

# PEI'S NORTH SHORE

## Far From the Maddening Crowd

**"Don't move!"**

I had almost stepped into it with my bare and susceptible feet when the warning shot out from behind. With a start I looked down at what at first seemed just an innocuous expanse of sand and scattered vegetation. But I had stopped just in time. Before me, reaching back to the dunes, were hundreds of short, woody shrubs that would have certainly meant days of misery if I had blundered only a few feet further. Poison ivy!

The shiny green, tri-foliolate leaves identified them immediately once my attention was focused. But I never expected to encounter them on a coastal paddling trip. They are rare among the the rugged and rocky eastern shore of Nova Scotia where my ramblings usually lead me. However, I was to come across much more that was different during this trip along Prince Edward Island's north shore.



I had often thought of making a trip to the "Island" with canoe or kayak in tow but I had never made the time. The region didn't strike me as particularly interesting from a paddlers perspective. This wasn't because I didn't know the province. On the contrary, I knew it well, I had lived there and, as a kid, my summers were spent digging for clams and constructing sand castles on beaches that stretched well beyond the horizon. It was a great place to bask in the sun, play a little beach volleyball, or bury my reluctant pooch neck-deep in the sand, but I recalled little that would maintain the interest during an extended paddle - or so I thought.

Childhood memories are selective. I didn't see then, or have a chance to appreciate, the variety of land form or seascape that existed: the shallow bays and salt marshes; the steep, stratified cliffs; or the large and deserted dune islands. This all had to wait until potential stardom and a regional television network, looking for a novel theme for a program, enticed me and my kayak across the strait to Canada's garden province. And it was to be a memorable trip, indeed.



Prince Edward Island (or PEI) is a large convoluted crescent nestled in the Gulf of St. Lawrence only a few miles from the shores of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. It has a characteristic brick-red soil that was deposited during the Permian era, over 250 million years ago, long before the dinosaurs dominated the planet. Back then the entire gulf was a huge delta that served as a basin for the eroded material from surrounding mountains. The climate was dryer than in earlier carboniferous periods and the vegetation wasn't dense

enough to produce the coal beds common in the older strata of the present-day mainland. High temperatures and an arid environment oxidised the minerals, especially iron, and the result is the deep red sandstone which forms the bedrock of the island. The loosely cemented grains eroded away easily to create abrupt escarpments, beaches and sandbars and the rich, colourful soil for which PEI is famous.

My week-long trip began at North Rustico, on the north shore, where the sheltered bay opens a safe passage through the surf, common on the outer shore. Bobbing on the gentle swells just beyond the breakers our mini flotilla followed the low cliffs of layered sandstone weaving towards the dune system at Cavendish. Here minute waterfalls occasionally spill from the aquifer where it cuts the escarpment, a source of fresh drinking water. Guillemot roosts lie concealed in the crevices of the serrated cliff face. Their black and white inhabitants circle around to find out what is going on, the stubby, short winds beating rapidly to keep the birds scarcely above the surface of the water.

At Cavendish the red and white striped lifeguard tower and the supervised swimming area are less prominent when view from a kayak, 1000 meters from shore. The crowds, too, don't seem as significant, dwarfed as they are by the extensive coastline. Behind the sunbathers and swimmers the village of Cavendish has changed considerably since the days of my youth, and commercialisation has descended up this once quite hamlet. A fantasyland-like world has developed with Green Gables the centre attraction. Each summer over a million converge on this narrow strip of sand and warm water filling campgrounds and cottages to capacity. The park, though, is well managed and the facilities are excellent. For those with a naturalist-bent, wooden walkways guide visitors through the distinctive biological systems of the area, complete with in-depth interpretive panels. The park staff also offer films and slide shows which will give you an insight into this dynamic coastline - its formation and evolutions.

Beyond the main beach we leave the other tourists to follow the dunes stretching westward to Blooming Point. This long undulating mass of sand and beach grass is, as with similar area around the island, in a constant state of flux and over the past 40 years it has migrated several hundred feet into New London Bay. The beach has a brownish tinge since the hematite which binds the sand to form rock, and is responsible for its intense colour, is washed



away in the seawater. Here the endangered piping plover can nest in relative safety, far from the wandering feet of beach lovers and their furry friends. However, its unfortunate habit of setting up "home" in competition with blankets and towels may eventually prove to be its undoing. The National Park ends here, and across the narrow channel which should be traversed with caution, the scenery changes radically. Gone are the seemingly endless sandy shores and again we are flanked by the cliffs, this time the highest in the province. We have arrived at Cape Tryon.

The Rockies this is not but, hidden by the wave-cut base of the overhanging escarpment, one feels an eternity away from the crowds of Cavendish. Above the inaccessible hay fields are out from view. The ledges, fashioned from horizontally layered strata, provide an ideal site for the largest cormorant colony in the province, the white excrement draping the rock like snow-dusted peaks. This rugged shoreline continues up to Malpeque Bay, interrupted along the way by several broad coves. An imposing flowerpot island, sculpted caves and arches adorn the route and the colours, contours and textures of the landscape are reminiscent of a desert, a patch of the Sahara sandwiched between the sea and a garden.

## Malpeque Bay: Oyster City

Malpeque Bay is a special place. The shallow waters are even warmer than in the gulf, and the barrier islands protect the bay from the fury of the storms. It is famous for the Malpeque oyster; the gourmet mollusc by which all others are judged. A scare was thrown into the industry several years ago when toxins found in mussels resulted in the closure of the entire shellfish business in the province. The toxin has now gone and it is again safe to indulge. If you want to collect a few clams or mussels pay attention to the tides or you could possibly find yourself sharing the bottom with them - a kilometre from firm ground. Take along a good chart.

A unique feature of this part of the coast are the long, narrow sand dune islands that shelter the entrance of Malpeque Bay and continue on to Alberton. This is where the coastline was situated not so long ago when the sea level was lower. It is continually changing as the forces of erosion restructure it and they will eventually disappear, as will all of PEI, under the waters of the Gulf.





Hog Island, the largest of the barrier islands, is a mini-paradise. All that Cavendish Beach has this place has too, and without the people. Sand dunes reaching 20 meters and stretching over 15 kilometres front a landscape of blowouts, salt marshes, and heath barrens that provide an excellent opportunity to study the active physical and biological processes that mould much of PEI's northern shore. The contrast with the rugged Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia (only four hours away) is dramatic. I spotted more shorebirds here in one day

than I usually see in an entire summer near my home in Tangier: sandpipers, plovers, curlews, yellowlegs, as well as the ubiquitous gull and cormorants flying back to the Tryon colony. And, in amongst the beach grass which keeps the sand in place the trail of a red fox, king of the dunes, weaves back towards the patches of bearberry.

These mounds of sand opposing the gulf seem to go on forever and is is a great place to play in the surf. If the going gets too tough you don't have to worry about breaking your boat or yourself up while landing. The slope is gentle and absent are those slippery, algae-covered rocks. It is also an easy portage over to the Conway Narrows which offer a shelter route into Cascumpec Bay, a smaller version of Malpeque. The temperature of the saltwater, reputed to be the warmest north of the Carolinas, is a welcome treat for the coastal paddler (including those from the Great Lakes) always conscious of the danger of an unexpected spill.

If you come, bring snorkel and mask, plenty of sun cream, as well as insect repellent (they can descend in swarms at dusk). And be prepared to camp and live on sand.

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