth.

As we drop anchor off the town, a fleet of tiny sailing dinghies wobbles away from the yacht club — it’s the children’s turn to race. They set off into the big bay, several

motor launches following behind them, just in case.

Baddeck is a lovely town. We stroll up and down the main street, treat ourselves to ice-cream cones. I buy a pair of glass earrings and a pottery bowl in a little art gallery. We dutifully visit the Alexander Graham Bell museum, a National Historic Site, but we find ourselves gazing out the windows overlooking the lake. All we want is to get back on the water. So we do.

Next stop: Maskells Harbour, the prettiest anchorage on the lake, according to our guide book. We enter the harbour behind a point of land with its handsome lighthouse and find ourselves in a bay surrounded by steep, tree-covered hills. At dusk, one other boat comes in and anchors at the far end of the bay.

We sleep peacefully, and at dawn I wake and climb above deck to watch the sun rise behind the lighthouse. As the mist burns off the water around me, my only companion is a bald eagle nesting in the top of a spruce tree right beside the boat.

It takes a while for us to finally decide to visit Chapel Island, not because the entrance to the sheltered bay between the island and the mainland is difficult to navigate — you have to pick your way between shifting sand spits and scattered rocks — but because the anchorage is right off the little settlement. We don’t want to intrude.

But as we motor slowly into the bay, we discover that the island is completely deserted. Not a boat, not a person in sight. It’s a bit eerie.

Though the church looks freshly painted, the steeple seems to lean slightly to one side, and the cabins tumbling down to the shore are in various states of repair. Many of them are boarded up; some are missing windows. A few of the doors hang open, swinging in the wind. Some roofs are shingled, others are a patchwork of boards and tarpaper, or just covered with tarps. An

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Chapel Island, only accessible by water, is a curious place. The chapel itself is surrounded by cabins in various states of repair.

overstuffed love seat sits at the water's edge. Still, there's something about this place.

Long before Europeans sailed into these waters, this island was a meeting place for the Mi'kmaq people, a place of great cultural significance and a sacred site. At the end of winter, they would come from all over the Atlantic region to bury their dead on the island in unmarked graves.

In the mid-18th century, the French erected a Catholic church and Chapel Island has since been the spiritual centre of the Roman Catholic faith for the Mi'kmaq. Each year, there is a pilgrimage to the island to celebrate the Feast of St. Anne in late July. But other than that, the island, still accessible only by boat, is uninhabited.

We end up staying for several nights. We never go ashore, even though there is no one here. It just doesn't feel right. Instead we spend our days exploring the shoreline by dinghy, aware as we enter each silent bay of the many canoes that have gone before us. There are often deer tracks in the sand along the water's edge. In one bay, we find large tracks from some animal. A big dog? A coyote? Maybe a wolf? To our delight, we find a bed of mussels there and feast on the freshest mussels we've ever had.

Our last morning, as the mist is just burning off the water, a deer steps hesitantly from the woods, takes a long look at the sailboat anchored just offshore. We both sit very still, looking back.

She decides we aren't a threat and picks her way through the tall grass that grows in the middle of the sand spit beside us, browsing as she goes. Another deer, smaller, emerges from the woods. I raise my binoculars — no sign that any creature is stalking the fawn. A flash of white in the trees, an eagle, and oh, another one.

I lower my binoculars and look out over the lake. The wind is coming up, turning the surface of the water beyond the sand spit into a sea of diamonds.

Surely this is the prettiest anchorage in the Bras d'Or Lake. ●

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