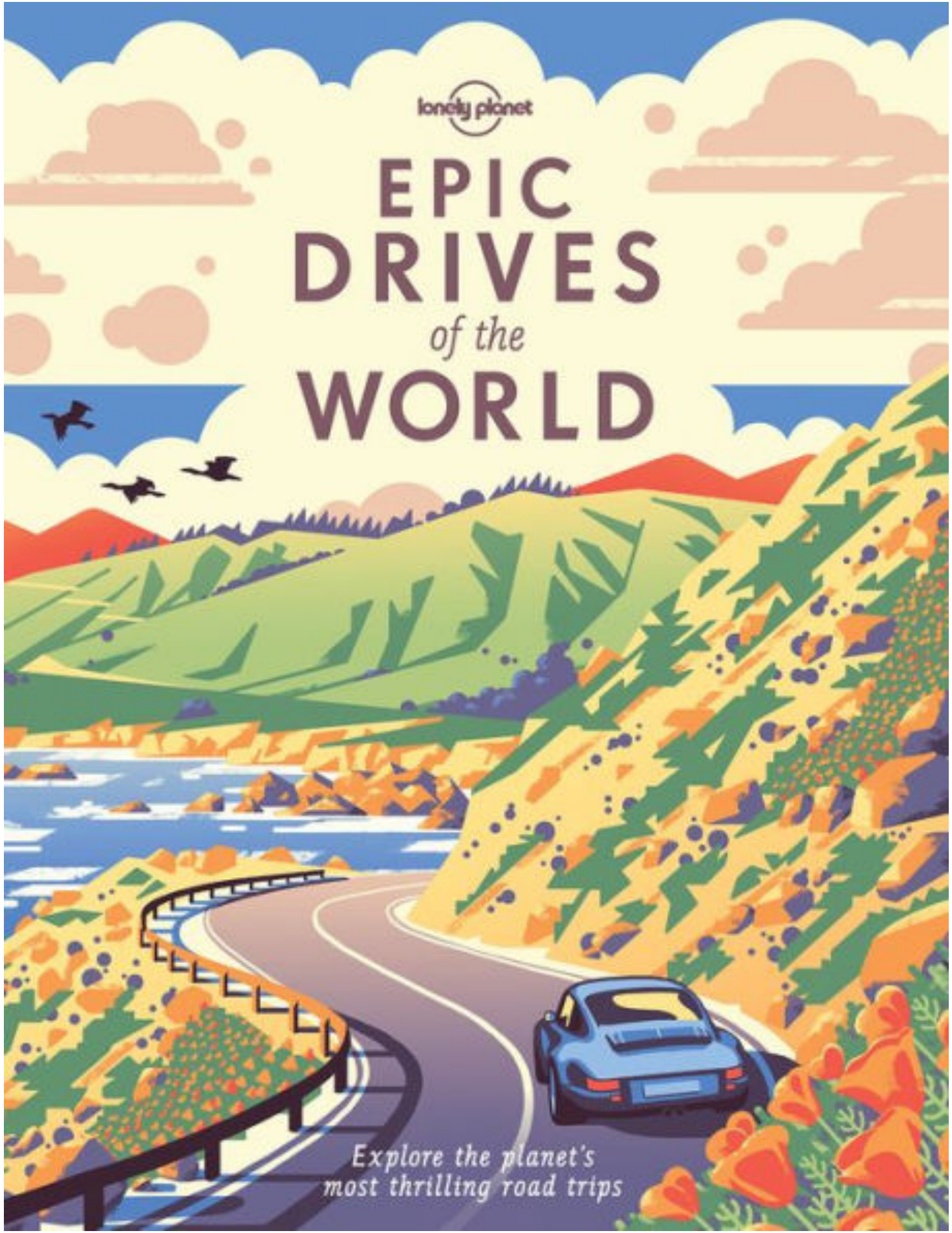




lonely planet

# EPIC DRIVES *of the* WORLD



*Explore the planet's  
most thrilling road trips*



# ON CAPE BRETON'S CABOT TRAIL

*Encounter Nova Scotia's windblown coastline, a rich blend of Gaelic, Acadian and Mi'kmaq cultures, vibrant autumnal foliage and a stunning national park on Canada's Cabot Trail.*

Life on the island of Cape Breton, in the far eastern corner of Canada, goes with the flow. Lobster boats chug into the horizon; whales rise and fall beyond the shore; bears lumber through the island's boreal forests; the Atlantic wind carries the rhythmical notes of Gaelic fiddles.

