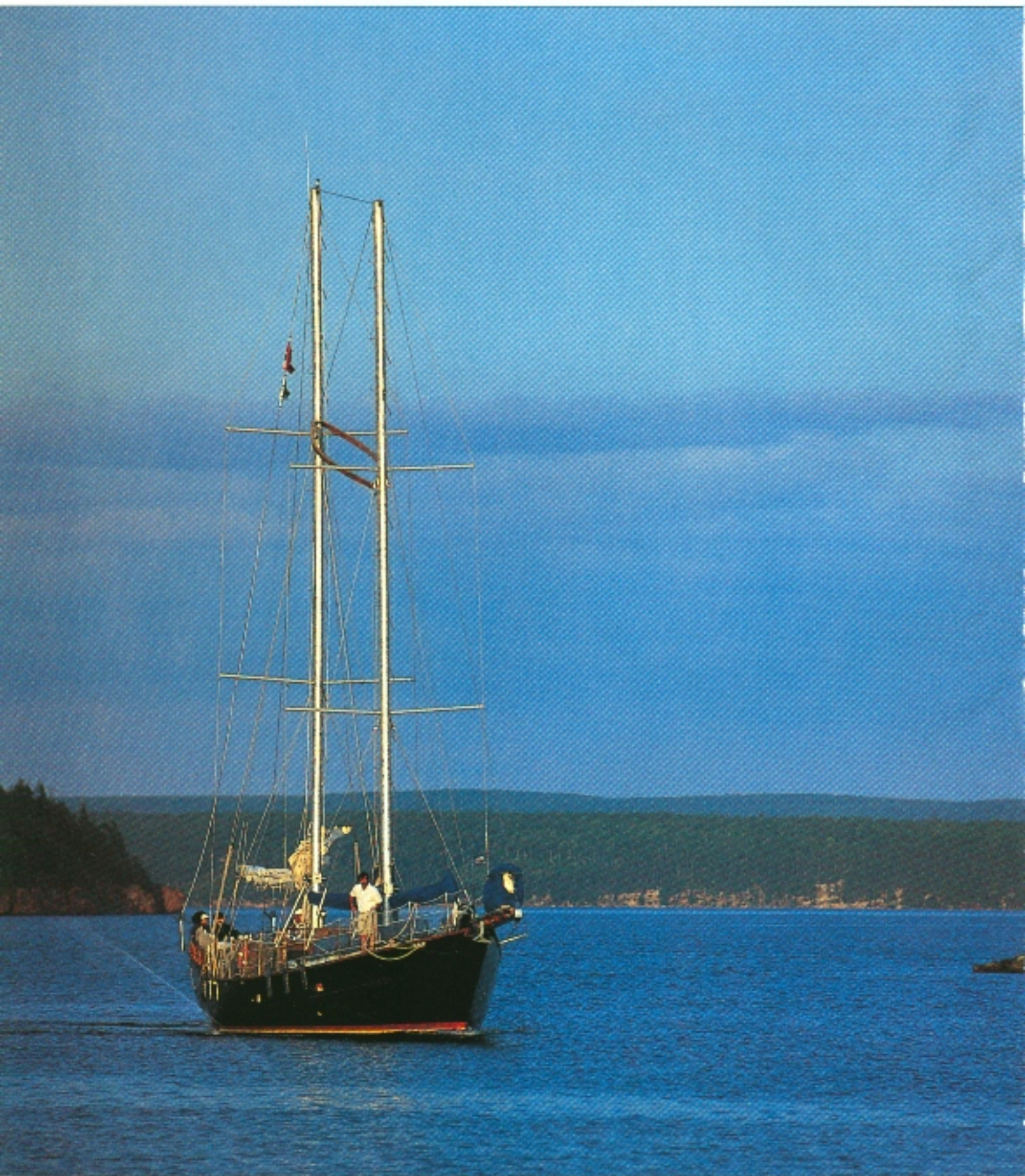
An aerial photograph of a winding asphalt road with yellow double lines, curving through a dense green forest on a mountain slope. The road disappears into the trees in the distance. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric.

Along The

CABOT
TRAIL





Between the sea and the sky, on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island, is a beautiful road that leads into the past.

