

Tune in to Cape Breton

BY PETER LENEY, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE APRIL 29, 2010



Ceilidh at The Red Shoe Pub in Mabou: It's a warm, relaxed place with pub food and regular live music.

Photograph by: Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage, Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage

When the idea arose of vacationing in Nova Scotia, it was immediately stamped as a music-chasing adventure by my musical girlfriend, Linda.

Since I vaguely knew Nova Scotia as a musical place, not just an ocean playground as the licence plates say, that sounded fine. But where to head after landing in Halifax?

Cape Breton Island seemed a good bet, being home to the very few East Coast musical figures I knew: the Rankin Family, fiddling icon Buddy MacMaster and fiddling firebrand Ashley MacIsaac. They seemed likely to be the tip of a big musical-talent iceberg.

We queried Nova Scotia Tourism, which eagerly confirmed the hunch.

"You have certainly struck a chord with the music angle in Cape Breton," emailed media relations manager Randy Brooks. "There is no lack of it in late July and August."

It happens along the Cape Breton western shore, where coastal Route 19 is called the Ceilidh Trail (pronounced kay-lee, Gaelic for house party) to promote musical tourism. The music held out to tourists stems from the fiddling style of Scottish Highland settlers of the early 1800s. One or more performances – either in concerts or pub settings – can be found daily along the trail.

And it's not only a spectator sport. Nightly fiddle-driven square dances are heavily attended by locals and touted to visitors as an essential Cape Breton experience. The dances, invariably from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., move around different villages on a weekly cycle.

The music route also spans Cape Breton's two cultures. After the forested hilly area of ethnically pure Scots settlement – look for porridge, oatcakes and Gaelic (at least on village name signs) – you move north into a francophone Acadian patch with its own windswept landscape, music and traditions such as rug-hooking and the mi-carême Lenten celebration.

Still farther north is an especially scenic part of the Cabot Trail, Cape Breton's most famous tourist attraction.

Our first stop as musical tourists was the Celtic Music Interpretive Centre in Judique, conveniently, a half-hour drive from the causeway from mainland Nova Scotia. The centre presents frequent performances of Cape Breton music along with an exhibition room with information about the music and its leading performers. You can even learn fiddle and step dancing at video terminals (fiddles provided).

The centre's musical director is Allan Dewar, also a leading pianist. Asked what characterizes Cape Breton fiddling, he replied: its "apparent effect to get you up and dance.

"People get captivated by the feel of the music," he said, adding that touring by Cape Breton fiddler-ambassadors like MacMaster and his niece Natalie MacMaster make "people from away" want to come and experience it. "It's become more and more of a draw."

Dewar then donned his pianist hat to join a young lady fiddler on stage for the centre's regular noontime concert. They form the classic Cape Breton music duo of fiddler backed by piano.

The Tom Rankin Exhibit Room opens to a giant mural titled An Island of Fiddlers with photos and text on the main fiddler names – Chisholm, Beaton, MacMaster, MacIsaac, MacDonald and more.

Other panels describe the marches, strathspeys and reels that form the medley of rising tempo usually played by fiddlers. You also learn that bagpipes and pump organs were dropped in the last century in favour of guitars and pianos. Indeed, not a drone is heard along the Ceilidh Trail, despite a piper on the trail logo.

Leaflets like Dancing around Inverness County and Summer and Fall Events – Fiddles, Festival and Fun, available at the centre, give guidance to the music tourist. Ads in the weekly Inverness Oran are another information source.

Our next stop was Mabou, home of the Rankin family. Its musical hotspot is the Red Shoe Pub, a warm, relaxed place on the main street with pub food and regular live

music.

This happy hour, we heard Robbie and Isaac Fraser, a veteran fiddle and piano duo despite being in their early 20s. (See them on YouTube five years earlier at the Red Shoe.) With no banter between tunes, they play on tirelessly. The music is somehow soothing despite the driving fiddle.

Other Cape Breton music settings are found at lodgings of special interest that also offer fine dining.

One is the Glenora Inn and Distillery, a single malt whisky distillery in a forest clearing with a hilly backdrop. A tree-lined driveway off Route 19 north of Mabou leads to a group of whitewashed buildings housing the distillery operation, a pub, fine dining room, lodging and a gift shop selling its own 10-year-old Glen Breton Rare.

The buildings enclose an inner courtyard lawn decorated with flower beds. A babbling brook called MacLellan's flows by, supplying water for the whisky.

Live music at the distillery is presented twice daily (noon and evening) in the pub. Over lunch of fish and chips, we heard Pius MacIsaac and Allan Cameron alternating on fiddle, piano, guitar and mandolin. Over supper of Atlantic salmon marinated in Glen Breton Rare, music from another pub group drifted into the adjacent dining room.

Another is the Normaway Inn, located in the Margaree Valley in an English park setting of trees and lawn circled by mountains. A rambling white house contains the reception, a restaurant specializing in Cape Breton lamb,

Atlantic salmon and scallops, an elegant living room with fireplace and a few rooms. Most accommodation is in cabins around the estate.

The Normaway Inn presents live music in its living room five evenings a week during the summer. But its big shows are in a red building called the Barn, presenting tourists with great musicians who somehow remain unknown outside the East. Our discovery was J.P. Cormier, a guitarist of astounding speed and smoothness who was accompanied on piano by his wife, Hilda Chiasson-Cormier.

