

Powerful tides, and an urge to slow down

► **NOVA SCOTIA**
Continued from Page M1

day. We arrived just an hour before low tide, and climbed down a staircase to the red sands on the floor of the bay. We wandered around eerie formations of slippery mud and rock, and around a suspended island that is reconnected to the shore at low tide. The phenomenon is most dramatic at this top end of the bay. At the nearby Shubenacadie River, you can even ride the "tidal bore," where the tide rushing into the narrow river creates a wave that rubber boats ride.

Seeing the tide change was one of two principal reasons for picking Nova Scotia for our getaway, and we weren't disappointed. The other was to experience the Atlantic coast, with echoes of Maine but in an earlier, less-McMansioned era. And truth be told, you don't go to Nova Scotia to lie on the beach, but to stroll and bike and sightsee. That means it is just as attractive in the fall, when the crowds thin out, as in the short summer.

We split our trip, half on the Fundy side and half on the Atlantic side, near the UNESCO World Heritage Town Lunenburg, "the best surviving example of a planned British colonial settlement," as the UN website puts it. We spent three nights in a simple cottage on the Bay of Fundy, and four nights in a rented vacation home on the southeast Atlantic coast, which we found on an online list of cottage rentals.

Given our aversion to driving, we chose the high-speed CAT ferry from Portland, Maine, to Yarmouth. The 5½-hour journey was choppy, and quite a few people didn't take their Dramamine. The various movies and TV screens were playing too loud for my taste — not to mention the chinking slot machines in the casino. But the vessel is remarkably fast. It sails some days from Portland, some from Bar Harbor, so plan carefully. It leaves Portland at 8 a.m. and you must arrive an hour earlier, so we had a 4:30 a.m. wake-up in Boston. We spent \$1,035 round-trip for the car, two adults, and two children.

The other nonflying options are to drive the whole way, at least 11 hours from Boston, or drive eight hours to Saint John, New Brunswick, see the Fundy coast there, and take the cheaper

three-hour ferry to Digby, Nova Scotia. The Digby area and Digby Neck are among the most developed for visitors on the Fundy side, with superb local scallops, fresh off the boats each day, and whale-watching excursions. And don't miss nearby Annapolis Royal, a historic town on a peninsula north of Digby, with several quality inns.

As we discovered driving from Yarmouth toward Digby, the Acadian coast on the Bay of Fundy is quite basic and starkly charming. This was home to the French-speaking Acadian settlers, thousands of whom were rounded up in the mid-1700s for deportation by the British, in one of the sorriest chapters in Canadian history. Vast wooden churches still loom over several small towns on the coastal Route 1 that meanders through the towns on the Evangeline Trail, named for the Longfellow maiden.

It quickly becomes clear that Nova Scotians manage to live more simply and more slowly, with time to chat and ask about your visit and offer suggestions. The houses are plainer, and even the coastal vacation homes fit the landscape.

We stayed high up the bay, where the tidal swings are greatest. We chose Harbourville, a tiny, isolated village with a classic fishing harbor, where Elke Huber has restored a set of six fishing cottages and rents them by the night or the week, for \$100 to \$200 per night. We stayed in one of two cottages up on a bluff about 60 yards from the harbor, with a bedroom downstairs and two small single bedrooms upstairs. Other cottages are right on the water.

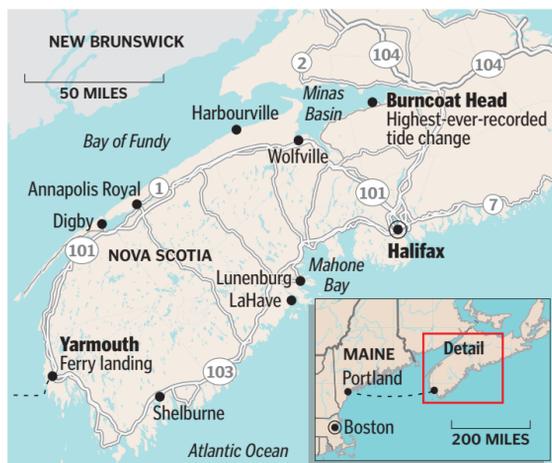
Elke's Schnitzelhaus restaurant is the town's lone eatery. We prefer to cook most meals on vacation, so look for equipped cottages. We bought lobsters — \$6 a pound — from the fish shop minutes after the lobster boat unloaded its catch, and steamed up a feast.