Surrounded by the Gulf of St Lawrence on one side, and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, Cape Breton's northern half is home to the Cabot Trail, a beautiful 185-mile (297km) road that hugs cliffs, then winds and climbs over the Cape Breton highlands before dropping down to grass-covered sand dunes and tranquil hamlets.

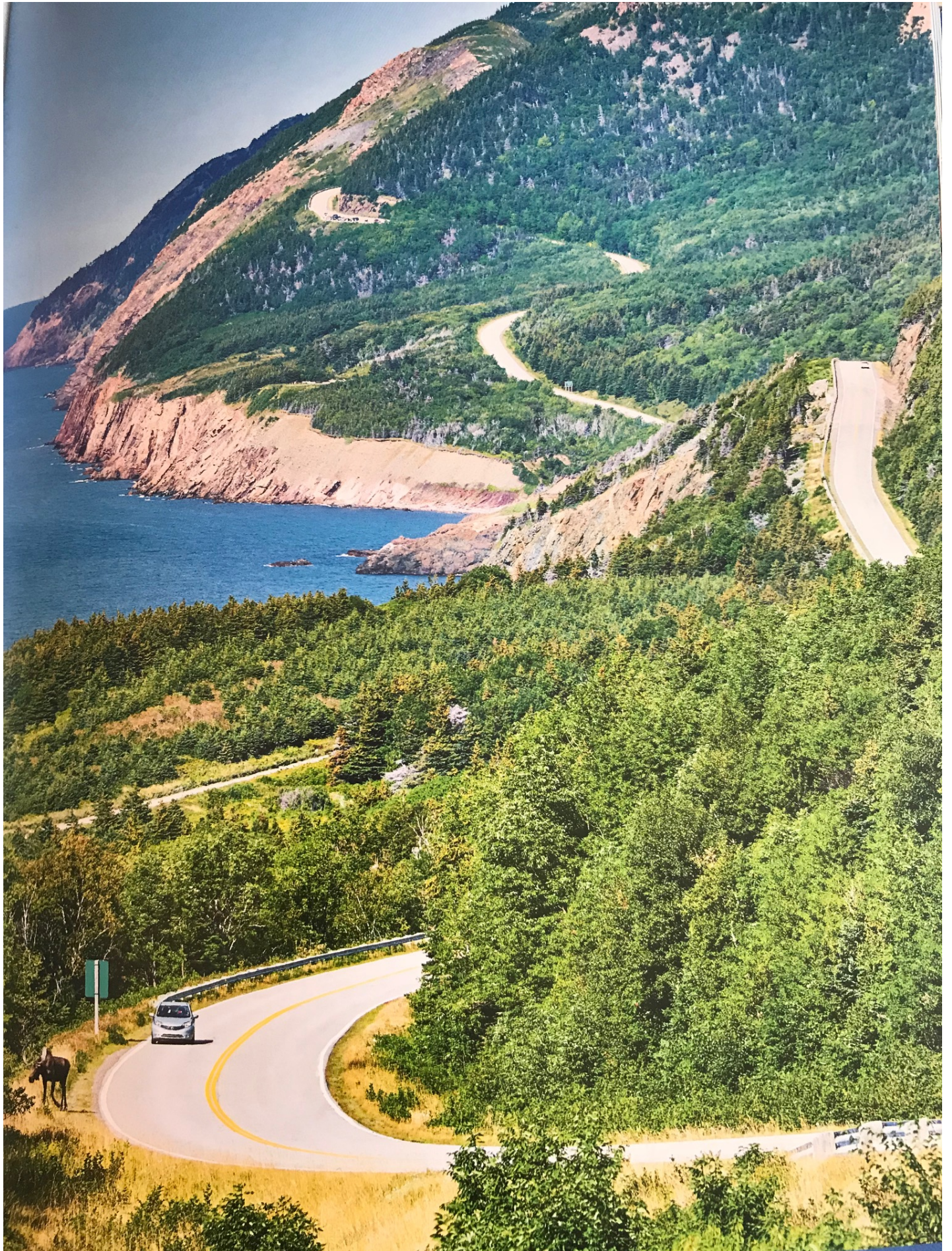
Alexander Graham Bell, he of telephone-invention fame and a regular visitor to the island, declared that of all the natural places he'd seen around the world, 'Cape Breton out-rivals them all.'

