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Time Travelling in Nova Scotia

Reliving Canada's Colonial Past

Garry Shaw discovers that the past is very much alive in this eastern Canadian province

The year is 1744, and I arrive at the gates of the fortified town of Louisbourg a little apprehensive – would the French sentry, dressed in his blue military uniform, and – a little more worryingly – holding a long rifle, let me, a Brit – the enemy – into the fortress? I'd read that the garrison allowed local people in and out of the fort during daylight hours (with the gates sealed at night), but the guards were always on the lookout for British spies. Their test, so I'd read, was simple: if you spoke French, then you were ok. If not, then you were a spy and imprisoned. Luckily, the sentries were also known for taking bribes, but what if I met one of those pesky rule-abiding ones?

The walk to this point had been remarkably desolate. A simple path, with an expanse of grass to one side and the oceanfront on the other. In the distance, as I followed the path, keeping one eye on the approaching gateway and its potentially troublesome guard, the upper storeys of colonial houses – all grey rubble-stone and wood – peeked at me over the fort's walls, revealing a taste of the hidden world beyond. Directly ahead stood the fort's main entrance, the Dauphin Gate, surmounted and dominated by a coat of arms: a crown above three fleur-de-lis, arranged like two eyes and a mouth, an emotionless face, with the entire ensemble resting upon two startled

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stone fish. The sentry looked me up and down. My French was rusty, but a few hasty 'saluts' and a 'ça va bien' later, followed by a quick march past the guardrooms and their toilets (emptying directly into the ocean), and I was in. I had successfully left the 21st century and travelled back to the 18th. Time travel isn't as hard as people say.

Ok, so it wasn't 1744, and I wasn't anxious about my prospects of getting into the fort because I'd bought an admission ticket. Still, I was meant to think it was 1744 and so far Louisbourg was doing a great job. My sense of immersion in the past was startling, a feeling magnified by the lack of modern technology in view (cars are banned from coming near the site, for example, hence the long walk). As I'd quickly learned after my arrival in Nova Scotia, living history museums and accurately reconstructed historic sites are a spécialité of this eastern Canadian province, and incredibly popular among both locals and tourists. As a fan of immersive historical experiences myself, I couldn't help but dive into the area's rich, varied, and often tragic colonial past (though admittedly, many of the people living in these past times probably didn't find it that entertaining). And of the peninsula's various immersive offerings, Louisbourg provided the pièce de résistance.

Leaving the Dauphin Gate behind, I could see that the town covered a wide area, stretching back from the oceanfront, with its wood-framed and rubble-stone buildings, each with their own land, separated and marked by wooden fences. Soldiers, with black tricorne-hats and stockings pulled high over their trousers, marched past me, carrying their rifles and chatting. Some were banging drums. Groups of women strolled along the streets too, wearing chequered aprons, loose dresses, white bonnets and neckerchiefs. Pigs, sheep and chickens, oinked, baaed and clucked away in their pens; at one point, I watched a man herd a sounder of pigs along a street.

As I explored my old/new environment, I passed the home of the town magistrate, named Joseph Lartigue; it was now a boutique, selling replicas of 18th-century items. Next came a bakery, which had retained its original flooring and offered bread made to an authentic period recipe. Other

buildings, spread out across the town, contained displays about the history of the site and the people who had lived there.

Located in Cape Breton, an island immediately to the north of Nova Scotia, Louisbourg (named after King Louis XIV) was settled by the French in 1713, with construction on the fortified town starting in 1719, a process that took 25 years. It had been founded at a complex time in Canadian history, when Nova Scotia had been handed from the French to the British, but rather oddly without Cape Breton being included in the deal. Taking advantage of this curious omission, the new French settlers used Louisbourg as a base for cod fishing – the fish being dried and exported – and as a trade hub between the Old and New Worlds; it quickly became New France's main east coast trading centre. But in 1745, when war once again broke out between the French and British, Louisbourg became a target. Over the next 20 years, the town repeatedly changed hands between the two sides, until the British, deciding enough was enough, dismantled its fortified walls. In 1763, they abandoned Louisbourg completely, leaving it to fall into a pile of romantic ruins. Not that you'd notice today.

The decision to reconstruct 25% of Louisbourg, including about 50 buildings at a cost of $25 million, was taken in 1961, with the idea of fixing the site as it appeared in 1744 – a Groundhog Year rather than a Groundhog Day. It became the largest reconstruction project in North America, and created work for local residents, left unemployed since the collapse of Cape Breton's coal and steel mining industries. And this was not an attempt at 'Disneyfying' the past. Rather than splicing together the town's most dramatic/dazzling architectural features, like Victor Frankenstein stitching together his monster, heritage experts extensively consulted both archaeological and historical records in order to faithfully recreate the town; the only concessions made were for health and safety reasons, and to aid visitor movement (apparently, so I read, some of the closed buildings hide fire trucks and modern equipment). Interestingly, with Louisbourg only operational from 1719 to the 1760s, a period of roughly 40 years,

Previous pages: The tall ship Hector at Pictou (Image: © Garry Shaw)

Right, top: Reconstructed Louisbourg (Image: © Garry Shaw)

Right, middle: A demonstration of making lace at Louisbourg (Image © Canadian Tourism Commission)

Right, bottom: Lunenburg County (Image © Canadian Tourism Commission)

the replica town has now existed, locked in 1744, for 55 years, much longer than its original life; as a functional space, the replica now has a longer active history than the original.

Before leaving the 18th century, I decided to stop for a drink and a bite to eat, so I headed to the Grandchamp Tavern, an inn aimed at the 'common' people, both then and now. Sat at a long wooden table, enclosed by whitewashed walls and a wooden ceiling, my server handed me a spoon, which, given the lack of knives or forks at this time, I had to keep for each course, whether I was eating soup or chicken. I washed it all down with a beer, described only as 'brown.' While I failed to slurp my chicken from my spoon, two kids, sat at the table beside me, began to fidget excitedly.

Listening in, they seemed to think that a public execution was about to be held, and rushed off, leaving their parents and meal behind. They returned a few minutes later, still giddy. Now, I'm not sure if Louisbourg does hold mock executions, but whatever the kids saw, it certainly made them happy. History had come alive (well, except for the person that had potentially been 'executed'), and they'd experienced heritage in a way that they'd never forget. These are the memories that forge the historians of the future. They are why such living history experiences are so important, and why they are a clever use of the archaeological record.

The Acadians and the 'Great Upheaval'

About a week before my visit to Louisbourg, one of my first stops in Nova Scotia had been Annapolis Royal. It was near there, in 1605, that French explorer Samuel de Champlain founded the first European settlement north of Florida (he also founded Quebec City on 3rd July 1608 – there's a reason he's known as the 'Father of New France'). He humbly called this settlement Port-Royal, and intended it to be a fur trading centre, but it only lasted from 1605 to 1613 (although it did rise from the dead, Lazarus like, in 1939, reconstructed from the original plans and populated by costumed interpreters; interestingly, like Louisbourg, it's another replica attraction that has far outlived the original's lifespan). Subsequent French settlers built a new Port-Royal a short distance away on

Left, top: Lunenburg County (Image © Tourism Nova Scotia)

Left, middle right: Adopt a lobster? Lobster Kettle Restaurant, Louisbourg, Cape Breton Island (Image © Canadian Tourism Commission)

Left, bottom right: Mar II Tall Ship, with Halifax skyline (Image © Destination Halifax/J. Ingram)

Left, bottom: This memorial church at Grand Pré is thought to stand close to the spot where the Church of Saint-Charles-des-Mines once stood (Image © Garry Shaw)

Right: The Acadian cemetery at Major's Point (Image © Garry Shaw)

the coastline, with many colonists moving there between 1636 and 1650. Over time, these colonists came to be known as Acadians, a distinct cultural group, who, along with the local First Nation communities, frequently found themselves caught up in the wars between the French and British for control of Nova Scotia. Indeed, following the imposition of British rule in 1713, the town would be renamed Annapolis Royal, and tensions between the British and Acadians would only increase.

