

*A lesser-known,
but special place*



by Sandra Phinney

In the spring of 2007, I travelled around parts of the Maritimes gathering information for *Fodor's Travel Guide*. This included driving through the Acadian Peninsula in New Brunswick, all the way up to Miscou Island. I remember thinking, "There better be a good reason for me to drive this far."

This year, when I was looking for a special place to spend a few days celebrating hubby's birthday in mid-October, fond memories of that region surfaced. In spite of the 10-hour trek

into the centre of the peat bog. Interpretive panels explain the importance of peat, as well as the flora you see, which includes everything from Labrador tea to huckleberry, cranberry, leatherleaf, and sheep laurel. Bird lovers will be happy to know more than 250 species of birds have been sighted on Miscou Island.

Although peat bogs on Miscou Island are protected, there are seven large active harvesting sites on Lemèque Island.



Sandra Phinney photos

to get there from our home in Yarmouth, N.S., it didn't take long for me to convince Barrie to take the road trip – all the way up to Miscou.

We were not disappointed. Known for its peat bogs, the region sported varying shades of red from the tip of Miscou Island down to Lemèque. Imagine miles of ground covered with splashes of scarlet, ruby, cherry, vermillion, and wine red. Much of the beauty is not visible by road but there are two places with perfect vantage points to see as much red as the eyes can take in: the top of the Miscou Island Lighthouse – designated a National Historic Site in 1974 – and the Peat Bog Boardwalk, about eight-kilometres before the lighthouse. The boardwalk was especially fun as we could stroll smack

The peat industry is huge in this region and plays a major economic role. Lucky me, I was able to get a site tour on the last day of the harvest with Serge Chiasson, the supervisor at Scotts Canada Ltd.

Chiasson took more than two hours of his life to drive me around to various harvesting plots, as well as tour the production stages inside the plant. I was especially impressed with how the company adheres to environmental regulations, and the company's restoration program. As a result, the peat industry is both healthy and sustainable today.

As a quick aside, I was also pleased to learn how Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Canadian Sphagnum Peat Moss Association signed a five-year memorandum of understanding



Sainte-Cécile Church

this past June, which will have the two organizations partner in creating innovative peat land and wetland management practices. This means they will also cooperate and collaborate on research projects and share their knowledge.

The success and growth of the peat industry on Lemèque Island is not its only claim to fame. (By the way, both Lemèque Island and Miscou Island are connected to each other and mainland New Brunswick by causeways.)

On the west side is a small community called Sainte-Cécile, and midway through the village is a non-descript Roman Catholic Church. In 1968, Father Gerard Estou decided to paint the inside of his drab little church. He experimented in the back stairwells using cans of pastel spray paints. A few months later, every square inch of the church was painted in pastel-coloured crosses, circles, stars, and candles. Estou even painted the ceiling depicting his version of heaven – cakes and balloons. No doubt some parishioners thought this was sacrilegious, while others thought their priest was smoking some funny stuff. Today, the church in Sainte-Cécile is a national treasure. But there's more.

The church has astounding acoustics and has become centre stage for the Lamèque International Baroque Music Festival held each year at the end of July. Founded in 1975 by classical composer and harpsichordist Mathieu Duguay, the festival grew and grew and grew. Now, the series of concerts (and competitions) is an international event, drawing musicians from around the world who perform baroque music from the 1700s and 1800s on period instruments. You'd expect to find an event of this calibre in a major city – not in a remote rural location!

Another morning, Barrie and I visited Fruit-Can Ltd., a cranberry producer in the village of Chiasson – also on Lemèque Island. It was the first time I'd seen man-made cranberry bogs. The word breathtaking comes to mind. At harvest time, sections of the fields are flooded. The cranberries had been mechanically separated from their plants and were floating on top of the water, waiting to be drawn in by workers in the

water wearing chest waders. Millions of berries danced in a sea of red.

This farm started in 2000 with 25 acres. Today, 117 acres are under production, and, this year, the harvest is expected to be five million pounds. We bought a modest 10 pounds to bring home, along with a bag of dried cranberries—which were so sweet they tasted like candy. The dried ones didn’t make it home; they went straight to our bellies enroute.

Speaking of bellies, we ate at various places, mainly in Shippagan, which was home base for most of our stay. We had some hearty down-home-good breakfasts at our lodgings, Motel Brise Marine, and a fun breakfast with great coffee at the Cactus Café on the main drag. For dinners, we went not once but twice to Pinokkio, noted for its wood-fired pizzas, homemade pasta, creative appetizers, and decadent desserts. Sharing several menu items, we gave a thumbs up to everything we ate – both times.

While in Shippagan, another highlight of our stay was our visit to the New Brunswick Aquarium and Marine Centre. Caroline Roussel was our guide, and her passion for the aquarium and



Sainte-Cécile Church



its inhabitants was infectious! We saw and learned a lot about a variety of fresh and saltwater fish. For sure the child in me fell in love with Ocean, the seal, and her two offspring, Dory and Nina. I was also impressed with Alexix the lobster, a huge creature that raises eyebrows and commands respect.

As a bonus, Roussel took us behind the scenes to see the labs where research is conducted, and into a large area on a level above the tanks in the aquarium where



the fish are fed and cared for. The installations here include more than 31 separate indoor aquariums that contain 50 families of fish representing 100 species comprising 1,000 specimens. Outdoor installations include the tank where Ocean and her family reside and a touch tank (seasonal) that is loaded with creatures that can be handled.

This brings me to Tracadie. Oh my. I'm not sure how I missed visiting this area on my previous visits to the Acadian Peninsula. That won't happen again. Barrie and I spent more than two hours in the Académie Sainte-Famille, a four-storey wooden Colonial-style building built in 1912 by the Religious Hospitalers of Saint-Joseph (RHSJ). Within that structure is the Historical Museum of Tracadie – the only museum in Canada to tell the story about the lazarettos and leprosy in New Brunswick.

What struck me the most was the care and compassion the doctors, priests, and nuns had for everyone who suffered (and eventually died) from leprosy. I was touched to see photos of lepers, to hear about their stories, and to see some personal artifacts that spoke to their past, including things such as tables and chairs made by the leper community.

I also learned that this is where the first francophone hospital and health care system was established in the Maritimes. Between 1885 and 1979, 58 lepers from different nationalities came here to live and receive medical care; 58 nuns served here.

While Barrie had a grand tour of the building with Gaétane Labelle, curator of the museum, Sister Zélica Daigle, RHSJ, the museum's director, guided me through the various displays and provided me with background information. It's a tough story to learn about, but heart warming.

As an added bonus, I discovered that Sister Daigle had spent time back in the '60s as Mother Superior at Villa Saint Joseph, a long-term-care nursing home near where I live. Now a feisty 90-year-old, Sister seemed as happy as I was to make the connection and to know that "The Villa" was still going strong.

And there you have it: New Brunswick's Acadian Peninsula – with more than one good reason to return.



Sister Zélica Daigle



Burial ground of the lepers