

# ***COASTLINE OF CONTRAST*** **SEA KAYAKING IN NOVA SCOTIA**

by  
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After packing up our scattered gear off the light station lawn and loading it into the canoe we launched into the swirling waters of the Cabot Strait. It was already mid July and we still had over two months of travelling. We reached the cape quickly, but the expectation of wind and strong currents on the other side made us apprehensive. The Gulf of St. Lawrence is in constant motion, escaping to the ocean, and our early days in the voyage had taught us what to expect from protruding headlands. This one was especially prominent and we clipped on our spray deck. We were prepared - or so we thought.

Suddenly, amidst a blanket of brilliant white foam dancing and rolling over Bay St. Lawrence, the smooth dark shapes headed towards us, sparkling rays glancing off black backs. All at once, the swimming forms surrounded us. They rushed beside and under the boat, and sometimes, it seemed they would fly over it too, often less than a paddle's length away. The sea was aboil. The waves were cresting and ominous darkened cliffs forbade a landing. I was petrified, not knowing what to expect and fearing the worse.

Then, just as quickly as it began, it was over. Our fear turned to relief, then to awe, and finally to disappointment as the Pilot Whales disappeared, pursuing a school of mackerel down the coast. After such a rush of conflicting emotions, we were drained, and with the wind continuing to pick

up, we landed as soon as we could find a scrap of beach. Our journey around the province would have to wait until another day.

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**I**t was in that summer of 1980 that I came to truly know my native province. I don't mean the superficial awareness that evolves from simply living somewhere, but a deeper understanding of the essence of one's community. My travels had led me afar, and I had climbed in the Alps and trekked through the Sahara, but I had little appreciation of adventures closer to home. My "awakening" came during one hundred days when a friend and I paddled an 18 foot open canoe around the entire coastline of Nova Scotia. It changed our lives. It certainly changed mine for the following year I left my job in molecular biology in central Canada and moved back to the wilderness of the Eastern Shore, where I have since continued to explore the shorelines of this and other provinces (in kayaks, these days). I even make part of my living from it, and I still encounter the unexpected and the novel in the dynamic environment I call home.

When I first ventured into coastal paddling I was alone. At that time the activity was considered uninteresting at best, dangerous at worst, and few followed. I only know that for me it became a passion, and I fell in love with it. I had spent years poking about our inland waters, on shallow lakes with encroaching cottage development and on transient rivers that became a bed of wet rocks by late spring. I had paid my dues, portaging through dense spruce woods on trails scarcely wider than the canoe or over sphagnum bogs, knee deep in anaerobic ooze. And I had fended off those irritating carpets of black flies and mosquitoes, with DEET dripping off my skin and dissolving into holes through my nylon jacket. So when I stumbled upon this novel environment, this dynamic world where the land meets the sea, I was hooked. I had found a freedom to explore that I had only known previously in the mountains and, lately, others have also begun to discover this hidden world.

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**E**xcept for the narrow isthmus of Chignecto, Nova Scotia would be an island. Our meandering coastline is so extensive, with its myriad coves, bays, inlets and headlands, that unravelling it would take you across to Vancouver and back. The mainland and Cape Breton coasts alone extend some 7000 km; add to this hundreds of offshore islands. Nowhere in the province are you more than 55 km from saltwater, and, as much as we might complain about it, our highway system will lead you almost anywhere. The contrasts are exceptional. Within a few hours you can travel between places as distinct as the exposed, rocky Atlantic shore and the sandy beaches and warm waters of the Northumberland Strait; or between the highlands of Cape Breton and the extreme tides of the Bay of Fundy. There is something here for all tastes and skill levels.

You can also explore all this diversity in relative solitude, for although our province is a popular summer tourist destination, residents and tourists alike use only small sections of the shoreline, even during peak periods. With several thousand kilometres from which to choose, there are plenty of secluded spots where you will seldom encounter fishing or pleasure craft, and only occasionally other paddlers.

The Nova Scotia coastline has four, more or less, distinct regions and I will describe the pertinent aspects of each, as well as suggest some of the more interesting sea kayaking routes.

## The Atlantic Coast



**T**he Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia extends from Yarmouth to Canso. It is young, in geological terms, scoured by the recent glaciation and left with a rugged and highly indented shoreline. The forces of erosion haven't had time to significantly affect this area and salt marshes and extensive beach systems are uncommon. The protruding bedrock is either greywacke, a metamorphosed sedimentary rock deposited originally off northwestern Africa and pushed up against North America by continental drift, or

granite, which was formed as a result of this movement.

