

Discovering **Cape Chignecto**

Take the winding road less travelled to find great treasures

Story and photography by Janet Wallace

Nova Scotia's Cape Chignecto is one of Atlantic Canada's must-see adventures. This spear of land, pointing into the Bay of Fundy between mainland Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, offers stunning scenery and long, beautiful beaches.

The area is relatively untouched by tourism; just enough amenities make travelling comfortable without spoiling the charm—and sometimes quirky nature—of its rural communities. Certain highlights are hidden; maybe that's fitting for a place where rockhounding and fossil hunting are two major attractions.

We start our trip in Parrsboro. After visiting the town's centre, we drive past Ship's Company Theatre, and follow a secondary road. When we are about to turn around and head back into town, we realize we're going towards Parrsboro's harbour.

At the wharf, lobster boats sit in wooden cradles on the muddy seafloor and await the incoming tide. A stone's throw away, a lighthouse stands on a gravel bar. At low tide, you can walk to it; at high tide, the pathway is covered with a fast current of water forty feet deep.

The lighthouse, boats and the view are all unexpected treats—as is the Harbour View Restaurant. This unassuming diner near the wharf serves regular fried fare and, surprisingly, excellent lobster ravioli with creamy roasted red pepper sauce.

After lunch, we go to the Ottawa House Museum. Sir Charles Tupper named the building “Ottawa House-By-The-Sea” to commemorate Nova Scotia's entry into Confederation. Tupper was a Father of Confederation and Canada's sixth prime minister. Later, a sea captain used the building as an inn, complete with a dance hall and—allegedly—an in-house rum-running business.

Nearby, a thin strip of land extends to Partridge Island. After the 1869 Saxby Gale, this sandbar emerged connecting the island with the mainland. The isthmus has beaches on both sides with a marsh in between. In shallow water, great blue herons stand motionless except for sudden jabs to spear fish.

We are initially disappointed on realizing the road to Advocate Harbour is mostly inland. But the winding road unexpectedly thrills us with its switchbacks up and down the Cobequid Hills. Blueberry fields showcase bright red foliage—a sign fall frosts have arrived. These intermingle with lush forests and century-old farmhouses set in valleys or perched on cliffs surrounded by green fields.

Highway 209 swoops back to the coast after Port Greville, home of the Age of Sail Heritage Centre. The area was once a hotbed of shipbuilding; tales of shipwrecks and dramatic rescues are common along the coast.

In Spencer's Island, I discover, to my delight, a lighthouse that is open to the public. After climbing steep stairs, I squeeze past the light



Above: Low tide at Cape Chignecto Park.

Right: Lobster ravioli at the Harbour View Restaurant in Parrsboro.



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and see saltwater and uninhabited coastlines. I wonder if this is what a former lightkeeper may have seen, then correct myself. In times past, the view may have included schooners and a community bustling with shipbuilding.

We arrive at Advocate Harbour and watch the sun set over the long cobblestone beach, piled high with driftwood at the wrackline. Advocate Harbour is a great home base for adventurous travellers. You can kayak, visit Isle Haute by Zodiac, or take 3-4 days to hike the coastal loop at Cape Chignecto Provincial Park. We opt for day hikes and beach strolls. In our walks, the only people we encounter are fishermen, sitting on the edge of the wharf. They look into the water at each other's reflections while they talk and laugh.

A memorial shaped like a ship's steering wheel honours the area's seafaring history. A plaque notes that nearby communities were named by Samuel de Champlain in 1607 and may have been visited by Prince Henry Sinclair in 1398. Some say this Norwegian-Scottish nobleman was the first to "discover" North America, nearly a hundred years before Christopher Columbus, and perhaps hid the Templars' treasure at Oak Island.

A great culinary treasure is Wild Caraway. The restaurant focuses on using local, often organic, ingredients in novel and delicious ways, such as Jonah Crab Spring Rolls and Scallop Mac' and Cheese featuring local gouda, seafood, peas and bacon.

For another meal with a view, take the long, windy gravel road to Cape d'Or. Walking along pathways in the woods, we encounter dramatic drop-offs and amazing vistas. We enjoy the unusual perspective of seeing a lighthouse from far above. On low land at the



Top: A beautiful isthmus connects Partridge Island to the mainland near Ottawa-by-the-Sea.
Above: Spring rolls at Wild Caraway restaurant.



The lighthouse at Spencer's Island is open to the public.

cape's tip, the lightkeeper's residence has been converted into an inn next to the restaurant. You can't drive down but the innkeepers will shuttle you there in an ATV.

After relaxing around Advocate, we explore the western side of Cape Chignecto. The only way to go around the point is by foot or boat. By car, we go inland to the ghost town of Eatonville and then backtrack along the Bay of Fundy shoreline towards the point.

This route is mostly uninhabited — no restaurants, gas stations or accommodations. There are, however, sand marshes and gorgeous beaches — some sandy, others covered with cobblestones. The sandstone has been shaped into amazing pebbled rock formations and, at places, sea caves are carved into the cliffs. It's a short hike to the Three Sisters: a trio of sea stacks, rocky columns emerging from the water. After leaving the park, we head towards Joggins.

The Joggins Fossil Cliffs is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. You can wander the shoreline where fossils appear as the cliffs erode. Since the mid-1800s, scientists have explored the site and found evidence of the earliest reptiles and other long-extinct species. Charles Darwin refers to Joggins in *The Origin of Species*. In the museum, you can examine past discoveries and learn more about the history of life on earth.

I now appreciate the landscape in a different way. I imagine alligator-like creatures basking on the red mudflats while gigantic dragonflies swoop overhead. I go home feeling I have explored a wild and beautiful place. 🌊

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