As I drove through the historic centre of Annapolis Royal along a tree-lined main road to Fort Anne, the area's major attraction, I passed immaculate wooden houses, each well-maintained and individualised, some three storeys tall, with large grounds and perfect green lawns, surrounded by white picket fences. Antique cars whizzed by along the streets, disappearing into the distance, and I again felt that I'd fallen through time. Even when having breakfast in my hotel the next morning, I was surprised to see a town crier, dressed in full period uniform, walk through the door, to 'hear ye, hear ye' and tell everyone about the day's upcoming events. Afterwards, he told me that he did a daily circuit of the local hotels, and proudly spoke about the authenticity of his clothing. Even outside the tourist attractions, I was living an immersive history experience. Perhaps it wasn't me that had fallen through time, but Nova Scotia.

Earlier that day, I'd stopped at Grand Pré National Historic Site, a UNESCO world heritage site since 2012, and in the early 1700s, home to Nova Scotia's largest Acadian population. In contrast to other local historic sites, at Grand Pré, there had been only a small attempt at reconstructing the area's lost built heritage: a memorial church, constructed in the 1920s, close to where the Acadian Church of Saint-Charles-des-Mines probably stood in the 1700s. Otherwise, the only building on site was the visitor centre, a large, red-painted building, housing a museum, shop and multimedia experience. One reason for the lack of reconstruction here is that the landscape itself is one of the attractions. From the 1680s, the Acadians had built a drainage network, dykes and wooden sluices (*aboiteaux*) across this territory to reclaim land from the volatile flood basin, changing the landscape and creating fertile

farmland that is still maintained today. From the vantage point at View Park, visitors can stand and look out across this landscape, and imagine how life had once been there. And, because the farmland that the Acadians created is still maintained today, and their impact still visible, it is another form of living history. Another method of time travel.

But Grand Pré also has a darker and more tragic side to its story. It is a location at the heart of the worst tragedy of Acadian history: the Great Upheaval. During the ongoing territorial war between the French and British, the Acadians had tried to remain neutral, though some had fought in anti-British militias. For this reason, and because they refused to pledge allegiance to the Crown, the British didn't trust the Acadians.

As a result, in 1755, when new hostilities broke out with the French, the British decided it would be best to remove these potential enemies from their territory. The Church of Saint-Charles-des-Mines at Grand Pré became the headquarters of British Colonel John Winslow, who summoned all the local men there to explain that they would be deported once the ships had come to remove them. By 1763, when the war eventually ended, some 10,000 Acadians had been deported from their homes to locations in France, Britain and the American colonies. Many died en route. Families were divided, never to meet again. The majority never returned home. The deportation left a brutal mark on Acadian culture, and would ultimately leave them a minority in Nova Scotia.

In contrast to other locations I'd visited in the province, where reconstruction and performance were part of the historical experience, Grand

Pré was a quiet place of commemoration and reflection. The empty fields, where communities once lived, and the presence of the reconstructed church, a symbol of where the deportations began, said everything that needed to be said.

Leaving Grand Pré and Annapolis Royal behind, I began my journey around Nova Scotia's south coast, making a brief stop at the Acadian cemetery at Major's Point along the way. Crossing a beach, populated by round polished pebbles, I entered a wooded area and then the cemetery itself, surrounded by a white picket fence. A simple chapel, built in the 19th century – a replica of the destroyed original – stood within, the words 'Ave Maris Stella' above the door. About 20 wooden crosses and one stone slab marked the burials, mostly the graves of early settlers, dating to the 18th century. In 1755, the family of Pierre 'Piau' Belliveau, along with 120 other Acadians, fled the deportations at Port-Royal to this area, settling in nearby Clare. Many died over the course of the winter, and probably ended up buried in this graveyard. In spring 1756, the survivors moved on to nearby New Brunswick, fearing capture if they remained (as an aside, if you visit New Brunswick today, don't forget to visit Potato World, a museum dedicated to potatoes). Twelve years later, the deportations over, Acadians resettled in the area, rebuilding their lives. The cemetery came into use once again.

