

MINDFUL TRAVEL: Flying High at Celtic Colours

Sep 24, 2016 8:59 AM by: Sandra Phinney



1 / 9 Opening night at the 2015 Celtic Colours International Festival in Port Hawkesbury. This year's festival runs Oct. 7 to 15. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

Ever have an urge to get high as a kite — but without the aid of booze or drugs? It's simple. Go to [Celtic Colours International Festival](#) which takes place on Cape Breton Island every October.

Whether you take part in the full monty (nine-day musical extravaganza) or a shorter stint, matters not. You'll find yourself wearing a silly grin 24/7, tapping your toes, and itching to dance every waking minute you are in Cape Breton. Or "God's country," as a friend who lives there keeps reminding me.

It's been said about Cape Breton that if you shake a bush a fiddler falls out — and a stepdancer is never far behind. Fiddlers and dancers are as common as oatcakes in this part of the world. It's all about Celtic music. Throughout the island, music floats like motes in the air; it seeps into your bones. I've come to believe that "the music" might even be a magic potion in the water. For sure it's infectious.

I've attended concerts where at the first strike of the bow, everyone behaves as if they've had an electric shock. Within seconds, heads are bobbing and toes are tapping. Everything starts to giggle. Minutes later, even the floor and rafters shimmy and shake.

In Cape Breton, music is the warp and woof of life and as distinct as the smell of newly mown hay. Yet, back in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Scottish music was not very sexy. Big band, jazz, and rock 'n roll music weren't bosom buddies with the fiddle.

[See also: The Unusual Suspects line up for 20th anniversary of Celtic Colours](#)

More than one Cape Breton fiddler has recounted to me how they hid in a closet or headed to the basement to play their fiddle while attending university; and stepdancing was anything but cool.



Multi-

instrumentalist Tim Edey of the U.K., who debuted at Celtic Colours in 2010, returns to the festival this year with performances on Oct. 13 in Judique, Oct. 14 at Greenwood United Church, and plays the closing concert on Oct. 15 at Centre 200 in Sydney. (MURDOCK SMITH).

Then a peculiar thing happened. In 1972, CBC-TV aired a documentary called [The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler](#). Feisty Cape Bretoners rallied. Old timers and a handful of accomplished players dedicated hours and hours teaching anyone who wanted to learn. Everyone wiped the dust from their bows and parleyed with their fiddles.

