

Summer travel in Atlantic Canada? Yes!

By Sandra Phinney

Commenting on what holidays, travels and vacations are all about, famed journalist Shana Alexander says, “It is not really rest or even leisure we chase. We strain to renew our capacity for wonder, to shock ourselves into astonishment once again.” How true. I’m also discovering that travel in my own backyard, a.k.a. Atlantic Canada, energizes me like no other. And there’s no doubt that it costs pennies compared to traveling further afield.

In these economic times, we’re all mindful of making do with less. So for starters, think about staying at a hostel or backpackers association. I used to think they were only for students but I’ve met more adults than youth at hostels! There are dozens of hostels in the Maritimes. Most are in settings that have lots of history, character and charm.

Another penny-wise option is to stay in a university residence (usually available mid May to late August.) Some universities have suites—perfect for families—and many universities offer continental breakfasts or recreation/gym privileges as part of the deal.

So here’s the question: do you want a quick rejuvenating weekend or a longer reprieve? Peace and quiet? Excitement and challenge? Unique experiences? I’ve yearned for all these (and more) and could write a book about the pleasures of traveling in my own backyard.

Newfoundland beguiles

Did you know that the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has 18,000 miles of coastline? Words like “panoramic” and “vista” sound trite. I’ve actually caught myself holding my breath and had to remind myself to breathe on my journeys there. I especially remember doing a curvy drive around the “Irish Loop” (lower part of the Avalon Peninsula) where the brogue is as rich as the setting.

At one point my husband and I lucked into a local BBQ in Riverhead where they happened to be entertaining an exchange group from Ireland. We sat with John Hewitt, a crab fisherman from Trepassy and his wife, Rosemarie. “Surely you’ve heard of Foster Hewitt me darlin’!” says John with a wink and a nod, implying there’s a connection—which, of course, there is not. (Readers or a certain age will recall Foster Hewitt as “the” voice of Hockey Night in Canada many moons ago.) After dinner, out came accordions, fiddles, flutes, guitars. It was magical. That’s the kind of thing that happens in these parts.

NB showcases edVentures

A growing trend in our region is the ÉCONOMUSÉE. We have about 20 of them showcasing everything from wineries to maple sugar production, pewter and woodworking shops. Each business gives tours and demonstrations. Sometimes you’ll find yourself as part of the action; other times you’ll be part of the audience. Many are self-guided tours. But in every case, there’s an intimate (and fun!) connection. For example, the Olivier Soapery in Sainte-Anne-de-Kent in New Brunswick promises a rollicking good time and it’s super kid-friendly. The scents are sensational and the demonstrations are hilarious.

In another vein, I just returned from a few days in Fredericton and sampled some edVentures programs that the city is featuring this summer. Wow! Dabbling in the art of Chinese kite making, Qigong, Pin Hole photography, classic board games and making jewelry got me pretty wound up to learn more. With over 120 different workshops ranging from half a day to a week throughout the summer (includes children’s courses) learning vacations are “in”.

Travel bonus: co-op stores

Of course another blessing of traveling in Atlantic Canada is that we have so many Co-op stores. I remember being in Baddeck, Cape Breton when my camera batteries conked out. Alas, it was day’s end; the Co-op had just closed. Yet I managed to catch someone’s attention by knocking on the front door and she let me in! Not only that but I learned about a community Ceilidh just a block away.

Co-op folks are like that. You’ll also get good food at a co-op (much of it locally produced), and the bonus is that staff are a great source of insider information like knowing the best place to go rock hounding for agates and amethysts. Yearn to find steamed lobsters, home-made sauerkraut, rare books, a coin collector or folk artist? Just ask!

PEI’s prolific artists

Speaking of which, I discovered a zany folk artist a couple of years ago in PEI. I was on a quest to find one-of-a-kind arts and crafts. Easy to do in PEI as it has the highest number of artisans per population in Canada. That’s when I discovered Kerras Jeffery and the Back Road Folk Art studio “up west” in Laretta. Kerras is well known for his folk art (silly to sublime) and for having the world’s largest working hand-held eggbeater in front of his house. He also has a small museum. One section tells how skunks came to the island as tourists and never left—and I was so busy gawking at other displays that I somehow missed that one. Good reason to go back, eh?

Cultural experiences and festivals

So too are authentic cultural experiences, and the Maritimes has a plethora of Mi’kmaq, Acadian, Loyalist, Viking, and Celtic experiences (to name just a few). I remember visiting Bear River First Nation Heritage and Cultural Centre in NS. After the tour, our guide invited us to form a circle. She started drumming then

chanted Wejkwita’jik (Come and let us gather here together). We took turns with the refrain, calling upon our family, grandparents, and ancestors to join us. It was so moving, we all got goosebumps!

Of course for high energy and hoopla there’s nothing beats a festival and Atlantic Canada has thousands—yes thousands of festivals a year! There are festivals celebrating everything from antique cars, chocolates and airplanes to whirligigs, jazz, and oysters.



ECONOMUSÉE is a popular way to experience traditional crafts, agricultural and fishing traditions in the Maritimes. This one features oyster farming and is found just outside of Caraquette, NB.

Go wild!

If you yearn for a more solitary experience, consider hiring an outfitter and taking a wilderness canoe or kayak journey. I invited ten women two summers ago to join me for a five-day kayaking excursion around Saint Mary’s Bay. We hired Hantford Lewis at Hinterland Adventures and Gear in Weymouth, NS. It was beyond wonderful. I’ve also canoe trips with him into the Tobetic Wilderness Area. Every province has a list of outfitters and it’s worth thinking about customizing a trip for your family or a group of friends. Goodbye cell phones, schedules and traffic. Hello quiet and tranquility. And it’s not as expensive as you may think.

Small yet alluring Archipelago

Oops. I forgot to mention Îles de la Madeleine. Well, you see, it’s one of the few places I’ve not visited. But that’s about to change. I have in front of me a great spread of options. I’m not sure how I can go kitesurfing, caving, horseback riding, bird watching, tour a cheese factory and fit in other gastronomic delights in a mere few days. But that’s the great thing about this region. It’s easy to go back.

So why vacation anywhere else when there is so much diversity, scenic beauty and incredible hospitality in our own backyard? Plus, it’s good for our economy. And surely it’s good for us simply to connect with each other—and “renew our capacity for wonder”. Yeah.



Kerras Jeffery works away at some of his folk art his Back Road Folk Art studio “up west” in Laretta. Whimsical, foolish and fun, his renditions make everyone smile. Kerras is one of hundreds of artisans on this amazing little island.