*PAGES 84-85:
Angling alongside
the Gulf of
St. Lawrence, the
184-mile Cabot
Trail ribbons the
western headlands
above the village
of Chéticamp.
Stewart Kidston
Island lighthouse
(left) near Baddeck
guides boaters
plying the Bras
d'Or, Cape
Breton's capacious
saltwater lake
and a celebrated
sailing ground.*

T

HE FULL MOON RODE HIGH OVER SOUTH BAY Ingonish, and the moon, the dusk, the beach, and the long felspar cliffs were all a tawny red. Wind rustled in the maple trees outside my cabin, and sea gulls cried, riding the south wind where it hit the cliff and rose. From far away came the long whisper of waves on sand.

My daughter, Erica, came rushing out of our cabin with a video camera. She hopes to be an actress, and this was a scene made to order, full of melodramatic beauty. She flicked on the camera, pointed at the cliffs and the moon and the beach, and said: "This is Nova Scotia!"

In a way it was, and in a way it wasn't. We were three days into a drive along the Cabot Trail, which skirts the sea at the northern end of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. It is a stunning road that circles the Cape Breton highlands—184 miles of cliffside cuts, charming villages, and sudden views of sea and mountain. "I have travelled around the globe," proclaimed Alexander Graham Bell. "I have seen the Canadian and American Rockies, the Andes and the Alps and the Highlands of Scotland; but for simple beauty, Cape Breton outrivals them all."

The land is ragged, built of some of the oldest visible rock on earth, Precambrian gneisses and schists ground down and shaped by erosion and glaciers. From coves and valleys, steep slopes rise to level, windblown plateaus an average of 1,300 feet above the sea, clothed in fir and spruce trees. These hills, wrote author Harry Bruce, "are puny by the standards of the Rockies, and yet their gloomy, lethal, sea-bashed cliffs are so plainly magnificent that they make you think of a symphony by Sibelius." In some places mountains can seem delicate, but the long straight ridges through which the Cabot Trail climbs seem as heavy as tempered iron laid down in slabs beside a sea of steel.

By Michael Parfit ♦ Photographs by Michael Melford

Though you can drive the Cabot Trail in a day, you shouldn't. Because, though part of the road goes through a Canadian national park, it's not just a park kind of place. It's also a journey among ways of life that go back a long time.

The Trail is named for John Cabot, who is said to have put ashore here in 1497, and both French and Scottish settlers have been living here since the 18th century. In 1787, surveyor Samuel Holland wrote, "Nature has blessed few Countries with so many advantages as this Island . . . the general Fertility of the Soil;—the quantity of Timber, the many Rivers, . . . the innumerable Game. . ." Reports like his enticed Scottish Highlanders, who were leaving home in droves as the clan system disintegrated, looking for a better living or religious freedom, or simply driven off the land by their landlords.

WE—ERICA, MY SON DAVID, and I—began our journey at a formal celebration of some of that long Scottish heritage. It was the Gaelic Mod, held every year in early August at the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts near Baddeck.

The Mod is four days of music competitions, concerts, and demonstrations of old skills—sheepshearing, spinning, weaving, and dyeing—held on lawns and at an open-air theater. The weather—an uncertainty at any time in this maritime climate—was fine and clear, and the moon was on its way to full. At night it hung lopsided over the stage while a procession of singers and bands played their homage to the past. "It's like we just walked into another world," Erica wrote in her journal, and it was easy to listen to the pipes and believe you were at the port of Glasgow in 1820, waiting for a westbound ship—to another world.

We drove northeast from the Mod. Along the coast the view was all cottages and small farmhouses nestled in woods, and the landscape looked peaceful and welcoming. Then we crossed the abrupt ridge of Cape Smokey and dropped down into the seaside valley of Ingonish, a community stretched for miles along a

Colorful fishing boats fringe a pier at Neils Harbour. Surrounded by the fertile Gulf of St. Lawrence and the open Atlantic



coastline of pink stone, peach-colored beaches, and clear, cold water. We stayed overnight at the famous Keltic Lodge—a majestic hotel surrounded by cottages on a spit of land so narrow it felt more like an island. Our accommodations included a world-class golf course (no carts allowed!); a magnificent dining room, where we

(map), many Cape Breton islanders rely on the bounty of the sea for a living.



feasted on pumpkin soup, poached salmon, and homemade sorbet; and a swimming pool with a stunning view of the sea. Such elegance seemed a far cry indeed from the landscape-hardened lives of those early Scottish settlers.

