

Canadian Destination: Cycling Nova Scotia's Cabot Trail

Scores of spandex-clad cyclists have caught on to the Cape Breton Highlands.

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It's an absurdly beautiful scene of sinuous roads carved into verdant mountains, cerulean bays, Celtic music revival and bucolic fishing villages populated by faces wizened by years working the seas. The Cabot Trail is lauded as one of the most scenic drives in North America, but scores of spandex-clad cyclists have caught on that it's best to enjoy this majesty of Mother Nature from the saddle, making the Cabot Trail one of Canada's most iconic multi-day bike rides.

Named for famed navigator and explorer John Cabot, the Cabot Trail (actually not a true trail, but a paved road) is a 300 km loop road that hugs the mountainous northern shore coastline of Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. The massive Cape Breton Highlands National Park lies along the Cabot Trail, confronting cyclists with a big, untamed wilderness. After all, where else do you have beaches, mountains and old-growth forests cheek by jowl? Over 100 km of the trail traverses this national park, considered one of the finest in Canada.

Along the Cabot Trail, cyclists can expect to encounter a rare blend of cultures, including Acadian, Scottish and Mi'kmaq and an abundance of wildlife. Moose sightings are all but guaranteed. If you're lucky, you'll ride alongside a pod of whales breaching the shimmering waters below. Each day will seem a few hours too brief. But it won't be an easy ride. Some segments of the trail have more ups and downs than an '80s guitar solo.

Location: For most cyclists, the loop ride around the Cabot Trail begins

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park straddles the upper reaches of the island, roughly 85 km north of Baddeck via the small communities of Chéticamp (on the west coast) or Ingonish (on the east coast).

Terrain: The road around the Cabot Trail is, for the most part, well-maintained. However, Cape Breton's harsh winters do take a toll, so expect a few potholes and bumpy sections. There are also several blind curves that should be approached with caution. Unfortunately, paved shoulders are sorely lacking, but drivers are generally courteous giving cyclists plenty of wiggle room.

Maps: The Nova Scotia Tourism Board (www.novascotia.com) will mail you a detailed road map of the province that should suffice for route planning. Complement this with the Cape Breton Highlands National Park's *Park Guide and Map* that you can pick up at any park office.

Season: The best time of year for a pedal around the Cabot Trail is between June and October. However, East Coast weather can be notoriously ornery year-round, so come prepared for rain drops and try to leave yourself enough time for a couple of off-the-saddle rain days. Four-wheeled traffic will be heaviest during the months of July and August. September has much less vehicle traffic and can provide bluebird **skies as sunny as the Disney channel**.

Where to ride: Cyclists arriving in Baddeck face a dilemma: cycle the loop clockwise or counter-clockwise? Although the Smokey and North Mountain climbs are somewhat easier when tackled in the clockwise direction, many cyclists prefer to ride in the other direction as this puts you closer to the ocean mist. But in either direction, you're sure to be blown away by the **torn-from-a-postcard scenery**. Surprisingly, there are no bicycle shops along the route, so make sure to come prepared with parts and tools. (**Update:** In 2012, Vélo Max opened up. It's described by owner Andre Brison as a "cycling dépanneur" and has the means to keep riders rolling along.)

A jaw-dropping side-trip is to Bay St. Lawrence and Meat Cove in the far north. When you cycle past the swales of verdant grass and rugged coastline resembling the Scottish Highlands you'll understand why Condé



Harbour. With an end-of-the-world feeling and outlandish scenery, the sun-warmed rocky outcrops are an idyllic lunch spot.

For mountain bikers, four trails (Trous de Saumons, Freshwater Lake, and Branch Pond Lookoff, and Clyburn Valley) in Cape Breton Highlands National Park are open to ride. Although there are some rough sections, these are not singletrack trails. Still, the marvelous surroundings make them worth slapping on the fat tires. The park also offers plenty of options for hiking and kayaking.

Who can ride?

The cycling, although manageable by most cyclists in reasonable shape, includes some lung-busting sections. Those with little cycling fitness may find North Mountain, climbing 500 steep metres to the highest point on the trail, a woeful moment on the trip. A hybrid or mountain bike (outfitted with slicks or semi-slicks) with plenty of gears is recommended. Cycling the Cabot Trail is a good test for those who are thinking of going on longer self-supported tours in more far-flung locales. Those who prefer not to carry all their gear on the bike, but still want a challenging ride, should consider signing up for the annual three-day supported tour by the Atlantic Canada Cycling Club (www.atlanticcanadacycling.com) in early September.

Getting there: If you don't want to drive to Cape Breton from your front door, you can fly into Halifax or Sydney from most major Canadian cities and arrange car rental from there. It should be no problem to leave a vehicle at your accommodation in Baddeck. Acadian Bus Lines serves Cape Breton from Truro and Halifax and will take bicycles if room is available. If you have a spare week or two, consider starting your bike trip in Halifax and cycling east along the very quite southern coastline and then up to Baddeck.

Accommodation: Cape Breton Highlands National Park has four campgrounds and there are also several commercial campgrounds along the trail. For those who prefer a duvet over a sleeping bag, there are numerous bed and breakfasts and inns famous for their individuality and charm. Reservations are recommended during the busy summer months.

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