Below: The countryside around Annapolis

Pictou and the arrival of the Scots

After Major's Point, I took in the provincial capital of Halifax for a few days before following the curve of the coastline north towards Cape Breton. There I enjoyed my immersive experience at Louisbourg, and moved on to the small town of Pictou, where I stayed for the night. Strolling along the waterfront, admiring the picturesque scenery, I stopped for a drink at Carver's Bar, and stared out across the road at the Northumberland Fisheries and Heritage Museum, where a sign urged me to 'ADOPT A LOBSTER' (it would apparently be set free once grown). Further along the road, at the Hector Heritage Quay, the *Hector,* a large ship, painted blue and with three tall masts, was docked. Launched in the year 2000, this was a replica of the Dutch cargo vessel that brought nearly 200 Scottish settlers – each promised a better life and free farmland – to Nova Scotia in 1773, the peninsula's first major influx of Scots since an abandoned attempt in 1622. After building a town and surviving their first harsh winter – a great achievement, seeing as their promised supplies failed to arrive – the settlers were followed by tens of thousands more Scots over the following decades, who found work in the lucrative lumber and ship building businesses. Scottish heritage now came to dominate the province, putting the 'Scotia' in Nova Scotia.

To learn more about the Scottish immigrants, on the way to Pictou, I'd stopped at the Highland Village Museum, another of the province's living history experiences. Unlike Louisbourg, where time was frozen in 1744, at the Highland Village Museum, 11 houses had been erected, each representing a different phase of Gaelic life in Nova Scotia over the centuries. The first turned out to be a home in Scotland, with stone walls and a sod roof, where I was shown about life in the Old World, circa 1790. Inside, a costumed interpreter pointed to a large cupboard at one end, '*It's for the children to sleep inside, so the rain doesn't leak on them'*, she told me, after initially greeting me in Gaelic (not unexpected, even the street signs in this part of Cape Breton are written in Gaelic and English). '*I can't get used to sleeping in there myself. I normally sleep on the floor*.'

From Scotland, via some highland cows, I next magically crossed the Atlantic and arrived in the New World. Wooden houses now replaced the old stone buildings, many having been moved to the museum from other locations and carefully restored, including a mid-19th century barn, a c. 1865 house, an 1874 church, and a single room school building from 1917, where another actor explained about education. There was also a replica general store, representing the 1920s, a carding mill, and an active blacksmith's shop. It was a fun experience, and although some experts regard historical reconstructions as the brain-eating zombies of built heritage – and admittedly,

long dead buildings do seem to have a habit of returning from the grave in Nova Scotia – witnessing how life evolved for these early Nova Scotian colonists certainly taught me a great deal about life in the old New World.

As I sat at Carver's Bar in Pictou, sipping on a beer from a tall glass and thinking about the awful voyage the Scottish settlers had endured (18 died during the 11 week crossing) and my experiences at the Highland Village Museum, there was the unexpected sound of bagpipes and drums. In the field behind the bar, a group of people had gathered, each dressed in full traditional Scottish dress and with tartans of different colours. It turned out that they were practising for the annual Hector Festival, when local people recreate the arrival of the first settlers, who marched from their ship onto the shore of the New World playing bagpipes. It was another jolt into the past. Another opportunity to time travel. Or was it?

Perhaps I'd been looking at it the wrong way the whole time. Instead of me travelling back in time, perhaps the people of Nova Scotia were summoning the past into the present, like a spirit at a séance, the actors and reconstructed buildings the mediums. I finished my beer and listened to the sound of bagpipes, once the herald of a new beginning, now beginning again. In this land of heritage, traditions were not past, but still very much present. History was not something to just read about, but to be lived in the here and now. ◉

Getting there

✈ Flying

Air Canada operates direct flights between London and Halifax and WestJet has a seasonal daily service from May to October non-stop from Glasgow. There are direct flights to Canada from New York (JFK & Newark), Boston and Philadelphia.

📱 Visas

Citizens of most EU countries, including the UK, do not require a visa to visit Canada; however, from 15th March 2016, they will require an eTA – an electronic Travel Authorization, which must be bought online before travelling. American citizens do not require a visa or an eTA to enter Canada.

🚆 Getting around

Buses connect Nova Scotia's main towns and cities, but it is much easier to rent a car or take a tour (or perhaps even rent a bicycle). You can also reach Halifax by train from Montreal, with stops at Truro, Springhill and Amherst, though there is only one train per day in each direction.

