

Halifax, Nova Scotia - Revisited by Rail

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The brilliant greens of a Canadian spring morning were first in frame when I peered out my bedroom window on the VIA Rail "Ocean" train bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. The rest of my day was leisurely and relaxed as I enjoyed the ride, the hospitality, my fellow passengers and the views as we rolled gently across rural New Brunswick, past small Acadian settlements and through the vibrant spring colours of Atlantic Canada's landscape.

My train journey had started in a very different setting the evening before. From deep under the city of Montreal, just an elevator ride below my hotel, the VIA Rail "Ocean" had slowly pulled out of La Gare Centrale into the dusk. I wandered down to the dining car and watching Montreal's skyline recede into the night, enjoyed the on-board service before sleeping easy to the gentle (and quiet) movement of the train.

I always look forward to a rediscovery of Halifax. Fortunately, not much changes in this old established Maritime community and I am soon in my hotel overlooking the familiar harbour. I arrived relaxed and rested from the truly stress free train ride and was ready to get out amongst the Haligonians!

Springtime in Halifax is a delight. Along the waterfront Historic Properties - an eclectic collection of old timber warehouses and granite buildings - I caught the "Spring Fever" that warming weather inflicts on those emerging from winter. Cafes and restaurants along the boardwalk ripple with laughter, and early season visitors browse through antique book stores, pottery and Celtic and pewter art shops.

If you like the distinct flavour of seafood from the North Atlantic's frigid waters, Halifax restaurants take pride in serving the freshest. Salty's on Privateers Wharf, serves up Atlantic lobster, smoked salmon, mussels in the shell, deep sea scallops, baked haddock, creamy seafood chowders and poached or broiled fresh. Their experience is unforgettable! www.saltys.ca/food.html

Or, if you just want a plate of Fish n Chips and a draught beer or two, head up to the lusty Midtown Tavern on Grafton Street, where fish chips will cost you C\$8.50 and Keith's, the local beer, is on tap. The Midtown is a Halifax institution, has great atmosphere and some committed customers. Nearby, Keith's, North America's oldest working brewery since 1820, also offers a good time and a tour to 'learn' about their beer. The Stag's Head Tavern, pumps with Acadian music which goes along nicely with my free sample of Keith's fine ale - I had to buy the next one! The Brewery tour costs C\$9.50...but does include a free beer.

Along the boardwalk is moored the heritage of this maritime region. Cutters and tall masted schooners evoke days of Caribbean rum runners, privateers, fishing and the West

Indian trade. The Maritime Museum chronicles a waterborne history, featuring a Titanic exhibit with an authentic deckchair (125 numbered headstones in this city's Fairview Lawn Cemetery mark the dead from the sinking of the Titanic). The North Atlantic Convoy exhibit tells of the perilous WW2 sea crossings to supply Europe. I chatted with volunteer members of the Maritime Ship Model Guild who were lovingly restoring a 1922 model of the Cunard steamship RMS Franconia which was familiar to the Port. C\$8 admission www.maritime.museum.gov.ns.ca

Further along the boardwalk is Pier 21, Canada's Ellis Island. It was Canada's 'front door' to over a million immigrants, wartime evacuees, refugees, troops, war brides and their children and is an evocative walk through Canada's immigration experience. In addition to numerous historical exhibits, they have hundreds of intriguing immigrant documents, papers, old photographs and personal possessions on display. www.pier21.ca

A stiff walk up the hill from the Midtown Tavern, the Halifax Citadel is the 1856 fortress home to the 78th Highlanders Regiment and the Royal Artillery who drill for the public to the skirl of bagpipes and tilt of the kilt. There are guided tours, and the old fortress buildings feature exhibits and audio-visual presentations. The Army Museum in the Cavalier Barracks has hundreds of artifacts reflecting Atlantic Canada's military heritage. Be prepared for the noon gun!

Halifax is a walkable place, and the private gardens around old Victorian homes are witness to a need to plant and enjoy the spring and summer months as quickly and as colourfully as possible (for the North Atlantic winter is long and hard). Point Pleasant and other public parks soon spring to life with carefully tended botanical gardens.

The cities many historic buildings, churches and museums exemplify the practical if austere mindset of those hardy settlers who established this community in the 1750s, although the many lively pubs hint that their descendants may have lightened up a bit. There are churches dating back to the early 1800s denominating the varied faiths of settlers; however, the only surviving settlement building is St. Paul's Church, built from timbers brought by sea from Boston in 1750. When the cemetery was located within the Cathedral grounds, scalps from the dead were sometimes taken by local Indians.

Please bear in mind that Halifax is only just the starting point for a Nova Scotian holiday.

VIA Real operates daily, overnight sleeper service from Montreal travelling in daylight hours though eastern Quebec and New Brunswick to Halifax. www.viarail.ca

For more info on Halifax www.halifaxinfo.com
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