The harbor's rocky beach could use a cleanup; it was edged with tidal junk. But the tidal change is stunning: The lobster boats bob on the full water at dockside at high tide — and lie stranded a few hours later as the basin drains. There's little to do but stroll the shore, fun for the kids for a while, but soon you



PHOTOS BY JAMES F. SMITH/GLOBE STAFF

A provincial park on the Lighthouse Route offers a fine beach and a reconstructed boardwalk. The kitchen of Fred Covey's House (right), where the lighthouse keeper once lived.



SOURCES: Nova Scotia Geomatics Centre: OMC

DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

have to get in the car.

We explored the Fundy coast communities of Wolfville, a small college town with several quality restaurants and B&Bs, and Canning (great home-made sausage lunches at Al's). Blomidon Provincial Park has a fine beach, set against red cliffs, that offers a great setting at low tide. The more ambitious can hike to the end of Cape Split, which juts out into the bay.

From there, we looped around the Minas Basin and made our extra trek to Burncoat Head

(some spell it Burntcoat) on the Fundy Shore Ecotour, an easy half-day journey.

For the second half of our stay, we drove for two hours over the forested middle of the peninsula to the Lunenburg area. The southwestern Atlantic coast is far more developed than the Fundy side, with more to do. We stayed in a gracious, high-windowed 19th-century home in Dublin Shore, near LaHave (anglicized to rhyme with behave) and available until mid-October. Jo Stern, the owner, spends half the year

there with her partner Dave Scarratt, living in the adjacent original post office. The stately three-bedroom, two-bath home is set on four acres on a point with the ocean on three sides, great for kids to explore. We often biked two miles north along the Lighthouse Route to the LaHave Bakery for scones and coffee. Two miles south are two wide public beaches, Crescent and Risser's, and the local maritime museum. Risser's has a wonderful boardwalk over the dunes and wetlands behind the beach, great in any season.

The coastal area around Lunenburg is packed with things to do. Lunenburg, a beautifully preserved 18th-century shipbuilding town, is worth a day itself. We frequently took the cable ferry across the mouth of the LaHave River to shorten the trip to Lunenburg; get a book of tickets if you'll do it often. It leaves every 30 minutes from each side. Nearby is The Ovens, a coastal warren of caves and cliffs (with an admission charge).

We made the 90-minute trip north to Halifax just once, to see the Tall Ships visit there. The capital is worth a full day of exploring the waterfront and meandering the nearby streets and cafes. There's a bohemian feel to many neighborhoods. But we preferred to get back to the Lunenburg area for quiet strolling and meandering in the surrounding fishing towns turned vacation escapes, including Mahone Bay and Green Bay. A colleague recently spent a week in a similar cottage rental, in the tonier St. Margaret's Bay, and also found himself drawn to slowing down and doing less.

We completed our circuit with a final three-hour drive back south to Yarmouth along the Atlantic coast, including a lunchtime stop in Shelburne, another inviting, restored coastal town. The ferry to Portland — a smoother ride that day — leaves at 3 p.m. and gets you to Portland at about 8:30 p.m., making for a near midnight arrival back in Boston. And we felt we'd barely gotten to know the province.

Next time, on to the northern half of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island.

James F. Smith can be reached at jsmith@globe.com.

If you go . . .



How to get there

Halifax, Nova Scotia's capital, is about 700 miles from Boston, or 11 hours by car. There is non-stop airline service. The CAT ferry departs Portland for Yarmouth (5½ hours) Friday and Sunday through Oct. 12. Round-trip passengers \$199, cars \$378 (including fuel surcharge). www.catferry.com.