Soil, which takes thousands of years to accumulate, is a rare commodity and the vegetation reflects this. Drainage is poor and the highly acidic covering support little more than heath plants and lichen-draped, stunted spruce. This is not farming country. However, there is a stark and compelling beauty to this environment and the numerous shoals, islets and islands are a paradise for those who enjoy exploring the nooks and crannies at the ever changing confines of land and sea. If it is isolation you seek you will usually find it here where your only companions are the seals and sea birds.

There seems to be no end to the interesting routes along the Atlantic coast, but my favourite haunt, and my home, is the Eastern Shore and its extensive archipelago. Shoal Bay, near Tangier is an ideal place to start. It is a shallow, protected bay that is dotted with islands, some large and forested with crescent sand beaches amid rocky shores, others barely breathing air at high water. Colonies of gulls, terns, cormorants and eiders nest on the outer islands. On the others, idyllic campsites are plentiful and although never far from shore, and "civilisation", the perception of wilderness dominates.

It wasn't always so quiet along this shore and a different picture would have greeted the paddler of a hundred years ago. When the first Europeans came over fishing was their livelihood and the sea their only highway. They found that the string of offshore islands, protected coves and inlets provided ideal anchorage. At first they stayed only the summer months, but gradually they established permanent homesteads and villages and even carried out subsistence farming on the rocky soil.

As settlement progressed the inland forests were cleared and the more fertile regions inhabited. Fish processing gradually evolved too and was consolidated in mainland plants. The island dwellers followed as there was no romance for these early settlers in living on the isolated and exposed islands. Now, all that remain are overgrown fields, stone foundations, and obscure grave markers found far from any current settlement. Even the light keeper has left, replaced by modern technology.

Several other areas on the Atlantic coast also deserve special mention. The glacier-sculpted Tusket Islands, near Yarmouth, are very different from the resistant bedrock outposts farther east. Fishermen still use them as a base during lobster season, much as their ancestors did in the past century. The Canso shore, at the opposite extremity of the province reveals an ice age product of enormous granite boulders, littering a landscape as devoid of vegetation as any in the province. Then there is Liscomb Island with the shipwreck, McNutts Island with its intriguing inscriptions (possibly Carthaginian) and Blue Rocks, boasting islets made of colourfully layered slate. Even Halifax Harbour and its islands have a history worth exploring.

## CAPE BRETON ISLAND

Alexander Graham Bell, who spent his summers and did much of his research in Cape Breton, insisted that it was the most beautiful spot on the globe. The island continues to attract admirers from throughout North America and its highlands, lakes, and place names give it a distinctive flavour of Scotland. The paddling possibilities are numerous, both along the rugged east coast and on the more protected Bras d'Or Lake, but the gem for the initial visitor is certainly the highlands. This "mountainous" plateau on the northwestern tip is the remnant of an ancient chain formed as an early Europe collided with North America eons ago. It contains the oldest strata in the province which time and erosion have worn down to under 1,800 feet. However, they are still the highest cliffs in Nova Scotia and offer an impressive scene as they erupt from the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I have paddled these shores many times, and it was here that I had my first encounter with the whales.

The journey from Cheticamp around to Ingonish has changed little since Ensign Prentiss struggled along this same route 200 years ago when his ship foundered near Cheticamp Island. Waterfalls cascade down steep escarpments and deciduous valley slopes climb onto the plateau, where the fir forest has been ravaged by the spruce budworm. Sea spires, caves and a tortured geology decorate the perimeter. The Cabot Trail winds out of sight and sound, carrying the throngs of visitors with it.



Remote river valleys still retain evidence of an earlier time when there wasn't an unsettled spot on the coast. Fishing Cove once had a lobster cannery; now the vacated community boasts only fields of regenerating spruce. The same is true for Pollett and Lowland Cove (once the most northerly settlement in the province). On the eastern side of this northern peninsula, the Aspy valley slices into the highlands and is believed by some geologists to be a continuation of Scotland's Great Glen, now separated by millions of years of continental drift.

## The Bay of Fundy

**T**he Bay of Fundy is perhaps our most distinctive region. Here the extreme tides (including the highest ever recorded) wash the shores, sculpting sandstone cliffs and inundating massive salt marsh flats. Many of us take them for granted, jaded as we are by familiarity, but during my canoe circumnavigation of the province in 1980, I was anything but indifferent.

My first serious contact with these tides followed a portage of the Chignecto Isthmus. We were camped at the head of the Bay facing a strong southwesterly blowing up the Cumberland Basin. For three days we had plenty of time to contemplate our situation - and it was not comforting. As far as the eye could see, a mass of whitecaps would alternate every six hours with vast expanses of mud and mire. Visions of standing waves, rip currents and whirlpools sucking us under occupied our imaginations as we waited for the winds to abate. That was one of the few points of the journey that we had some self doubt.



