

Falling for Guysborough

For those who want to venture off the beaten path, a breath of fresh air awaits in a seaside village

by SHELLEY CAMERON-McCARRON

Glynn Williams leans back in his patio chair, laughs, and launches into the story of how, 20 years ago, he first moved to the Guysborough area (www.gcrda.ns.ca) from Toronto to spend his summers here and tried unsuccessfully to start a chainsaw that came with the house he had bought. “I took it to a nearby convenience store,” he says. “The guy went into the back room, and a few minutes later I heard ‘vroom, vroom.’ I asked what I owed him, and he said, ‘Forget it.’ If this was Toronto, it’d be in the shop for two weeks, it’d cost me \$200, and it still wouldn’t work.”

Williams was a jet-setting entrepreneur who was used to working on Bay Street with Canada’s top investors and money managers; his anecdote illustrates what he loves about this easterly corner of Nova Scotia. “I’ve travelled all over the world, and this is a great place,” he says, tucking into a bowl of thick seafood chowder on the harbour-side patio of the Rare Bird Pub & Eatery. “The people are friendly, it’s safe, the water is clean, the air is pure. When you get off the plane, you can smell the difference.”

The area also boasts scenic villages, good fishing, and beautiful beaches—vistas that made Williams, 50, and his wife, Charlene, fall for Nova Scotia during a cycling trip 20 years earlier. They bought a home on the other side of



St. Francis harbour soon after they returned to Toronto. “Some people complain that the Marine Drive is a winding road that takes forever,” he says. “Hey, that’s the whole idea. It’s kind of the essence of Nova Scotia.”

Chris Cook agrees. The 31-year-old social worker grew up two kilometres south in Cook’s Cove. An ancestor had staked a claim in the 1760s, and in 2003 Cook wrote a book called *Along the Streets of Guysborough*, a historical directory of the village that is close to his heart. “The place is appealing because it has been largely untouched,” Cook says on a sunny Saturday,





Picture perfect: the Guysborough marina.



sitting on the patio of the bustling Days Gone By Bakery & Eatery, a sea breeze drifting in off Chedabucto Bay and the aroma of homemade baking in the air. “People are attracted to the pace. When you come here, you see the old houses and it’s almost like you’ve driven back in time. People have a connection to that.”

Rounding Route 16 from Boylston, Guysborough’s Main Street unfolds lazily, the horizon dotted with historic 19th-century homes set against a sheltered harbour. Traditional life has been largely undisturbed by tourism. Locals tend to marvel at how some residents of nearby towns have never been here, though it is only 25 minutes off the Trans-Canada Highway’s Monastery exit.

While the isolation has helped preserve a timeless rural beauty, time hasn’t stood entirely still. Amenities include a luxurious inn, microbrewery pub, and a nine-hole golf course. In 2002 Williams bought DesBarres Manor, an elegant, 10-room, stately home that

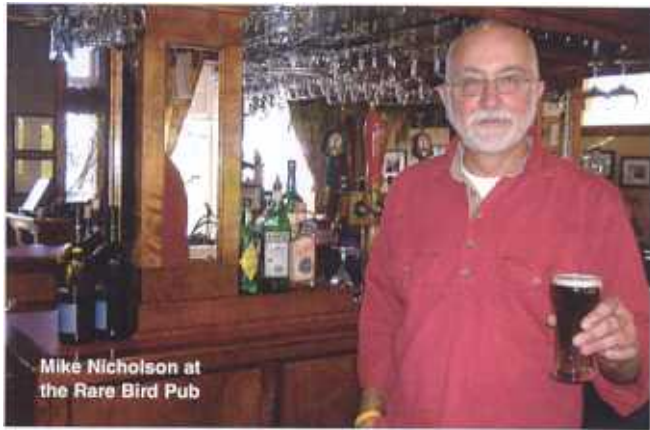
had been vacant for almost a year, and the following year renovated it into a luxury inn. The 1837 dwelling was once home to Supreme Court justice W. F. DesBarres.

Williams also owns the Rare Bird Pub & Eatery and Skipping Stone Crafts and Gallery, landmark properties in the historic Jost and Hart buildings on Main Street. The pub has a waterfront patio, live stage, and handcrafted ales brewed on-site, all in the shadow of Frenchman Nicholas Denys, who is thought to have begun Canada’s first brewing operation in Guysborough in the mid-1600s.

