

Pleasure islands

There's lots of fun to be had exploring our islands in the sun

Story and photography by Sandra Phinney

It's a balmy August day. Four vehicles pull up at Mason Point in Tangiers, NS, each carrying one canoe, two people, and enough gear and grub to last four days. We're headed to Baltee Island where we'll set up camp. Over the years, hundreds of kayaks have left these shores. That's not a big deal; what's unusual is that we intend to do this trip in canoes—a rare sight, as few venture out for a wilderness canoe trip over the briny deep.

What's even more unusual is that we've never done this before. Sure, we've all paddled rivers and lakes in various parts of Atlantic Canada, but never on the ocean. Do we have what it takes to camp and explore the 100 Wild Islands—Nova Scotia's largest coastal wilderness region—for four days? The weather forecast calls for everything from sun to rain, wind, fog and an electrical storm.

Nutshell: we not only survived, we thrived. Sure, the swells on the second day were a bit of a challenge (read: downright scary), but we took our time crossing to Carryover Cove where the rocky cliffs and emerald lagoons were simply spectacular.

Paddle on

All over this area are hidden coves, islands galore, and pristine sandy beaches. Every half hour the topography changes as the 100 Wild Islands feature more than 250 kilometres of coastal habitats and 400 acres of wetlands. It includes everything from boreal forests, bogs and barrens that have remained isolated for more than 10,000 years, to freshwater lakes—rare on islands. We discovered one while on a hike and had an invigorating swim!

If kayaking is your thing, this is nirvana. Don't have a boat? Sign up for a kayaking excursion with Coastal Adventures at Mason Point.

Landlubber fun

If you prefer having your feet firmly connected, step aboard a lobster boat in Wedgeport with brothers Lucien and Simon LeBlanc and the Tuskent Island Tours. Local lore says that the Tuskent Islands consist of 365 islands, one for every day of the year. That's a tad exaggerated, but most agree that including islets and significant ledges, there are over 200, each with a distinct personality. En route to Big Tuskent for a stop over at the family's fishing shanty—where you'll have a huge bowl of fish chowder and homemade rolls—Lucien tells stories.

For example, you'll hear about Russell Arundel who bought Outer Bald Island in the late 30s. He built a stone house so tuna anglers could rest there if caught in foul weather. But he also tried to turn the island into a separate nation—the Principality of Outer Baldonia. Its manifesto stated that fishermen are a race and endowed with certain rights, including the right to be free from nagging, shaving, women, taxes, politics and war, to name just a few. It's a true story, and one many associated with the region. On the way back, Simon, an accomplished musician, plays the guitar and sings. The entire outing is pure pleasure.





Clockwise from top: Typical sunset scene in the 100 Wild Islands; Captain Lucien LeBlanc looks over to the Tusket Islands and tells engaging tales about them en route to Big Tusket Island; a bunker on McNutt's Island; one of the many "wow" beaches in a tour of the 100 Wild Islands; guests of Tusket Island Tours enjoy homemade fish chowder on Big Tusket Island during a lunch stop.

Many options

For yet another "wow" experience, sojourn to McNutt's Island with Ken and Sherri Taylor and the Shelburne Island Boat Tours. You'll be given a choice to return on the same crossing or to disembark and get picked up a few hours later on the second run. Choose the latter! (Bring a picnic lunch). From the wharf, hike inland where you'll eventually come upon a large cement bunker, which encompasses a huge cannon-like gun several feet below. It's the most bizarre thing I've ever seen that's not in a museum. Even stranger is the fact that it's in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by scrubby trees.

There's another bunker just like this one, about 150 feet away connected by an underground tunnel.

Together with the Sandy Point Battery on the mainland, the bunkers protected the region from the threat of submarines during the Second World War. At one point there were 200 soldiers and 100 workmen on McNutt's Island. It took 17 men to man each gun.

The island was founded by Alexander McNutt in 1765 and was originally called New Jerusalem. Cats were not allowed on the island because they were not mentioned in the Bible.

Fast forward 100 years to the late 1800s when there was a post office, school, even a hotel on the island. Mind you the hotel consisted of two bunkhouses—one for ladies and one for gents. Sheep roamed around in the wild and were only corralled once a year and sheared for their wool. Sheep still roam around today (and are sheared once a year) although no one actually lives on the island. A few locals have cottages; they visit for summer outings or come over the hunt in the fall.

Here are three more island gems to add to your "must visit" list:

Brier Island—oh the birding and nature walks! Bonus: the island has accommodations and you can drive there by taking two ferries and mere minutes to cross.

Big Tancook—where the oh-so-tasty Tancook Sauerkraut originated. Ferry over and back as a foot passenger.

Cape Sable Island—accessible by a causeway. Head to The Hawk. Designated as an Important Bird Area, at low tide it's also home to the 1,500 year-old "drowned forest" of exposed petrified tree stumps.

Doesn't all this talk about islands just whet your appetite? And yes, there are more islands to discover. Just go. 🐾



Sandra Phinney

Sandra's Sauerkraut Salad ▲

- 4 cups (1 L) fresh sauerkraut, drained
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 sweet red pepper (or green), chopped
- 1 red onion, chopped
- ½ cup (125 mL) sugar
- ½ cup (125 mL) cider vinegar

Dissolve sugar in vinegar, mix well with vegetables, then refrigerate. This recipe is great to take camping, on picnics, hikes, or to pot lucks. Keeps well for a few days.