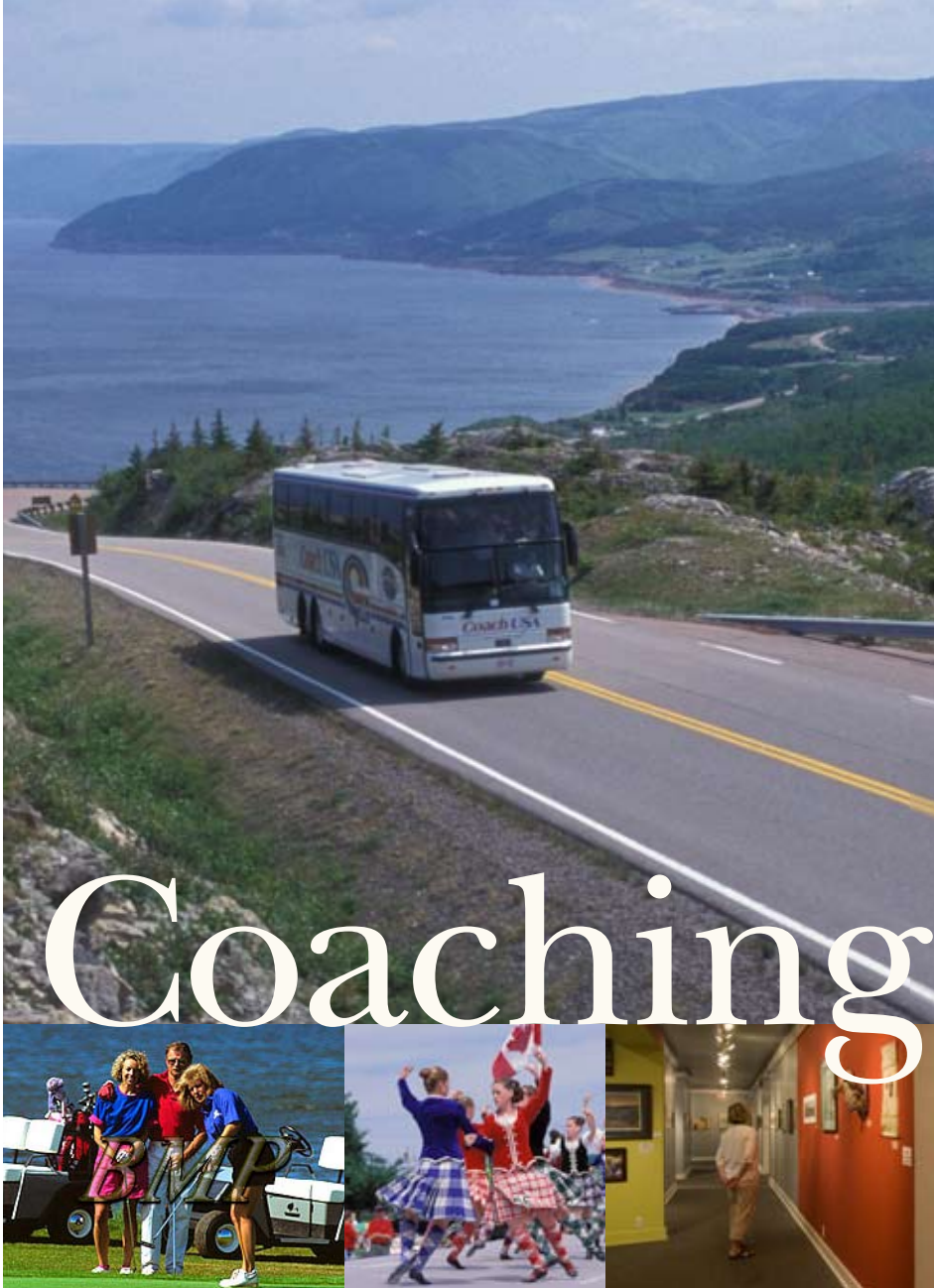


## TOURING BY MOTORCOACH PUTS PLEASURE BACK INTO TRAVEL

By Sandra Phinney



# Coaching ways



I haven't always been a big fan of vacations that included motorcoach tours. The notion of joining a group and traveling in this fashion never appealed to me, until I was invited to join one starting in Halifax that would venture to Lunenburg and eventually loop around Cape Breton.

Here's what I discovered. For starters, you meet some fascinating people on group tours. I met young teachers from Toronto, a professor from New York, a musician from Australia, a retired couple from Scotland, and honeymooners from the US. And I was totally blown away by the comfort of the coach. Unlike planes, it was plush and roomy. Then there were little things like not having to lug my suitcase. At each stop my luggage magically appeared at my room and I simply left it outside the door when we were

ready to leave. Nor did I worry about getting decent tickets to concerts and attractions, or wonder where my next meal would be. As this was all taken care of, I was free to enjoy the moment and my fellow travelers.