The highway led us on. In the past couple of years, two automobile companies have shot commercials along the Cabot Trail, which speaks both to the scenery and to the challenging quality of the road. It rose and fell, twisted and turned, following the coastline for miles, then abruptly climbing into the highlands.

Still heading north, we followed the Trail along the edge of Cape Breton Highlands National Park, which covers most of the northeast corner of the island and offers trails, camping, and both austere mountains and sheltered beaches. We chose a beach where small waves washed in and out over layers of pebbles. "It makes a sound like a waterfall, only more musical," Erica wrote in her journal. "I guess it's an instrument for the ocean to play."



At Neils Harbour, just east of the park boundary, the park might never have been there at all. Neils Harbour is a hard-working little village on the water, with small, simple homes and a fishermen's cooperative. In the harbor we admired several wooden commercial fishing vessels, 28 to 32 feet long, known as Cape Island boats. And we saw the two main industries on this part of Cape Breton Island—fishing and tourism—juxtaposed. At the dock, three men transferred plastic bins of crabs from a boat named *April and Brothers* into a refrigerator van—in front of the video cameras of a busload of tourists from Martinique, Nova Scotia.

We found lunch at the Chowder House, which stood by gentle surf near a lighthouse.

"We do good business here," said Wanda Smith, who was making me a lobster burger and fries (\$4.95 Canadian). "For a short time. For a very short time. The rest of the time we stay home and have fun with our children."

Outside of summer, the tourist season, life along the Cabot Trail is simple and isolated. Wanda's words reminded me of those spoken by John Hamilton, the assistant manager back at the Keltic Lodge. John had told me of the hardship, the beauty, and the solitude along the Cabot Trail. "I have found serenity here," he said, "that I have found nowhere else."

A couple of days later I read the guest book

Forests, mountains, moose, and dramatic cascades like Mary Ann Falls (right) await visitors to Cape Breton Highlands National Park. Nova Scotia's largest protected wilderness, the park covers 367 square miles on the northern end of the island.









at another resort in Dingwall, and similar words jumped out at me. The resort, called the Markland, was more modest than the Keltic Lodge but just as beautiful—a collection of log cabins on a gentle slope by the sea. A photocopied handout in the lobby promoted “50 Things to do at the Markland.” Among them were “Breathe in the fresh air,” “Enjoy the Markland beach,” “Try some sketching,” and “Ask our chef about Big Pond.” This was not exactly a jet-setters’ list (Big Pond was the chef’s hometown), and the people who wrote in the guest book were glad. One short but passionate entry stood out: “Peaceful,” it read. “Thank God.”

The moon was with us at the Markland, too. At night I walked out into a long grass field be-



tween the hotel and the sea and stood looking out at the moon’s path on the water. I thought that the peace was not just a product of the scene or the climate, both of which can be tumultuous. It also sprang from the people who live here. You have the sense as you travel along the Trail that the

people here have come to terms with themselves and their impregnable land.

Much of that accommodation has to do with the way people value their families. The phrase “I knew your father” is a password here, and it was no coincidence that a collection of short stories from the Maritime Provinces I read as I drove the road was dominated by bittersweet tales of the generations fighting ancient battles to retain their identity and culture.

We drove around the northern corner of the island, with a detour to visit the tiny village of Meat Cove, where a precipitous campground full of tents seemed almost cantilevered over the sea. Then we crossed the wooded plateau through the national park. It took only a couple of hours, but the cultural distance we covered was far greater. We dropped out of the hills into Chéticamp, a French Acadian fishing village that looks west across the sea toward Prince Edward Island. Now signs were in French, and at Les Trois Pignons information center I was greeted with “*Bonjour*.”

