

DAY TRIPPER: Family caps Thanksgiving celebration by hiking Cape Breton trails

SANDRA PHINNEY

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Margo MacGregor enjoys a brisk outing on the boardwalk that runs along the coast adjacent to the Cabot Links in Inverness. (Sandra Phinney)

What do Thanksgiving dinner and hiking have in common? My family experienced both on the same day in Mabou, and we are still talking about it.

First, the food. Picture this: between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., volunteers fed 612 people, including me and seven members of my family at the annual Thanksgiving dinner at St. Mary's Parish Hall.

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I think we consumed enough food to feed a small village, possibly because the dressing is better than mine. Turns out to be Mary Beaton's recipe.

Mary's in charge of this affair, although she credits a team of 60-plus volunteers with pulling it off.

How to feed this many people? Cook 24 turkeys, 70 kilograms of turnip, 160 kilograms of potatoes and 70 kilograms of carrots. Chop up a small mountain of cabbage for coleslaw, then focus on the dressing, made up of 140 kilograms of potatoes, five bucket of bread crumbs, 25 kilograms of butter and fistfuls of seasoning.

Mary says some people eat more stuffing than potatoes.

In spite of this being a gargantuan undertaking, Mary can't imagine spending Thanksgiving any other way.

"I haven't had a Thanksgiving dinner in my own home for over 40 years," the 67-year-old says.

"Even our children growing up came to this hall for dinner."

After polishing off pumpkin pie and strong cups of tea, we waddle back to our cars. John Cooper sums it up nicely: “Did you notice Nobody was glued to their smartphones! And there were lots of young volunteers making sure everybody had what they needed and clearing off the tables.”

Although some of us would rather nap than hike, we head off to roam the hills of Mabou.

In Inverness County, there are extraordinary areas to hike, including 17 trails that wind along rugged coastlines, unique plateaus and intimate wooded areas. They range from short to long, benign to death defying.

There are three trailheads: from Sight Point Road on the outskirts of Inverness village (note: the road is narrow and can be rough) from Cape Mabou via Glenora; and from the road that leads into Mabou Mines (about 12 kilometres from Mabou village, and the easiest access).

We choose the latter. Although it’s a steady uphill climb, the look-off view at Fair Alistair is worth the climb.

Margo MacGregor recently commented:

“It made me curious about the longer hikes, and now I want to go back and explore more of the trails. It also made me think about the Rankin Family and other local artists and where they draw their inspiration from for songs like We Rise Again, one of my favourites.”

Reaching the look-off, Margo couldn’t resist serenading us with a chorus from that very song. At that moment, the wind diminished as if bowing to honour the spirits of the clans.

This region was settled in the early 1800s by the Scots; several of the trails were cart tracks built by these pioneers, providing access between villages. Thanks to the Cape Mabou Trail Club, formed in 1993, the old cart tracks were restored and new hiking trails were developed. Volunteers keep the trails free from deadfalls and report dangerous sections that erode or are not otherwise passable. For updates, visit capemabouhiking.com.

Unfortunately, the family had to return to the mainland the next day, but Barrie and I headed over to Baddeck for a morning concert at Knox Church followed by a music session at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum.

Following the session at the museum, we head to Uisge Ban (ish-ka-ban) Falls on the outskirts of Baddeck (directions available at the visitor’s centre.) At the end of the two-kilometre trail, you literally walk into a 15-metre narrow waterfall, banked by a gorge that towers 150 metres on both sides.

We’re not the only ones there: families, children, teens and seniors — all have enjoyed an easy stroll through canopied trails, with gnarled roots stretching over big rocks next to a swishing stream. It’s pure pleasure.

In the past, Barrie and I have hiked in various locations in the national park along the Cabot Trail. If you have your heart set on seeing a moose, head for the Skyline Trail, a 9.2-kilometre loop that takes you to a dramatic look-off point. There’s a shorter way to get to the look-off, but taking the longer route improves your chances of seeing a moose.

The last time we were there, we saw five moose less than 10 metres from us, including a big bull moose the size of a SUV. My heart pounded.

In case you didn’t know, moose do not see very well and are colour blind.

“But that doesn’t mean they are stupid,” Barrie says.

“Be sure not to aggravate them by using the flash in your camera or getting too close and personal.”

Although we had planned this year to hike again into Egypt Falls, located in the Upper Margaree area, our time simply ran out. But it’s another one of the “wow” places.

Warning: The trail to Egypt Falls is not suitable for children, and you’d better be in decent shape; the last part is several hundred metres of near-vertical drop. Yes, there’s a rope. When you get to the bottom, you’ll be rewarded with a gorgeous setting facing a wide and dramatic waterfall.

Of course, a drop-dead gorgeous (and flat) place to hike is along Inverness Beach. If you have a sharp eye, you just might find a pocketful of beach glass.

Day Tripper is an occasional feature highlighting places to explore across Nova Scotia and beyond. A variety of writers contribute to this series.

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