

CANOEING MAHONE BAY, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA

Canada's ocean playground

After speeding around the province of Nova Scotia in two 400-mile trips (for a total of 832 miles) during the summers of 2003/04 (see my website for details of those canoe trips), I had made a note to return to Mahone Bay at a later date for some serious gunkholing in that large island-studded bay. It is a truly spectacular area, sporting about 365 islands, one new island for every day of the year, if you wish. And if you believe the Sailing Directions (see notes), you are also apt to find better than usual boating weather here than along the rest of Nova Scotia's shores. "During fogs, which are frequent in July and August, the SW shore of Mahone Bay is usually clear with winds west of south". If that does not sound perfect for an early August fun paddle, I don't know what does.

No wonder Canadians consider Nova Scotia "Canada's ocean playground", and Mahone Bay personifies that designation. You find it a tad to the south of Halifax, and it stretches from the Tancook Islands, the town of Chester, all the way down to the fishing port of Lunenburg, home of the famous Grand Banks sailing schooner Bluenose, memorialized on the Canadian dime. To make this trip even more fun, I put my sleek, carbon fiber solo outrigger canoe on my car roof, instead of my heftier touring Sea Wind sea canoe. Nancy had found a lovely place for us just outside the tiny town of Mahone Bay, right on the water. There were endless possibilities for paddling day trips in the morning, leaving the afternoons and evenings for special moments for the two of us, still celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary. (No, we did not "elope" for our anniversary. There also was a small family "Fest" at home in Maine, in May.) But this was our time, just the two of us...and my boat :-)

Day one

So here are a few of our outings:

Day one greeted us with pea soup fog; not what the Coast Pilot had promised. But I was off from our launching site at Whynachts Cove ("Weihnachten", meaning Christmas in German), feeling my way north along shore past Indian, Leg and Birch Points into Deep Cove. Swinging around that cove to Martins Point and across to Young Island sounded like a prudent decision, rather than heading further out to sea. By then I was on a compass course past Klungemache and Zwicker Island back to my starting point. Reading all those German place names, made me smile. It was obvious that this area was settled by Germans, mostly in

the mid 1700s. (Lunenburg was founded by the British in 1753, intended to replace Mi'kmaq and Acadian Catholics with Protestants, mostly from Germany and Switzerland, but also England, Scotland and Ireland as well as New Englanders.) I quietly wondered what enticed them to come here and farm and fish as well as endure the harsh political and real climate. Would I have joined them? I came across the Atlantic about 200 years later, in 1962, as a penniless young graduate assistant, on a coal freighter to Norfolk, Virginia, after having lived the first 23 years of my life in the old "Heimat".

My thought was suddenly interrupted when a small sailboat popped out of the fog, somewhat bewildered, seeing me in my tiny boat and all alone. Did I know what I was doing out there?, they queried. Not knowing what they wanted to hear, I assured them that I was all right and on course for the northern tip of Zwicker Island and the thoroughfare into Mahone Harbour. "Would you mind if we follow you in?" was their surprising reply. I gladly obliged them, not wanting to know if or why they were lost.

Since we could cook in our "Barn Apartment", a chicken dinner in house with our Acadian "poulet" spices and a celebratory glass of white wine made for a nice evening. Electric heat even dried out the rather moist sea air and the general dampness all around.

Day two

Day two took us into Mahone Bay Harbour proper, which is oh so picturesque with its three churches lined up along the inner harbor. We headed for the town launching ramp, and I put in right beside a motor cruiser from Newport, Rhode Island, who, as I found out, winters his boat in Belfast, Maine. We both were impressed with what the other had accomplished in his boat. But then I was off: straight out the harbor bay, around Strum, Andrews, Sheep, Goat, Rous, Ernst, Kaulback, Zwicker and Gifford - a total of nine islands, 7 miles in about 2 hours, with fairly good visibility.

The afternoon was our Lunenburg day. In an earlier article I had already lamented the change of that city from a viable fishing and boat building port to a tourist town, a living museum selling its once glorious past. It now is a National Historic Site of Canada as well as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but from my point of view, it seemed wrung out, its vitality gone. The roads were now choked with tourist cars and tour busses; gift shops and restaurants were crowded. I felt very uncomfortable elbowing our way down to the dock. Nancy pointed out, however, that Lunenburg is a popular and bustling tourist destination, and many

people love it.

Three years ago we happened to drop into Lunenburg when the schooner Bluenose II was being rebuilt in a huge work shed along the water's edge. Clad in hard hats, we marveled at the strange synchronized dance of all the workers doing their job, re-planking the huge 151-foot-long (46 meters) hull. The smell of fresh-sawn oak filled the hall – it was like a picture out of the past.

But it took several years, actually till the day before we arrived in Lunenburg, for the newly rebuilt Bluenose II to finally appear along the town dock to be admired by the crowds. Test sails were scheduled for later this year, we read on a ship-board sign, and visitors would have to wait to step on deck till next year. "Sorry!" A project, started with so much hope, bogged down in politics and insurance company demands, the latest being to replace the traditional wooden rudder with a steel one. It turned out the steel rudder was so heavy it could not be turned by the traditional gears. Now engineers are working on an electric power steering assist. I shake my head. What a sorry state, for a great beautiful sailboat being tied up, in more than one sense.

Nancy and I also wanted to see what became of the big shed the boat was rebuilt in. Gone completely! Time to leave town. Half-way back to Mahone Bay we found the little "Old Black Forest" German restaurant where we had eaten three years ago. The "Sauerbraten" was definitely tenderer than what I remember from growing up in post-war Germany. And the "Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte" (Black Forest Cherry Cake) was a scrumptious dessert. Good choice to lift one's spirits. My glass of sherry back in our "Barn Apartment" finished off this full day nicely.

Day three

Day three took us to the NW corner of Mahone Bay. My chart showed a public ramp at Western Shore, a mile north of famous/infamous Oak Island – the treasure island of Canada. Since 1795, countless groups of treasure hunters have spent unbelievable sums of money trying to retrieve the alleged treasure sealed away in the over 100' deep shaft, which had the uncanny knack of filling with sea water no matter how many pumps were used to keep things dry. Pirates' treasure chests as well as important documents, like the original Shakespeare plays, which some claim were actually written by Sir Francis Bacon !!??. were believed to be hidden here. Engineers estimate that it must have taken hundreds of laborers several years to dig and construct such a pit; a very unlikely place to hide any treasure from the eyes of the public, if you ask me. Whatever it is or was, I had to paddle by there and briefly touch land, or better the two rocky

points on the north. From there I headed due east around about ten more islands (Frog, Clay, Quaker, Lynch, Mark, Mountain, Saddle, Woody and the two Meisners islands) into Chester Harbour.

The little town of Chester is the only place of significance just north of Lunenburg. It has a very active sailing club, with many popular youth summer sailing programs, as well as a most prestigious regatta for the "real" sailors from Halifax and the rest of Nova Scotia. It was fun seeing the youngsters joyfully practicing tacking and jibing their little Optimist dinghies, as well as watching the slightly older youths intently hoisting the spinnaker and keeping it filled on the slightly larger International 420s. And then there were the "big boys and girls" in their racy yachts motoring out to the starting line behind the Tancook Islands, serious determination in their eyes.

Fun was had by all. I was able to take out at the public ramp beside the Tancook Island ferry dock. Nancy greeted me there with a locally made juicy turkey sandwich, which I ate at a pagoda overlooking the busy Yacht Club.

Day four

One more day, day four, but the fog was even thicker than on day one. By noon I could see just enough to push off. I had planned to paddle as close to the Tancook Islands as time would permit me, hopefully to the Rafuse Islands, which could be a German corruption (mispronunciation) of the name "Refuge", because the three islands there form a perfect storm refuge anchorage. It reminded me also of "Refuge Harbor", on the western entrance to Narragansett Bay, at Point Judith, Rhode Island. Anyway, I worked out my courses in advance, went north of Gifford and Ernst Island and then headed SE around the southern tip of Spectacle and Mason Island. When the wind piped up, I decided that going around the outside of the two Rafuse islands was not prudent and went through the anchorage instead and only around one of the three islands there, Mason Island. With that I had kind of done what I had planned. It was another successful trip, and I decided to head home. My slender outrigger canoe was flying before the tail wind, and I was all smiles when I arrived at my take-out. Time for a hot shower and a cold beer.

Homeward bound

Our Nova Scotia trip was ending, but I left many more trips for future years. Since the drive home to Maine is too long for one day, Nancy and I normally stop in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. And yes, about 7 miles from town, at the bar to

Ministers Island to be exact, she sets me in to paddle around the island and back into the harbor proper. It was windy all right, and the Passamaquoddy Bay tide, which runs about 19 feet here, was ebbing hard, leaving me high and dry at the take-out town ramp. It was an awfully long portage over seaweed-covered rocks and gravel bars. Canadians consider portaging character-building. Sorry, not for me! Even my 30-pound boat was a chore, and I badly needed a big swig of "barley juice" to re-hydrate. But all's well that ends well.

Not a bad vacation week, especially having Nancy around, driving to the put-ins and take-outs, but especially her company in the afternoons and evenings. What a luxury for a solo paddler! Thanks my dear.

But concerning the subject of Mahone Bay fog, I have to talk to the editors of the Coast Pilot...

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Notes:

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