



One Perfect Week in Prince Edward Island

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On the road hugging the western coastline of Prince Edward Island, the car radio was streaming an assortment of Stompin' Tom Connors tunes, peppered with the occasional commercial break for fishing gear and farm equipment. In this part of Canada, Stompin' Tom holds a special place – the local singer, storyteller, and songwriter was a proud islander and an unabashed Canadian nationalist. In his signature black hat, cowboy boots and stompin' board, Tom embodied little PEI – with a surprise around every corner.

Prince Edward Island is an RVer's dream destination. It's tidy and compact, easily navigated,

with lots to see and a mix of excellent parks, beaches, trails, and campgrounds. The landscape is a patchwork quilt of friendly communities, small woodlands and gently rolling fields, all hemmed in by the island's trademark red sand seashore.

If all of the Gentle Island's annual visitors decided to show up at the same moment, they'd have around an acre apiece. Happily, that's not the case; demand for campsites peaks in summer but the shoulder seasons of late spring and fall are lovely – and much less crowded – times to visit. Being on island when seasons are changing is a special experience, from springtime lobster season

to autumn culinary festivals. Many visitors focus on the urban hub of Charlottetown (population: just shy of 45,000) and the attraction-rich north shore of the Cavendish area, home to Anne of Green Gables and some of the island's national parks. But its three signposted scenic coastal drives make for perfect, easily accessible road trips.

North Cape Coastal Drive www.northcapedrive.com

Like the rest of Canada's tiniest province, the western reach of PEI can be easily described as authentic. Think Prince Edward Island and certain images come to mind – carrot-top Anne, long stretches of red beaches, lobster and... potatoes. The story of the potato is told in the small town of O'Leary, home to The Canadian Potato Museum (potatoes being PEI's major agricultural export, it's near impossible to turn a blind eye). You'll either find the giant potato commanding the front entrance to be cheesy or charming (our household was split) but the museum was a delight – light and bright, well laid out and informative about potato production, history and culture from around the world.

Who knew that the humble potato was once the buried treasure of the Spanish conquistador?

"The origin of the potato was actually in the Andes Mountains of Peru," explained museum volunteer Stanley MacDonald as he toured us through the museum. "The Spanish came over to the New World in the 1500s, discovered the potato and took it back to Europe. The potato went from South America to Europe and then back to North America with the European settlers into New France in the early 1700s."

The small island's stone-free, fertile, acidic soil make for perfect growing conditions, producing more potatoes per person than any other place in the world. And the western part of PEI boasts the island's peak potato production, so the drive along the North Cape Coastal Drive passes many farms.

A short drive to the north, we came to MacAusland's Woollen Mills, a family-owned and operated business in Bloomfield. Just a few steps inside the front doors is the heart of the heritage mill operation, announced by the smell of machine oil and the rhythmic mechanical music of the massive industrial carding machines, spinners and looms.

MacAusland's has been creating blankets and yarns from handcrafted Atlantic virgin wool

since the early 1900s. Past the whirring and spinning engines, up a narrow flight of stairs, the second floor shop offers blankets, sheepskin slippers and stacks of yarn skeins for purchase.

From Bloomfield we chose to hug the coastline along Highway 14, past fishing harbours and views over the ocean to the far northwest reach of the island, stopping at Skinners Pond and the new Stompin' Tom Centre Homestead & Schoolhouse. The museum is modest but fans of Canadian-grown music will come as a pilgrimage to Stompin' Tom favourites like *Bud the Spud* and *The Hockey Song*. A karaoke sound booth is the place for wannabe performers to sing along with the late rags-to-riches minstrel of Canadian stories.

Central Coastal Drive www.centralcoastalpei.com

Making a large driving circle in the middle of the island, the Central Coastal Drive touches both the south shore (Red Sands Shore) and the fabled north shore (Green Gables Shore). We enjoyed visiting small towns like Summerside and pretty Victoria-by-the-Sea with its shops and community theatre, but chose to spend most of our time at the sites and national park along the north part of the drive.

It's true that this part of PEI becomes awash with images of redheaded Anne of Green Gables and in the peak summer months may be overrun with bus tours and stiff competition for campsites. We found the offseason months delightful – a quieter pace, fantastic camping weather and a choice of sites at the beautiful Prince Edward Island National Park. The campground has a selection of beachfront campsites with no services as well as wooded sites with full hook-ups. There are new, clean showers, laundry facilities and a free wifi signal at the entry kiosk.

Before early settlers cleared the island for farmland, PEI was mostly covered by Acadian forest, a mix



of hardwood and softwood trees. Parks Canada has undertaken environmental programs to restore the Acadian forest mix as well as protect the fragile sand dunes along the shoreline. Pets are not allowed on park beaches and two-legged visitors must use designated pathways to walk to the oceanfront.

We spent a perfect afternoon hiking the park's mostly-flat Cavendish Trail through woods and a boardwalk across protected wetlands to an overlook above the dunes and beach. The route is popular with bicyclists and walkers of all ages.

Also under the umbrella of Parks Canada, nearby Green Gables Heritage Place preserves and presents the island's most recognizable character, Anne Shirley of author L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. On display are the writer's original 1906 Empire typewriter and the farmhouse filled with antiques from the late 1800s. The green-gabled farmhouse belonged to a Montgomery relative and while she never lived there, the house, the Haunted Wood and Lover's Lane formed the peaceful settings depicted in her words. Prince Edward Island was L.M. Montgomery's spiritual home (she's buried nearby in the Cavendish cemetery). Tens of thousands of visitors come to the site each year. To avoid the crowds, plan a visit for early morning or aim for the offseason.

A short drive along the shoreline to the fishing village of North Rustico provided a two-fold way to experience some authentic PEI cuisine. The Blue Mussel Café is known for its award-winning seafood chowder, made from fresh fish arriving daily. It was the perfect place to combine two of the island's signature ingredients – potatoes and seafood – with the deeply satisfying Chowder Poutine. The homemade cream chowder filled with haddock, salmon, scallops and mussels was poured over chunky roasted potatoes and topped with warm sheep's cheese curds from

neighbouring Saint Jean Cheese House. We loved the seafood so much that we stopped in at Doiron Fisheries in North Rustico for fresh mussels to cook back at the campsite.

Points East Coastal Drive
www.50beaches.com

Rural and less developed, the eastern part of the island is a delightful driving tour through farmlands, past lighthouses, small towns and beaches, including the 15-kilometre stretch of white sand at day-use Basin Head Provincial Park. Nearby, there are sites at private campgrounds as well as at beautiful Red Point Provincial Park.

It was a day well spent driving from the small town of Souris north to East Point Lighthouse (copyright named by the owner as “the end of the world”). There were many roadways to red cliffsides and deserted beaches that made for quiet picnic spots followed by a stroll on the sand.

Even though it is small, a week exploring the drives and parklands of Prince Edward Island seemed not enough. Our final night was spent at beautiful Brudenell Provincial Park on the east coast near Georgetown. In a well-equipped, spacious site tucked into a stand of tall fir trees, we lit a campfire, cooked our last island seafood meal and toasted to seven days well spent. They say there's a pull to island life. It's true – we'll be back. 🍁

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210 Popular. Learn more at www.travelswithrigby.com.

For more PEI information:
www.tourismpei.com

Parks Canada campground information:
www.pc.gc.ca

