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# 2 WEEKS

Sometimes you don't have to own a cottage  
for it to be yours



# A T S E A



By Philip Preville Photography Liam Mogan



# HWY. 16,

which traces the easternmost point of Prince Edward Island from St. Peter's Bay all the way to Souris, is full of surprises. Every dirt road turnoff takes you to the coast. Some of those roads lead to deep-red rocky outcrops, some to 20-metre-high cliffs, some to pristine, picture-perfect beaches. No map in existence, not even the satellite views on Google, will tell you which roads lead to which formations. You've got to drive them to find out. My family has driven them all. We know where all the treasures are hiding around here.

On this morning we've decided to head for one of our favourite northshore hide-aways, down a nondescript red dirt road near the Hermanville wind turbines. The road, flanked by abandoned farm fields, leads to a freshwater pond surrounded by wildflowers and dense shrubbery. We park the car, grab our gear—towels, chairs, umbrellas, beach toys, picnic lunch—then hike the narrow, winding path through the thicket to the sand dune on the horizon, single file: our seven-year-old twins, Ivor



Most days, the family heads to the beach early in the day. Philip (far left), also known as "the mule," says they rarely need more than the four portable chairs that belong to the cottage, since at any time there's usually one person off exploring. The trip back often features found treasures, such as the float that Ivor is carrying.



and Noel, their older brother, 11-year-old Luke, my wife, Lynn, then me. We scamper up the steep sandy slope of the dune, and there it is: the most beautiful and expansive nameless beach we've ever seen, nearly a full kilometre of sand and stones, bisected midway by a river and scattered with driftwood.

The beach is different this year. Seaside beaches change every year, which is part of the fun. The river used to run due north from the pond to the sea, but winter tides and storms have pushed the mouth of the river westward, so that it now runs parallel to the shore for about 150 metres before turning to meet the ocean. But one thing never changes year to year: there is no one else on the beach. We have it to ourselves.

We set up chairs and blankets and then go off in our own directions, the beach a blank canvas of our imaginations. I wade out to hunt for crabs at low tide. Lynn heads east to gather seagulls. Luke runs and leaps the length of the beach, testing his growing body and stiffening muscles against the rocks and surf. The twins play the intricate role-playing game they've shared since they were toddlers, filled with heroes and villains and beasts and contraptions. They call it the Original Game, which is exactly what it is. We call this beach the Drifto beach, named for the tiny, friendly driftwood creatures that are part of their adventures here. The name has stuck with all of us.

By mid-afternoon, when we've had our fill of sun and sand, we head east to our cottage, a gambrel-roofed home covered in cedar shingles located in the town of North Lake, which is comprised of a dozen farms and a small-craft fishing harbour. The cottage's design is a feat of mimicry: it's barely a decade old, but it was purpose-built to look like an old barn that's been fixed up with second-storey dormers and a covered porch overlooking the Gulf of St. Lawrence. White, pink, and purple lupines, growing wild on the roadside, line the entrance to the driveway. »



Ivor and his brothers learned to eat oysters from a shot glass, but now slurp them straight from the shell. A candle chandelier hangs over the dining-room



Lynn looks toward the far end of the beach, where the white sand turns into red rock, and the kids go to climb and look for driftwood. The painting over the



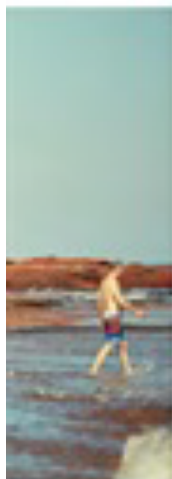
Philip steams mussels over celery, onions, garlic, a can of diced tomatoes, and a generous helping of white wine. At "Drifto Beach," the family plays in the



table (above, right), which is made from the same wood used to build the open-concept cottage.



couch was done by a local artist. One bedroom sits beyond the living room, and three are upstairs.



ocean and the river that bisects the shore, on the hunt for interesting rocks and bits of fotsam.

## HOW TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE ON A LONG DRIVE

We've been making the 17-hour drive to the cottage in P.E.I. with three kids in the back seat of our SUV for six years now. Here are our tips to make your long drive go smoothly.

### Bookend your trip with travel days

If you've rented the cottage for two weeks, take two extra days off work for travel. Bonus tip: make sure each day's drive is shorter than yesterday's.

### Plan every last stop

In the era of Google Maps, there should be no guesswork and little improvisation to your trip. We try to plan every single pit stop, mealtime, and bathroom break, so that we're never stuck in our seats for more than three hours. Lynn prints out a copy of the itinerary every year for each kid. That way they can check when the next stop is instead of asking "Are we there yet?"