Naturally we wanted Acadian food, so we ate at the Acadian Restaurant, which offers several traditional dishes, such as chicken *fricot* (much like a stew), meat pie, codfish cakes, and blood pudding—a kind of sausage. Below the restaurant was a small museum of Chéticamp artifacts in which a shy 15-year-old named

Unexpected elegance: The old Keltic Lodge rises amid the wilds of Cape Breton Highlands National Park. For 53 years it has pampered guests with rose gardens, golf, and gourmet cuisine fresh from the sea (above).

Mandy Deveaux sat spinning wool. In her long dress she was as demure and old-fashioned as a child Evangeline, the heroine of Longfellow's famous epic poem about an Acadian maiden's separation from her fiancé during the exile of 1755-1763, when the British seized the French in Acadie and deported them. The wheel whispered and clacked, and produced hanks of soft yarn, and I asked Mandy what kind of music young people in Chéticamp liked.

"Rap," she said.

"We've never made our own sound," said Charlie Larade, proprietor of a record store on the outskirts of Chéticamp—the only record store on the Cabot Trail. A cool breeze blew off the water, smelling of fish and salt. Posters of country music stars hung from the ceiling. "Our music is French music with fiddles, flattop guitars, and mandolins," Charlie said. He pointed out that Acadian French is something of an artifact; it contains idioms that were last spoken in Paris 200 years ago. But schools teach the modern language. "We're losing our patois," he said.

We drove south from Chéticamp, with the tidal waters of the Trail's famous salmon river, the Margaree, to our right. Hills rose black around us, and night lay all over the land, but a luminous twilight sky still brightened the walls of the clean white houses and lifted the river out of darkness.

When we got to our last stop, the Normaway Inn, a secluded lodge and cabins tucked away in the hills of the Margaree River Valley, the proprietor, an energetic man named Dave MacDonald, met us with a proposition.

"You got to go to the dance, bud!" he said. "It'll only take 45 minutes!" I didn't know him well enough yet to know he was, as usual, being wildly optimistic.

The dance proved to be about an hour and a half away down a maze of roads that ended up on ten minutes of dirt. For all I knew of where we actually went, it might as well have been through a door into the past. That was what it seemed: an old community hall filled with people of all ages, dancing square and step dances to a piano and fiddle. We got there a little after midnight, danced for a joyful 20 minutes, and then it was over.

As we emerged from the hall sweaty and happy, we ran into a man whom we had met back at the Gaelic Mod. I suspect he had been drinking something strong from Scotland outside the hall for some time, and he spoke to me urgently in Gaelic for four or five minutes before he figured out I wasn't getting it. Then he led us to the parking lot, where several men produced their own accordions, fiddles, and guitars to continue the night's music. It reminded me of

something John Hamilton had said—"The best music here is when people get together in their kitchens." Now it struck me again how complete life is on Cape Breton Island. The spirit of these communities is still built from within. Family here is powerful and clannish at times—people can be cold to strangers who move here and try to break in. But the people I met along the road fulfilled a reputation that at first seems contradictory—that people here are friendly to the traveler. On reflection it made sense: The circle may be closed, but it's so warm it's like a bonfire—you can stand in its glow.

Our last night at the Normaway I woke at 2 a.m. and couldn't sleep. I got up and went outside. The fading moon was hidden behind



clouds, but the night still glowed. I walked a long time in an avenue of trees, their darkness warm against the cool gray luminous clouds. One cricket sang somewhere deep in the grass, and far away a car hummed along the Cabot Trail. As I walked, the sound of the car disappeared, but the cricket kept going, and its song gave depth to the quietness. After a while I heard low voices from a cabin. It was a conversation of lovers or friends, or—most likely in this place—of family. I heard no distinct words, just the murmur of people at ease in their affection for one another. This road that runs along the seam between mountains and sea is a place of great natural beauty and of real peace, but most of all, along the Cabot Trail the roar of the world is not yet too loud; you can still hear people's voices. □

Michael Purfit wrote about the Beartooth Highway in Montana and Wyoming for the May/June 1992 issue of TRAVELER. Michael Melford is a frequent contributor. He photographed Canada's Kluane National Park Reserve and the Sand Hills of Nebraska for the May/June 1993 issue.

Lassies let loose with a Highland fling at Cape Breton's annual Gaelic Mod, held each August at the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts. The Gaelic community celebrates the island's Scottish roots with Celtic music, food, and sport.