Originally from Cap Le Moine in Cape Breton's Acadian area, Cormier was a session musician in Nashville for several years before returning home. He performs his own songs in a style that "mixes bluegrass, Celtic and Gordon Lightfoot," said Hilda as she helped me choose among his 13 CDs.

Breakfast next morning recalled the old country: aside from oat cakes to tug at a Scot's heart, the menu included "French toast with our own porridge bread dipped in a special oat mixture."

We then crossed the Margaree River into Acadian country. The landscape changed from forested hills to cleared meadowland sloping to the sea, with white houses scattered about.

Cheticamp, the main city, stretches along the sea, here the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Along its peaceful waterfront boardwalk, you can read panels on local history (gypsum, not coal, was mined here) and

watch whale excursion boats come and go. A lighthouse painted blue, white and red, with a gold star on the blue, evokes the Acadian flag.

Cheticamp is known for its rug-hooking tradition, making not only rugs, but wall hangings, hot plates and other items for local gift shop sale. A hooked rug museum in the Trois Pignons cultural centre displays a large collection of artistic wall hangings including naïve landscapes and portraits of American personalities.

The Festival de l'Escaouette provides almost daily entertainment in July and August, including music and theatre, and the Acadian history pageant called Le Grand Cercle.

Cheticamp's big music spots are the Doryman Tavern and Le Gabriel lounge. At the Doryman, we found Robbie and Isaac again, sharing one tune with an old man acrobatically playing spoons against his knees and lips. But what seemed like a pleasant musical pairing across Cape Breton cultures was really an endurance contest.

At least some spectators fell silent as exertion turned the old man's face red, but locals were not alarmed. "That's Gerry Deveau. He does it all up and down the coast," we were told as the tune finally wrapped up.

At Le Gabriel Lounge, a cavernous space decorated with hockey items, a singer described to us as the "ambassador of Acadian music" was playing. Sylvia LeLièvre sang in a plaintive but strong voice, mixing Scottish love ballads, her own Acadian compositions and classics like Ian Tyson's Four Strong Winds.

Cheticamp is also a jumping-off point for an especially scenic part of the Cabot Trail. The road winds along hillsides above the sea, then crosses a plateau to the Atlantic Ocean on the east coast of the island. Two short trails – through a bog and to a replica of a Scottish crofter's hut – provide 15-minute diversions along the way.

To get back to Cheticamp that same day, we skipped the serpentine Cabot Trail onward to Ingonish and turned north to the supposed 1497 landfall of trail namesake John Cabot. Along with a monument to the explorer, Cabot Landing Provincial Park has a sandy beach with the usual warm water that ocean currents surprisingly deliver to Cape Breton swimmers.

Then it was all over but the dancing. Chance brought us to Brook Village, an inland hamlet with Monday night square dances, and gave us a guide and coach in one Burton MacIntyre, a man introduced by our motel keeper as "Mr. Cape Breton" for his involvement in Cape Breton music.

The Brook Village parish hall throbbed with about 200 dancers and musicians familiar by now – Robbie and Isaac Fraser again. Dancers are self-directed, since callers were dismissed long ago for being "too cranky," someone said.

Noting my nervousness about jumping in, MacIntyre was encouraging. Just fake it, he joked. People won't mind if you make a mistake. He escorted Linda into the fray and I later found the courage to jump

into the swirling sequence of holding hands in a group circle, splitting off with a partner, changing your partner, stopping to fake a little step dancing, and always getting pushed in the right direction.

The entire hall was dancing except one man. A retired computer programmer from Ottawa Valley, now living in New Jersey, Victor Faubert is happy to come and observe every year. "It lifts the spirit," he explained. And the fiddler played on.

IF YOU GO:

Getting there: Fly to Halifax and rent a car at the airport. Make sure to pack food. Our noon Air Canada flight had only potato chips for sale and Route 105 north is a wilderness run with no population centre visible until Antigonish several hours north. Sleep over in Antigonish to reach Cape Breton refreshed the next morning.

Lodging: Glenora Inn and Distillery mixes lodging with the making of single malt whisky. Lodging is in rooms or log cabins nestled on a forested hillside. For prices: www.glenoradistillery.com. Ten-year-old Glen Breton Rare sells for \$80 a 700-ml bottle in the gift shop.

Normaway Inn in the Margaree Valley has rooms in its elegant main lodge or cabins scattered in a park setting. Info at www.normaway.com

Haus Treuburg Country Inn in Port Hood. Rooms in the main house or cottages near the water. Fine dining upon reservation. Access to a small swimming beach lined with wild roses. www.haustreuburg.com.

Music: Celtic Music Interpretive Centre in Judique, first stop for an intro to Cape Breton music: www.celticmusic.com

Inverness: Between tunes, the main Ceilidh Trail city of Inverness has a sandy beach for a swimming break. For local history of this former coal mining town (until 1957), visit the Inverness Miner's Museum with photos, paintings, tales from town history and mockups of a miner's life at work and home. Curator Ned MacDonald can point you to a Coal Age fossil hunting beach.

Native son Allan MacEachen's political rise is spelled out in brass nameplates, up to Deputy Prime Minister of Canada.

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette