



Land of Canada's Scottish clans

A direct route from Edinburgh to Halifax puts the history and hospitality of Nova Scotia just six hours away. By Laura Millar

The sight that must have greeted the 171 weary passengers who had set off from Ullapool on a ship called *The Hector* in July, 1773, was the proverbial for sore eyes: firstly, it was land, something they hadn't seen for nearly three months.

Secondly, this was now their home: a brave new world where they'd have to start totally from scratch – build shelter, grow crops, and form alliances with the indigenous Mi'kmaq people. After their exhausting journey, they had landed at a part of Canada which had been named Nova Scotia by Sir William Alexander in 1621, after being given the land by King James I and VI. They had come from 'old' Scotland, where they'd been forced from their homes during the Clearances.

In comparison, my journey

to New Scotland is far less harrowing; I arrive on WestJet's recently-launched direct flight from Edinburgh to Halifax, Canada's second smallest province, in under six hours. I'm keen to find out more about how those first Scottish settlers made an impact on the region, and explore how much of their heritage has been preserved here. I spend my first night at the Fox Harb'r Hotel, a beautiful resort on the northern coast with a golf course (apty, the sport is very popular here), where I have my first taste of one of the region's most famous foodstuffs: fresh lobster. After consuming it for breakfast in the form of eggs Benedict, I drive an hour along the Northumberland Shore to Pictou, where the *Hector* landed.

Here, in this charming small, waterfront town peeped



Meat Cove, Cape Breton Island, main; Fortress Louisbourg, above

“There is a facsimile of the original passenger list: on it are Urquharts, McKenzies, McLeods, McDonalds, Frasers and more

with bright, primary-coloured clapboard houses, is the *Hector* Heritage Quay Museum (entry CA \$10/£5.60, shiphector.ca). It not only tells the story of the *Hector's* odyssey, but is also home to a full-sized replica. On entering the museum, I observe a selection of tartans on display, representing some of the 34 families who came over – many with children (some of whom did not survive the crossing). There is a facsimile of the original passenger list: on it are Urquharts, McKenzies, McLeods, McDonalds, Frasers and more. “You'll still find

families with these surnames here,” explains Rebecca Whiffen of the volunteer-run *Ship Hector* Society.

Sheer Scottish determination saw them through, and, as hundreds more subsequently made the journey to the promised land, within 20 or 30 years Nova Scotia was predominantly Gaelic-speaking.

To find out more about how they would have lived, once they established themselves, I head to the Highland Village Museum on Cape Breton Island. Attached to the province by a causeway, Cape Breton is even more rugged than the mainland, graced with dramatic seascapes and pine forests; driving along its largely empty, but strikingly beautiful, coastal roads, occasionally dotted with jaunty, red-and-white lighthouses, is a delight. The Highland Village (entry CA \$15/£8.45, highlandvillage.novascotia.ca), is a living museum, where costumed guides take on the role of storytellers in the characters of settlers who came here between

1820 and 1925. The site itself, near the small fishing village of Iona, is home to a collection of authentic and reproduction buildings, from a typical log cabin, to more prosperous housing, a general store, and a church. "Fàilte!" smiles our guide Joyce, who explains Gaelic was her grandmother's first language.

As part of the tour, I visit the blacksmith's, where the horses which would have pulled farming equipment were shod, and pop into the general store, which also functioned as a post office. It's all engagingly done, and helps bring the time period vividly to life.

But there is another side to Nova Scotia's history, with a clue in the word 'Breton': its French colonisation. The French got there well before the Scots did, coming over after 1605 to become the first European settlers of the region they called Acadia. Their rule didn't last long, thanks to the British, who battled back and forth to conquer it for themselves. This rocky era is well-encapsulated at another brilliantly-done living museum, a recreation of a fortress called Louisbourg (entry CA \$19.75/£11, parks.canada.ca). Our guide, Yvan, a descendant of those original French Acadians, shows me around the vast, 12-acre site, which used to be home to soldiers and ordinary citizens. I chat to people dressed as bakers, tavern-owners, and musicians, and learn about their relatively prosperous lives under the protection of King Louis XIV's army.