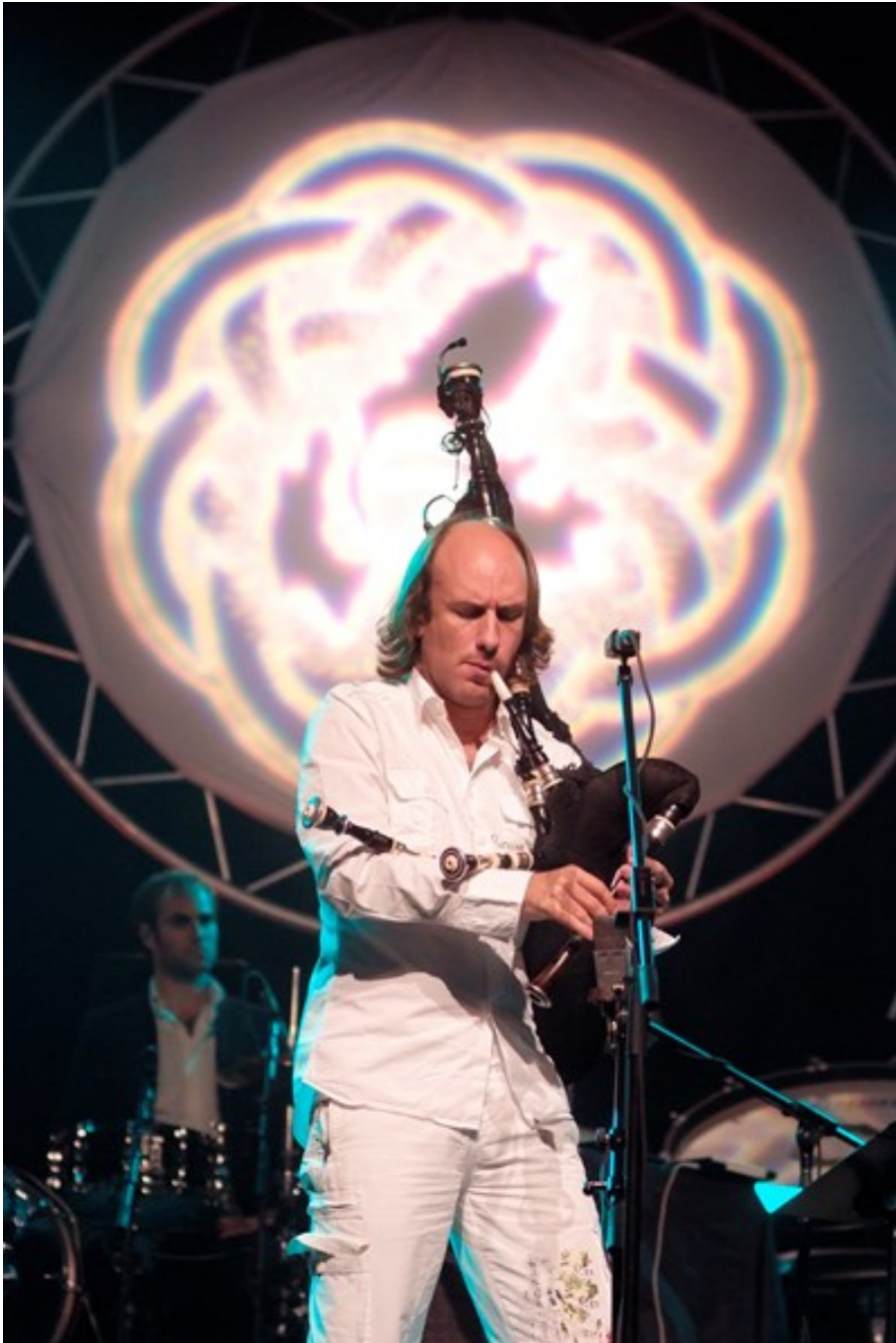
A year later, the first Festival of Cape Breton Fiddling was held in Glendale, featuring more than 130 players cheered on by 10,000 fans. The word "vanishing" morphed into the word "flourishing."

Fast forward to 1997, and the first edition of what is now the Celtic Colours International Festival. It has since grown to be the most prestigious international Celtic musical gathering in North America. This

year marks its 20th anniversary and festival organizers have pulled out all the stops for the event running Oct. 7 to 15 across the island.

Lowdown on the festival

The opening concert in Port Hawkesbury alone is worth whatever it takes to get there. Titled [Forever in our Hearts](#), the performances will include the likes of the Carlos Núñez Band, Symphony Nova Scotia & Scott Macmillan, Ashley MacIsaac & Mary Elizabeth MacInnis — and many more. (That's enough name dropping. But just so you know, Carlos Núñez is the world's most famous player of the *gaita*, the bagpipes of Galicia, a region in Spain that is renowned for its Celtic music.)



Carlos Nunez returns to headline the opening concert of the 2016 Celtic Colours International Festival at Port Hawkesbury Cive Centre on Oct. 7. This photo was taken at Celtic Colours 2008. (MURDOCK SMITH)

There are [174 “billed” solo artists, bands, and choirs](#) representing the U.S., Canada, U.K., Wales, Ireland, Spain, Scotland, Japan and Russia performing in the festival. It's a phenomenal collection of talent.

And these are only the ones who are part of the “officially” sponsored festival performances. Scores of others (upwards of 400) will be performing all over the island, morning, noon and night.

One of the perks of the festival is that it takes place all over the island. On any given day, in various regions, you'll find at least six things going on in venues ranging in size from large theatres, arenas, and school auditoriums to smaller places including churches, community halls, and pubs.