But the Cabot Trail is more than a drive with stunning geography, ocean vistas, wilderness and wildlife. It's also a cultural circuit enriched by colourful inhabitants and centuries-old traditions. The Mi'kmaq people inhabited the island when the first Europeans, led by explorer John Cabot, arrived in 1497. In later centuries, many Scottish, Irish and English settled. So did Acadians, descendants of the French, all contributing to a colourful Gaelic melange.

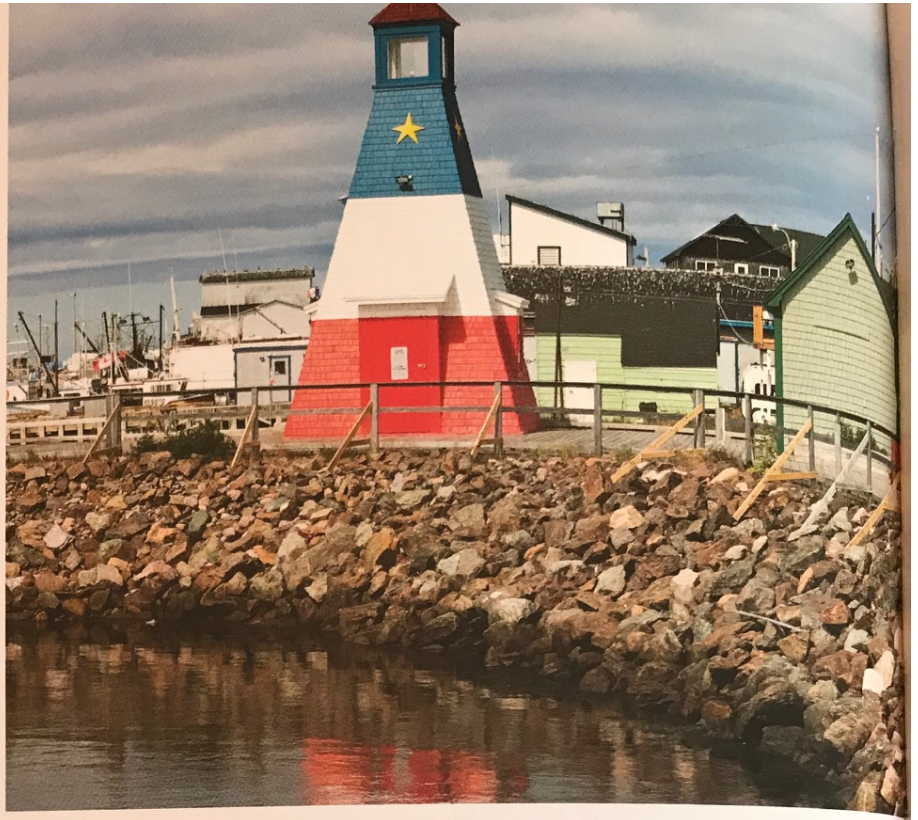
Many fishing villages were not accessible by land until as late as the 1930s, when car travel over the Cape Breton highlands became possible. In 1936, the Cape Breton Highlands National Park was created in the northern section of the island, preserving 366 sq miles (949 sq km) of coastal wilderness, forests and mountains. The road – which encompasses much of the park – was gradually paved in sections between 1940 and 1961.

The route itself is circular so I can head in either direction (though the cliff-clinging, anti-clockwise trip offers the best views). Driving





*"The road winds through corridors of pine and spruce, before I emerge at a cliff edge and a view of the icy ocean"*



here is a pleasant, leisurely experience. While the maximum speed on the trail is between 60km/h and 80km/h (35mph-50mph), the trail has a pace of its own; locals regularly stop their vehicles in the middle of the highway – for a pedestrian, a moose or simply a friendly chat with a neighbour heading in the oncoming direction.