But now, back to the Scots. A very famous one made Nova Scotia his home in the little town of Baddeck, which sits

by the vast, shimmering Bras d'Or lake. Before I visit the museum dedicated to his life, however, I stop off for a night at a hotel owned by two other well-known countrymen: the delightful Colin and Justin, interior designers and TV presenters of shows such as *The Million Pound Property Experiment* and *How Not to Decorate*. Together they own the renovated North Star Suites, a chic oceanside resort near Louisbourg (rooms from CA \$229/£129 per night, hellonorthstar.ca).

A 90-minute drive away is Baddeck, where Edinburgh-born inventor and scientist Alexander Graham Bell built a spacious summer house, Beinn Bhreagh Hall, in 1893, where he would come with his wife, Mabel, and their children. The nearby National Historic Site devoted to his life and work (entry CA \$9/£5, parks.canada.ca) is utterly fascinating: I had no idea, for example, that he was involved in Canada's first powered-aeroplane flight, or that he experimented with hydrofoil technology. Bell was a much-travelled man, and he had this to say about his adopted home: "I have seen the Canadian and American Rockies, the Andes, the Alps and the Highlands of Scotland, but for simple beauty, Cape Breton outrivals them all!"

Return flights from Edinburgh to Halifax start from £409, westjet.com; rooms at Fox Harb'r Hotel start from around £254 per night, foxharbr.com, and at the Inverary Resort in Baddeck from around £141 per night, inveraryresort.com; visit novascotia.com and atlanticcanadaholidays.co.uk



Lobster is plentiful and a restaurant favourite



Dive into the charms of Sharm

The Red Sea resort has bounced back as a reliable winter sun destination, writes Sarah Marshall

Dazzled by the neon lights and heaving bazaars of Naama Bay, it's hard to imagine this patch of land on the southern tip of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula was once a small fishing village. Over the decades, sleepy beach fronts have been transformed with all-inclusive resorts and dive schools, making Sharm-el-Sheikh a top winter sun destination.

But the last few years haven't been easy.

Overtourism and poor behaviour threatened to destroy the fragile coral reefs which have made this Red Sea outpost a top diving destination. Security concerns have also been raised. In 2015, a Russian plane was bombed shortly after take-off from the

airport, causing a rapid decline in tourist numbers. Rumbblings in the Middle East and the war in Gaza have also resulted in a loss of confidence in the region.

But according to the FCDO (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), the Gulf of Aqaba coastal region, at the northern tip of the Red Sea, is not deemed high-risk.

But Sharm is bouncing back. New environmental regulations have improved the underwater experience for divers and snorkellers (not to mention the wildlife), and new investment has allowed resorts to up their game.

One of those properties is the Iberotel Redsina in Nabq Bay, which reopened with a new name earlier this year. Surrounded by golden sands and gardens of lofty palms and bulbous cacti nurtured for 20

years, the 521-room property has a dive centre, spa and multiple restaurants.

Competitive prices, a mid-haul flight time of five hours, no jet lag (GMT+3), and balmy temperatures (24C in December) make it a very appealing winter sun destination.

Here are three more reasons to go to Sharm...

Idyllic beaches

The sun shines (almost) every day of the year, making it possible to enjoy a good selection of beaches. Lined with cafes and restaurants, crescent-shaped Naama Bay is the area's glittering tourist hub. The calm, clear waters make it perfect for swimming, snorkelling and watersports, while the bars play music into the night.

The more secluded shores of Sharks Bay appeal to those seeking peace and relaxation, while Terrazzina Beach has a laid-back, bohemian feel which sets it apart from more commercial resort areas. The shallow waters and soft sands are ideal for families.

For divers, Ras Um Sid is a favourite. Famous for its lighthouse and cliffside views, it provides easy access to coral gardens teeming with marine biodiversity.

Exceptional diving

An underwater wonderland of coral reefs, the Red Sea is regarded as one of the world's top diving destinations. Ras Mohammed National Park, a short boat ride away, is decorated with vibrant reefs and dramatic drop-offs. Brightly coloured fish dart through coral gardens, while larger residents like manta rays and reef sharks can be found in the depths.