We did finish, though, and I have since returned many times. And, although, I have never had any major mishap on the Bay of Fundy, I have been tested often and retain a healthy respect for its tides and currents. This is especially true when they accelerate around headlands and through narrow channels. Locally, currents can exceed 8 knots. This may not seem like much to the armchair paddler but I assure you that is certainly apparent when you are bouncing around in a kayak. This is not the place for self experimentation by the novice kayaker.

The Bay of Fundy is not homogeneous. In the upper reaches, a gentle slope leads onto extensive salt marsh systems where, at low tide, vast flats of soft mud with a labyrinth of winding channels are exposed. Good timing is essential if you don't want to find yourself beached miles from firm ground at the end of a trip. The incoming water races over the flats with surprising speed, with

tragic results for hunters who had wandered out, oblivious to the danger. The tide water funnels into the river mouths, often creating a substantial bore that can travel inland for miles.

Outside the upper basins, the geology of the bay changes drastically and resistant bedrock now predominates. The shoreline dips more sharply and cobblestone replaces the sand and mud. Sheer, vertical cliffs are commonplace. This is where the most spectacular routes in the province will be found, including Cape Chignecto and Five Islands.

In the Minas Basin, opposite the village of the same name, lie the Five Islands. These are small basalt remnants of ancient lava flows which cover what is now the bay floor. Indian legend, however, suggests that they were created when Glooscap, the MicMac man-god, hurled huge boulders at his enemy, the beaver from his home across the basin on Blomidon Mountain. A days paddle will take you around most, although, those with an inclination to explore and an interest in semi-precious stones will want to plan an extended stay.

Cape Chignecto is the jewel of this region and is a paradise for the amateur geologist. Situated where an early Africa thrust up against North America the cape cuts into the Bay of Fundy, separating Chignecto Bay from the Minas Basin. This ancient cataclysmic upheaval can be read in continually changing rock strata of the escarpment. Red granites and black diorite form the southern cliffs of the fault where the Cobequid mountains separate the province into two distinct geologic zones. The abrupt scarp and numerous pinnacles and sea caves combine with tides exceeding 40 feet to create a spectacular land/seascape. The area has recently been designated as a wilderness park.

The two sheltered coves on the Chignecto route now lay deserted. Refugee Cove got its name from the Acadians who fled there to avoid the British during the expulsions of 1756. Lumbermen came later to harvest the virgin timber on the plateau for the bustling shipbuilding industry. They, too, left when it was depleted. The Eatonville valley had a large mill where bricks from the furnace are still scattered about the beach and enormous wharf pilings poke up through the course sand. Like much of the Nova Scotia coastline, a wilderness that was once tamed has now been freed again.

## The Northumberland Strait Shore



**T**he sea kayaker in Nova Scotia often has to contend with chilly, sometimes downright frigid, waters. An unexpected spill can range from the merely uncomfortable to the life-threatening. Seldom does the ocean temperature rise to the point at which I will snorkel among the kelp beds and rock gardens without the aid of a wet suit. For the privileged few, an occasional trip to the hospitable climes of southern waters may remedy this situation but, for the impoverished remainder, a rich imagination while lying on a warm sand beach will normally have to suffice.

One stretch of the Nova Scotia coastline is an exception to this rule. The Northumberland Strait on the province's north shore has the warmest saltwater this side of the Carolina's (or so the tourist propaganda runs) and, after numbing your toes in the Atlantic, this can be a real treat. Fog is normally absent, and the miles of sandy shores and salt marsh estuaries offer safe paddling for the entire family. This comes at a price, though. Kayakers are not the only ones who enjoy soaking up a few summer rays and this shore has become a mecca for the vacation crowd. Some secluded corners can still be found, but they aren't always as easily spotted and don't offer the isolation of our other coasts.

One sure escape from the bustle of the crowd is Pictou Island. A sandstone outpost about 8 km from the mainland, and opposite the town of the same name, this pastoral island is shunned by the tourist throngs that sail by on their way to the beaches of PEI. It is not advertised, is difficult to reach, and has no tourist accommodation. However, it is a great paddling destination. In calm weather a three hour paddle will get you there, otherwise a small ferry (a modified fishing boat) makes the crossing a few times a week.

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**T**here are many other areas of our coastline worth exploring by sea kayak. Perhaps I will have a chance to take you to some at a later date. In the meantime get your feet wet, but don't take needless or foolish risks. Seek out and travel with an experienced paddler or take an introductory course to learn the basics. Gradually move on from there. Coastal paddling can be practised safely but I must emphasise that there are certain risks inherent with taking a small craft on the ocean; these should be understood and respected. Happy paddling!

**Scott Cunningham is a biologist and Senior Instructor with the British Canoe Union. He has recently published [Sea Kayaking in Nova Scotia](#).**