☂ Weather

Temperatures across Nova Scotia can reach an average of around 23°C in summer, but drop to below freezing in winter; winters in Nova Scotia are, however, milder than in other parts of Canada. Rainfall occurs throughout the year, and there is often fog.

💳 Money

Currency: Canada's currency is the Canadian Dollar, which is divided into 100 cents. Banknotes are issued in 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 denominations, Coins come in 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 cents.

Credit Cards are widely accepted across Canada. ATMs are available throughout Canada.

🔍 The Essentials

Time difference: GMT - 4

Language: English and French are the official languages of Canada.

Electrical current/ plugs: Plug sockets have either two flat pins or two flat pins with a round third pin. The current is 110V and 60 Hertz.

Water: Tap water in Canada is safe to drink and bottled water is widely available.

Politics: Canada is a parliamentary democracy with a prime minister as head of the federal government.

Religion: The vast majority of Canada's population are Christian.

1 Holidays

(In 2016): January 1 (New Year's Day), February 15 (Nova Scotia Heritage Day), March 25 (Good Friday), July 1 (Canada Day), September 5 (Labour Day), December 25 (Christmas Day).
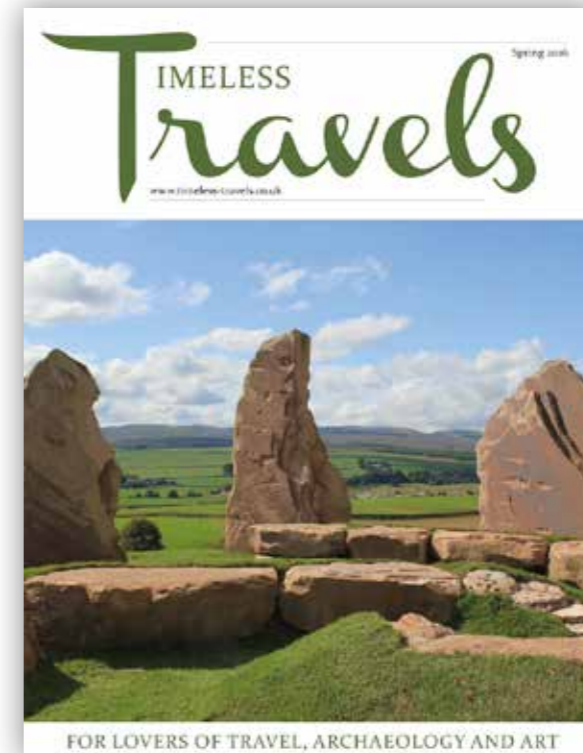
🛍 Shopping

One of the best buys in Nova Scotia is wine. There are a number of vineyards on the peninsula, where you can go on tours and taste the local produce; the Jost Vineyard is particularly recommended. If you fancy something stronger, the Glenora Distillery produces single malt whisky and also offers tours, while for something sweeter, Nova Scotia's maple products are also popular. For your one stop maple shop, Sugar Moon Farm – an award winning maple farm – sells everything maple-related, including an all day 'maple brunch'. You can even learn about the craft of maple sugaring.

Brief history of Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia has been inhabited for 11,000 years, with the Mi'kmaq – a First Nations people – still living on the peninsula today. The first French settlers founded Port-Royal in 1605, establishing relations with the Mi'kmaq, and from this time, referred to the area as Acadia, with the French population known as Acadians. After several attempts to take Nova Scotia during the 17th century, the British were given the colony in 1713 under the Treaty of Utrecht; this treaty, however, did not include the island of Cape Breton, which remained in French hands. During this phase, Port-Royal was renamed Annapolis Royal and remained capital of the territory until 1749, when Halifax was founded. Although officially neutral, the majority of Acadians were expelled by the British from Nova Scotia between 1755 and 1763, during a time of increased hostilities between the French and British. This event is known as the Great Upheaval. Farmers from New England took their place, while Scottish settlers also arrived in great numbers from 1773. During the American Revolution, American privateers attacked Nova Scotia, leading the population to take the side of the British; indeed, many loyalists settled in Nova Scotia after the end of the American Revolution. In 1867, Nova Scotia joined the Canadian Confederation.