Across the courtyard, the Skipping Stone houses more than 3,000 square feet of gallery and craft studio space. In May Williams, who lives and works in Toronto but spends his summers in Guysborough, purchased the nine-hole golf course on a 60-acre peninsula, re-opening it as Osprey Shores Golf Resort, which has accommodations, an outdoor pool, a clubhouse, and a pro shop. So what prompts a former Bay Street man with interests in aerospace investments to work part of the year here? “My vision was to do something for the community in a sensible manner that was self-sustaining and to give the young people an alternative to moving to Alberta,” he says. “We’ve got the whole package; the challenge now is to get the world beating a path to our door.”

A glimpse into Guysborough’s rich history can be found in the monuments in Boylston Provincial Park and Halfway Cove that pay tribute to Prince Henry Sinclair of the Orkney Islands off Scotland. Sinclair is believed to have landed at Chedabucto Bay in 1398, nearly 100 years before John Cabot landed in Newfoundland. Over the past 600 years, native peoples, the French, black and white United Empire Loyalists, the Irish, and Europeans have rubbed shoulders here.

In the 1800s the harbour helped spawn a shipping industry as the village developed as a service centre for surrounding commu-



Mike Nicholson at the Rare Bird Pub

nities. This vigour deflated with modern highways, which provided cheaper and faster transportation. Since 1921 the population has been in decline. When Chris Cook graduated from Guysborough Municipal high school in 1994, P-12 enrollment was 630; today it numbers less than 500.

Infrastructure also sets Guysborough apart. "For a small rural community, the services available are among the best anywhere in Nova Scotia," says Gordon MacDonald, the special projects manager with Guysborough County's Regional Development Authority. MacDonald mentions what the Municipality of Guysborough has done in the last six years, including constructing Chedabucto Place, a P-12 school. It also has contributed funding to expand the province's plan for the school, for such amenities as a fitness centre, the Afrikan Canadian Heritage Friendship Centre, a new soccer field, and a soon-to-be-completed performing arts centre. There's also an outdoor pool, adjacent tennis courts, and an upgraded ball field across the street. The next project: a civic centre with an ice rink.

The Sable natural gas project played a significant role in enabling the municipality to invest in infrastructure by expanding the tax base and reversing the reliance on residential tax revenue. More good news may be ahead in the form of at least one mega-

project, which, if given the green light, will have a positive impact on the area. Keltic Petrochemicals is proposing to construct a facility next to Maple LNG's liquefied natural gas terminal and storage-and-process building in Goldboro. Capital investment for these two projects will total more than \$4.5 billion, making it the largest capital investment ever made in Nova Scotia (this could potentially more than double the municipality's commercial assessment base). Also creating a buzz is Trident Holdings Inc., a Halifax-based company that is working toward establishing a container terminal at Melford on the mainland side of the Strait of Canso.

Dr. Lauder Brunton is a 90-year-old former blood specialist from Montreal who first came to Guysborough in 1917 as an infant with his family and who returned almost every summer. "We are very fortunate to have top-notch management, one of the best wardens in rural Nova Scotia, and an extremely able chief administrative officer," he says. "We're also involved in natural gas and buying up property for a deepwater port, and we have a second-generation landfill."

In 1973 Brunton, and his wife, Marjorie, retired here; he became active in village life, championing a new hospital and serving as school-board chairman and historical-society president. When pressed to pinpoint the lure, he pauses. "You can't give a concrete answer," he muses. "How do you fall in love with a particular woman? It's a purely emotional thing. I'm a great believer in Spinoza's philosophy that God is nature. You don't see that in a city. You can't see the stars because the city lights are too bright. It's wonderful to see the wind blow here and the waves breaking on the beach."

In spite of the economic activity, life goes on as usual for residents. Mike Nicholson is a retired Halifax/Dartmouth school administrator who moved to St. Francis harbour in 2003. He is currently the brewmaster at the Rare Bird Pub & Eatery. "Guysborough reminds me of Chester 40 years ago," he says. "Undiscovered." ■



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