Officially, the Cabot Trail starts and ends in Baddeck, a pretty harbour town on Bras d'Or Lake. I take a quick pre-drive look in the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site, a museum that displays Bell's fascinating inventions, including his hydrofoil.

From Baddeck, I head north to St Anns, home of the Colaisde na Gàidhlig, the only Gaelic college in North America, where you can learn to speak the language, step-dance or play the bagpipes. The road then winds through corridors of pine and spruce, before I emerge at a cliff edge and a view of the icy ocean. In its northern section the road heads around the national park, whose hiking trails and campgrounds make it the perfect stop for adventurers.

You should get used to stopping. At North River, you can jump in a kayak and paddle up an inlet while keeping an eye out for whales and otters. At Ingonish Beach, enjoy a round of golf at Highlands Links, a stunning course designed by Stanley Thompson in 1939.

I have my sights set further north. Back on the trail, at Cape North on the northernmost tip, a detour takes me to the tiny fishing port of Bay St Lawrence. Here I jump aboard a whale-watching boat and cruise alongside the bay's rugged coastline, whose numerous waterfalls and sea caves are just as beautiful as the pilot whales and dolphins that swim around the boat.

Back on land and feeling peckish, I head from Cape North to the remote settlement of Meat Cove, so named because in the 1700s, European settlers slaughtered moose, deer and bear there (for antlers and hides). It's a must-visit for the cove's only chowder hut that whips up seafood chowder, lobster rolls and crab sandwiches.

The northwestern shore of Cape Breton – between Cape North and Pleasant Bay – has magnificent 'look-offs', viewing points that frequently dot the route. These showcase the island's deciduous trees – birch and maple – that transform into an explosion of autumn colours. Bald eagles frequently soar overhead.

Heading south at Pleasant Bay, steep cliffs morph into lowlands comprising grass-covered dunes and sandy beaches. A shock of striped red, white and blue flags (and even buildings) signifies my arrival into Chéticamp, a village that proudly proclaims its French Acadian roots. A sign also states cheekily that the locals are 'Proud to be Hookers', a nod to Chéticamp's expert hooked-rug makers. The best examples of their work are exhibited in the hooked-rug museum, Les Trois Pignons ([www.lestroispignons.com](http://www.lestroispignons.com)).

Another cultural event is the annual Celtic Colours International Festival in October, when local and international artists fiddle, pipe and dance in churches and school halls.

But whatever the time of year, it's worth the drive just to kick up your heels at a *ceilidh* (pronounced cay-lee), a Gaelic gathering where all are welcome to eat, drink and be merry to a backdrop of local folk music, and Cape Breton's exceptional hospitality. **KA**



## PARKLIFE

In summer, Parks Canada ([www.pc.gc.ca](http://www.pc.gc.ca)) offers a range of fabulous activities in the Cape Breton Highlands National Park. You can hike at sunset along the scenic Skyline Trail with a park interpreter, enjoy the gourmet contents of a Parks Canada picnic basket, or learn to cook, crack and feast on a lobster. At night, rub shoulders with the region's ghosts on a lantern walk or wander through the park with a guide to view the star-filled sky.

*Clockwise from left: moose are a common sight on Cape Breton; an Acadian lighthouse in Chéticamp town; the road winds through Cape Breton. Previous page: the Cabot Trail Hwy undulates around the cliffside*



## DIRECTIONS

**Start/End** // Baddeck

**Distance** // 185 miles (297km)

**Getting there** // Sydney, the capital of Cape Breton, is a one-hour flight from Halifax Stanfield International Airport on the Nova Scotia peninsula. By car, it's a 4½-hour drive from Halifax to Sydney via the Canso Causeway.

**When to drive** // June to the end of October is the prime season. During autumn the deciduous trees show their true colours and hundreds of performers kick up a musical Gaelic storm at the Celtic Colours International Festival.

**Where to stay** // Keltic Lodge ([kelticlodge.ca](http://kelticlodge.ca)) is a stunning lodge above the Highlands Links Golf Course, perched on a cliff overlooking the Ingonish Beach.

**Where to eat** // Don't miss the fishcakes at the Rusty Anchor Restaurant ([therustyanchorrestaurant.com](http://therustyanchorrestaurant.com)).