Where to stay

Hillsdale Inn
Annapolis Royal
877-839-2821
www.hillsdalehouseinn.ca
Victorian home built in 1859; 13 rooms, pet friendly, \$119-159 per night, open through Dec.

Harbourville Cottages
Harbourville
902-538-0844
www.harbourville.com
Six fully-equipped rustic cottages and two-room B&B. \$100-\$150 a night. Through Oct. 31.

Fred Covey's House
Dublin Shore
902-693 2413
www3.ns.sympatico.ca/riverain

Three-bedroom home on a rocky point. \$975 a week in season; through October.

Where to eat

Schnitzelhaus
Bay of Fundy
The only restaurant in the village. Hearty German food.

Fundy Restaurant
34 Water St., Digby
902-245-4950
www.fundyrestaurant.com
On the waterfront, overlooking the fishing fleet.

The Knot
4 Dufferin St., Lunenburg
902-634-3334
A favorite local pub at the entrance to town.

If you go . . .



Where to stay

Camping La Grigne
011-33-5-56-26-54-88
www.leporge.fr

This is car camping and there are plenty of neighbors — but the attitude is calm, family-friendly, inexpensive, and you can walk to the beach in a few minutes. Two people with a tent and space for a car, \$16-\$27, depending on your dates between April 1-Sept. 30.

Seeko'o Hotel
54 quai de Bacalan, Bordeaux
www.seekoo-hotel.com

An iceberg (the hotel's name in Inuit) in Bordeaux; this new luxury hotel's facade is covered in white Corian. Prices start at about \$270 per night.

Where to eat

Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat
Château du Prince Noir
26 bis, rue Raymond Lis Lormont

011-33-5-56-06-12-52
www.jm-amat.com
Prix fixe lunch \$43, dinner \$72; a la carte about \$144 without wine.

Restaurant Le Savoie
1, place Trémoille, Margaux
011-33-5-57-88-31-76

Pleasant lunch stop, with glass roof in one room, lacquer ceiling in another. Specials include an appetizer-main dish prix fixe for \$26 and a glass of a rotating stock of high-end wines for \$10.

Café Lavinal
Place Desquet-Bages, Pauillac
011-33-5-57-75-00-09

Located in a restored hamlet, this cafe offers bistro fare with main dishes at about \$22.

Deep roots, graceful lines, and a frothing surf

► **BORDEAUX**
Continued from Page M1

about family," Maillé says, looking at the people gathered around the room. "There's nothing here, but it's so convivial that everyone gets together."

I'll hear several variations on that refrain on this road trip, and learn that throughout the year the region is one of unexpected extremes — relaxed and sophisticated, wild and wonderfully civilized — a mix that demands the grandeur of a composed photo and the spontaneity of a point-and-shoot.

"People come here year after year," says Bordeaux native Damien Reynaud, 31, a lifeguard at the Gressier beach, near the town of Le Porge in the Médoc region, where I'll stay for most of my trip. "It's calm. There are five little restaurants on the other side of the dune and no buildings on the beach except ours. It's calm."

Except when it's not.

Reynaud's perch overlooks a swath of the Atlantic that is a magnet for surfers, and near the shore, waves break and foam. He cites a recent summer day when he and his team plucked 15 wayward swimmers from the frothy zone in front of his station.

I meet my traveling companions in Arcachon and head to the Dune du Pyla, which, at over 300 feet, is a mountain of sand separating forest and sea.

On a summer day, there are classic tourist trap warning signs everywhere: swarms of them wedge through greasy food stands and knickknack shops that sell seashell necklaces and Tokio-Hotel towels.

We climb the dune on a giant plastic staircase crowded with gawkers, but when we reach the crest and fan out, its immensity swallows us. Everyone suddenly has all the space they need.

Spread out far below are Arcachon Bay with its famous oyster beds and the sea beyond. Behind us, the length of the dune runs down into the trunks of the trees



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The staff of the Jean-Marie Amat restaurant, from left: Guillaume Legrand, Maeva Fougeres, Guillaume Gritteret, Morgan Geraud, and Antony Beau on the grounds of Château du Prince Noir. The port of Andemos-les-Bains, along Arcachon Bay (left).

on the forest edge. High above the treetops, we joke that it feels like we're peering down on the forest moon of Endor, yet there's a peacefulness that comes from being in a high place that blends the new and the familiar.