For those who prefer to stay closer to the surface, snorkelling in clear waters is equally impressive. There's also the option to try an assisted 'Discovery Dive', where instructors will help you descend in scuba gear for a taste of what it's like to explore underwater.

A rich history

While Sharm's coastal charms are hard to resist, the desert landscapes of the Sinai Peninsula are captivating. At the foot of Mount Sinai lies St Catherine's Monastery – founded in the 6th century.

One of the most magical ways to visit is with a sunrise hike along the 6.5 mile Mount Sinai trail. Tour companies collect guests from their resorts in Sharm to begin the hike at lam, stopping at makeshift Bedouin

New regulations have helped to improve the diving experience in the Red Sea at Sharm El Sheikh

tea stops along the way. Watching the sun blink above a horizon of endless peaks is soul-stirring.

Where to stay

Start days with yoga sessions on the beach at Iberotel Redsina, cooled by the sea breeze, while listening to the pulsating rhythms of Arabic music. The warm, shallow waters that line the resort's white sand beach are perfect for paddling and off the jetty, snorkelling.

The choice of restaurants is varied: from themed dinner offerings (including a traditional Egyptian night) at Waleema, to seafood and meat grills at Flames. While an adult-only pool caters to couples, there are also options for families with a kids club, nightly entertainment and an aqua park.

Doubles at Iberotel Redsina (jazhotels.com) start at £87.72pp on an all-inclusive rate; easyJet Holidays (easyjet.com) offers a six-night all-inclusive stay at the Iberotel RedSina from £944pp, including flights.

Dog-friendly getaways to discover in the UK

Four-legged guests can expect pedigree service at these 'pawsome' hotels, writes Sarah Marshall

There was a time when it was frowned upon to bring dogs into hotels and restaurants. But more people are refusing to pack a suitcase without bringing their four-legged companion along for the ride.

If you're looking for a pooch-friendly getaway, try one of these pawfect properties.

Balmer Lawn Hotel, New Forest

Let your pooch run free with a sensory overload on 140 miles of safe off-road tracks in the New Forest and 40 miles of nearby coast to explore.

An ideal base is the four-star Balmer Lawn Hotel on the edge of Brockenhurst, where many of the rooms are classified as dog-friendly.

The hotel provides towels, water bowls and tasty treats for four-legged guests, ensuring they enjoy the same service as their owners. There's also a fine-dining experience in the restaurant, with an area outside set aside for guests to sit and have dinner with their pets.

How: Prices start from £165 per person on a B&B basis (two sharing). Dogs are £25 extra per night. Visit balmerlawnhotel.com

Homewood Hotel & Spa, Bath

The patter of paws is a reassuring sound in country house hotels, where dogs are in their element. Set in the Somerset Hills, a 15-minute drive from Bath, this playful Georgian retreat is decorated with vibrant interiors and bold artwork, reflecting a playful approach to hospitality.

On arrival, all dogs are given beds and bowls to help them



The SCHLOSS Roxburgh has a dedicated doggy menu

settle in. Foodie requirements are catered for with a specialised dog restaurant menu, while a dog agility course on site is available to burn off extra energy. Tired owners can book their pet into a doggy creche, too.

How: From £195 per night including breakfast, dogs are £25 extra per room. Visit homewoodbath.co.uk

SCHLOSS Roxburgh, Scottish Borders

Why should dogs make do with scraps and kibble? Guaranteed to set tails wagging, a dedicated doggy menu is served at this historic house on the Scottish Borders. Culinary delights include yappertizers such as 'Tail Wagging Eggs' with a mix of scrambled eggs, ham, carrots, and 'Poochie Poultry' with poached chicken breast, carrots broccoli and gravy.

Hotel rooms are also dog-friendly, equipped with individual baskets and rugs, or choose to stay in one of 39 new self-catering cottages. Additionally, pets can enter most of the communal areas including the drawing room for afternoon tea.

From woodland walks to riverside strolls, there are more than 300 acres of land to explore in the grounds. A dedicated doggy shower prevents the risk of muddy paw prints on the carpets.

How: Two-bedroom cottages from £580 per night, dogs are £30 extra per room. Visit schlosshotel-roxburgh.com