Two of the main reasons people consider a coach tour are peace of mind and value. Details are taken care of, and the price is reasonable compared to the cost of setting everything up oneself. Tens of thousands of tourists are opting for the motorcoach tour experience. Over the

past 15 years, Grand Circle Tours alone, for instance, has taken approximately 2,000 travelers a year on tour. This kind of response from travelers makes Dennis Campbell, president of Ambassadors Gray Line, grin from ear to ear. He said it's not uncommon for first-time coach tour travelers to be wowed by the experience. It's worry-free travel, he said. "But more importantly, the experience off the bus is as important as the experience on the bus. It's all about significant choices." Ambassadors, Grand Circle and Caravan are three of the biggest coach tour companies in Atlantic Canada.

Betty Zane Morris from Rome, Ga., researched coach tours on the Internet early last summer while recovering from foot surgery. She and her husband decided to find a cool place to take a trip in August, and



Top to bottom: Whale watching off Digby Neck, NS; LeNoir Forge Museum at Arichat in Cape Breton; La Viree performing at an Acadian Festival.

settled on a tour to the Maritimes offered by Ambassatours. “It was a trip full of wonderful surprises,” said the retired professor of communications from Shorter College. “The Cabot Trail was magnificent, with all that gorgeous scenery. And I was really impressed with the quality of the performance of *Anne of Green Gables* at the Confederation Centre of the Arts in PEI.”

Aside from meeting a lot of like-minded travelers from different countries who were as curious and interested in history and culture as she was, Betty loved the notion of a hassle-free vacation. She discovered that coaches are comfortable and roomy. The ride was a lot smoother than her car and the vistas were splendid. Chuckling, she adds, “It may have saved our marriage — we didn’t have to argue about what exits to take.”

The feisty traveler from Georgia had so much fun on this coach tour that she just finalized another trip for October of 2008 through her travel agent for a repeat performance. This time, 25 buddies will be aboard. “I was so impressed with my trip and



had so much fun that I want to take all my friends,” Betty said. “We need to learn more about our neighbours to the north.”

Many people start their tour in various parts of the US and ferry over on The CAT. The ferry means not only less driving time, but it gives the coach-tour company a chance to provide yet one more unique experience for travelers. “It’s one of the world’s fastest high-speed ferries so it’s very special and a lot of fun,” said Campbell.

Grand Circle Tours is another coach-tour organization that visitors often see on The CAT. The company offers a package called Nova Scotia and the Canadian Maritimes, with a minimum of two nights in each of the three Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. “This itinerary has been a favourite at Grand Circle since 1992,” said Vinette DiGregorio, vice-president of product marketing. “While at heart, trips to this part of the world are focused on scenery, our trip also brings travelers close to the local culture by introducing them to people who make this part of the world home,” she said. All the program directors (people leading the trips) are local to the Maritimes, which means they’re tuned in to the heartbeat of the region.

Caravan Tours currently specializes in affordable coach tours to Latin America along with various parts of the United States and Canada. The eight-day trip through the Maritimes departs from Halifax and heads to Peggy’s Cove, the fishing village

### A little coaching lore

Caravan Tours started in 1952 and was the first in North America to offer grand tours of Europe — 11 countries in 40 days. The tours turned out to be a huge success and garnered so much attention that in 1965 CBS featured a two-hour documentary on the company. That in turn inspired the 1968 romantic comedy movie *If It’s Tuesday This Must be Belgium*.

### Start your own tour

Put the words “coach tour” and “Atlantic Canada” in the same sentence and John McGarry’s eyes light up. The Muskegon County Museum director in Muskegon, Mich., arranges yearly educational tours for his board, patrons and members of the museum. They fly into a region then scoot around by coach to visit places of interest, weaving in historical landmarks, museums and cultural experiences.

Last year, someone suggested going to Nova Scotia, so John and his wife Kay did some research and discovered Experiential Tours, based in Truro, N.S. Before long they were plotting out areas of interest with a tour specialist.

Twenty-five Michigan travelers flew into Halifax and were met by a personal tour guide with a coach and driver. Over 10 days, they toured Nova Scotia, visiting national parks and historical attractions. They took time to visit a winery and go whale-watching. “Over the course of our trip we saw finbacks and humpbacks, eagles — even a moose that walked out in front of the bus. Our little digital cameras are chockfull,” says John.

Lasting impressions include not only beautiful scenery but also how well-informed and personable the guides were at each destination. “And you are so far advanced of the US without those damned billboards everywhere. It’s nice to travel down a road and see a country that is so marvelous,” he says. The trip to Nova Scotia ranks at the top of all the trips he has set up over the years. John and his wife were so impressed that they plan to return.

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with the famous lighthouse. Visitors can expect spectacular sights and experiences on this journey, including a visit to Fortress Louisbourg in Cape Breton, whale-watching, a great feed of lobsters in Prince Edward Island, and time at the famous Hopewell Rocks in New Brunswick.