So far, it's been surprisingly easy to forget the elephant in the room: our proximity to some of the best wineries in the world.

We drive north on the D2, the two-lane departmental highway through the Médoc that hosts many of wine's crown jewels like the Saint-Estèphe, Pauillac, Saint-Julien, and Margaux appellations, a stunning ensemble that merits an entire trip of its own. At Château Verduz in Saint-Seurin de Cadourne, we meet Alain Dailedouze, who has the build and personality of a boxer too gentle to deliver a knockout punch.

"I could have done other things in life, but this place was abandoned and had lost its aura," Dailedouze says, gesturing at his beautiful fields and aging château, "but my father got the vine-

yard going again in 1965 and I took over in 1990." Yet his connection is much deeper. "We have a wedding contract connecting our family to this land dating to 1471 and it goes even further back than that."

Dailedouze, 59, is a walking history book who dug his roots deep into the land and is now doing most of the vineyard's work by himself and counting on family for untold hours of help.

"When you're family, there are things you have to do, ways you have to navigate from top to bottom," he says. "It gives you a certain character."

He's got vines to trim, yet here he is, way after closing time, telling visitors about his wine and the region's history. Why does he stay in it?

"I love it," he says, smiling and almost embarrassed. "With a good bottle, you can remake the world."

This distilling philosophy continues with chef Jean-Marie Amat at his eponymous restaurant in the Château du Prince

Noir in the Bordeaux suburb of Lormont. The château sits at one end of the graceful Aquitaine Bridge that stretches out and away from the grounds, vanishing in the mist above the Garonne.

Amat emerges from the kitchen, a quiet, humble, even fragile gentleman who seems to function on an interior emotional level. Yet he is, as the French say, good in his skin, dressed not in chef's whites like the rest of his kitchen staff, but jeans, sneakers, a black T-shirt, and blue apron.

"When I started out in the '70s, the Bordeaux restaurant scene was scorched earth. I'd rather live in rhythm with the seasons; they are like a metronome for a chef," Amat says, evoking the arc of his culinary style. "Besides, I don't feel like doing the same things over and over. It's not that I wouldn't want to make a classic *lièvre à la royale* [hare royale style], but truthfully, it bores me a little."

I watch as the kitchen gains momentum, the dining room

A REGIONAL REFRAIN

Explore a photo gallery of Bordeaux's extremes at www.boston.com/travel.

fills, and orders crowd the rack on the back wall. Through it, Amat is quiet, reposed, and at home.

Watching him plate the dishes is like watching an artist paint, and his dish conception is an internal creation — simplicity that can come only from larger understanding.

The only one who makes much noise in the kitchen is head waiter Jean-Guylain Dupuy who, peering through the horizon of his rimless glasses, announces each order to no one in particular, tosses the order slip onto the shelf above the heat lamps with a flourish, pivots on his heel, and exits.

Amat's dishes are as distilled as he is. Alone at my table, I try grilled pigeon with spices, which initially registers on a sort of primal level with singular descriptors like dense, deep, and bloody.

I continue to explore the dish, finding contrasting sweet and savory flavors with cumin, cinnamon, powdered sugar, and soy sauce. At first whiff, I think of my father's French toast, but that's too literal, and when I couple a bite with a salad of fennel fronds and mint, which Amat grows just outside the window, the whole thing explodes. Unconsciously, my feet bounce up and down.

At the end, there's a fennel dessert: lightly candied cubes of the vegetable, with citrus sorbet and bits of crumble dough surrounded by a caramel tower. It's a play on textures and preconceptions, a quiet tour de force.

Dining alone at a restaurant this good can be a tragedy, but here in Bordeaux I'm having the time of my life consuming a master class.

Joe Ray, who writes and edits for the Paris-centric food blog *Simon Says*, can be reached at joearay@mailcity.com.