And — as if the music weren't enough — there are over 200 advertised community events going on. Want to learn how to play the harp? Check. Join a milling frolic or learn the art of clogging? Check and

check. Perhaps you'd fancy learning a few words of Gaelic. No problem. There are countless learning opportunities and activities that you can sign up for. Some charge a small fee; many are free.



The annual free CBC Mainstreet Live series with Wendy Bergfeldt at the Knox Presbyterian Church in Baddeck will be held Oct. 10 to 14 at 10:30 a.m. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

The first time my husband

Barrie MacGregor and I attended Celtic Colours was in 2007. We quickly became addicted to the island, her music and her people.

One year, we signed up for a Folk Art workshop. We each carved and painted a fish. Mine is yellow, has long painted eyelashes and red polka dots. I call her "Fishy" (and sometimes confide in her.) Barrie's fish? Well, he still needs some work although I must say his fins are sexy. I digress.

Our home away from home

Although choices abound regarding where to stay in Cape Breton, our favourite place to hunker down is [MacLeod's Beach Village](#) in Inverness. Why? You've heard the saying "Location. Location. Location." Sitting on bluff with easy access to a two-mile beach below, it's easy to see why "the village" uses that saying for their tag line. It's also within an hour of several concert venues, and a smorgasbord of community events.

Hiking trails like this one on the coast near Inverness fill in Cape Breton. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

Bonus: owners Ivan and Anita MacLeod (brother and sister) know every thing there is to know about Cape Breton. If you're a hiker, they'll point you to little known places not found in guide books. They



also know where to get the best oak cakes; where to buy woollen toques and shawls; and where to find beach glass.

As well, to the immediate left of Beach Village is [Cabot Links](#) billed as

“Canada’s first and only true links golf course.” To the right is its sister course, [Cabot Cliffs](#). And, across the main drag behind the village you’ll find the [Inverness County Centre for the Arts](#) —where we carved our fish. This year we’ve signed up for a luncheon and culture/art demo.

Mere kilometres away are other gems such as the [Glenora Distillery](#) producers of Glen Breton Rare Whiskey. (Great food also served here).

Further along you’ll find the famed [Red Shoe Pub](#), in Mabou. One night, after a meat loaf meal that our grandmothers would approve of, we decided to hang out to hear local fiddler and piano player.

The pleasures of Mabou

By 8:30 p.m. the place was hoppin’ and boppin’ and people were being turned away at the door. A couple hours later, [Ashley MacIsaac](#) strolled in. Within minutes, he was sitting next to the piano player and fiddling away. Just as he finished a set, a world champion bagpiper sauntered in for a beer, and yep — you guessed it — the pub practically burst at the seams with bagpipe music. And so it goes.

The Red Shoe Pub in Mabou is a hopping venue during Celtic Colours. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

We always have [Thanksgiving Dinner](#) at the Community Hall in Mabou. That’s a story for another time, but suffices to say volunteers make upwards of 200 pounds of turkey stuffing. Eh-yep.

On Saturday nights in West Mabou, head to the community hall. Oh the dances there! I was once swept off my feet by a gentle giant; I could have run away with him — but he didn’t ask. (And the [Sunday](#)



[Farmer's Market](#) in Mabou is a must.)

Back to square dances. They occur six out of seven nights a week somewhere on the island during the summer and fall. They often start at 10 p.m. and normally run until 1 a.m. I was told that they start this late because in the olden days, farmers needed time to finish their chores and clean up before walking to the hall with their family.

And just so you know, the dances feature jigs and reels which consist of “figures.” Figures can be upwards of 10 jigs (twice over) and a dozen reels (twice over), depending on how many people are in the set. Lost count? Doesn't matter. Just keep dancing.

I was going to write “And there you have it.” But truth is, I have barely skimmed the surface. I simply cannot capture everything there is about Cape Breton in general and this festival in particular.

Oh! And the colours! The hills are always ablaze with riotous reds, yellows and oranges. WARNING: You'll

be smitten.

No wonder [Destination Cape Breton Association](#) adopted a tag line that says, “Once you've visited Cape Breton Island, your heart will never leave.” Test it out for yourself.

Comments