### Everyone make a playlist

Every member of the family prepares 45 minutes of music, and whoever's up front enforces the equal-time rule. You might be surprised at your seven-year-old's choice of tunes.



### Get podcasts, audiobooks, and radio-on-demand

There's nothing like a vivid narrative to help while away the midday hours. If the kids are into it, they'll ask for more. Last year the boys listened to episode after episode of the radio-comedy program *The Debaters*. Thank you, cbc Radio app!

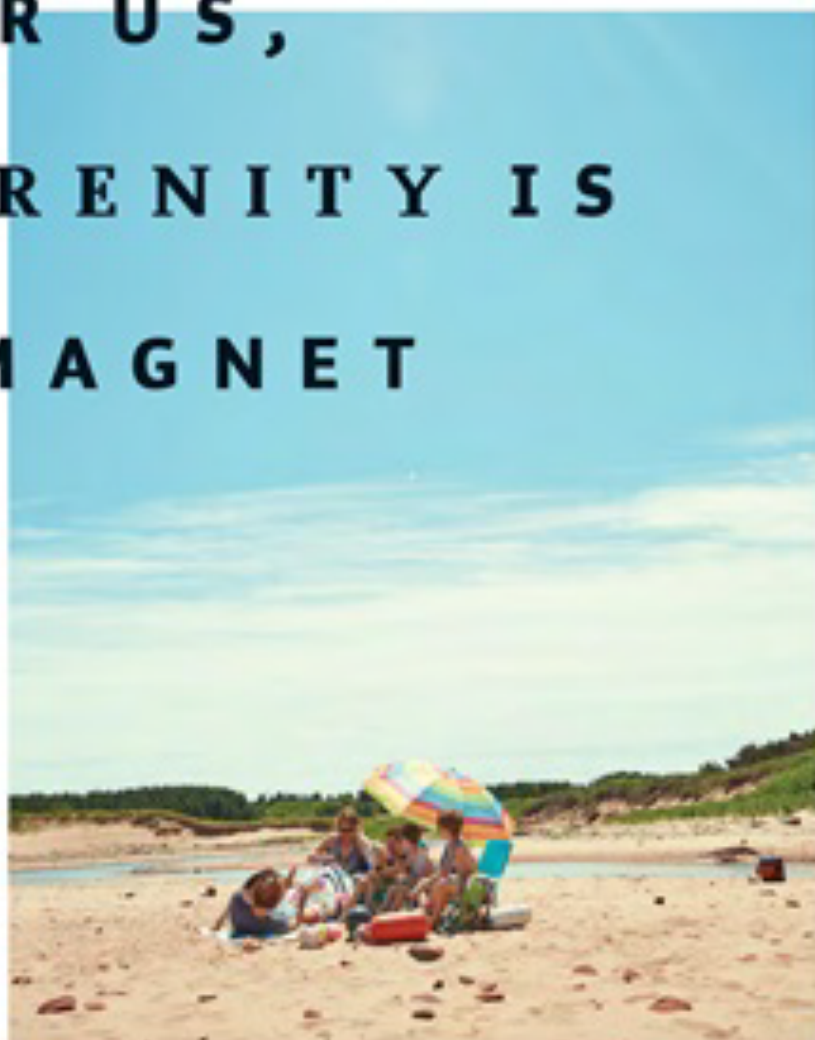
### Play road games

Punch buggy will only start a fight, but just about any other game is fine. We spot the license plate letters of cars and invent acronyms for them. Example for Dad, BCIF is British Columbia Typists' Federation; for the kids, it might be Brown Cow Travelling Fellowship.

### Bring lollipops

No matter how many distractions you plan, there will be times when the kids get excitable and irritable in the back seat. Give them a sweet, hard candy to suck on, and the ensuing 10 minutes of silence presses the reset button on their mood. — P.F.

# FOR US, SERENITY IS A MAGNET



The boys can hear the dinner bell on the back porch [opposite] even when they're down the cliff at the beach. Lynn and Philip often watch the sun go down from the chairs on the lawn in front; in early July, sunset is late enough that the kids are usually asleep by then.

We call it our cottage, but really it's not ours at all. We've been renting it for five consecutive years now from the New England couple who built it. We know all its nooks and crannies and grooves, its needs and its moods. Every year gives me the occasion to pull the toolbox from the storage area beneath the stairwell and fix a screen door or a dripping faucet. Those moments aren't really work, but ministrations to what feels like a family legacy. Ownership is beside the point. We may be renters, but our family is as intimate with this place as we are with each other—and we are never more intimate than when we are here.

The cottage coffee table features a collection of well-chosen books: seashell guides, books about Canada, histories of N.E.A. But my favourite one is *Second Home*, a style guide published by Better Homes and Gardens. It is on display to honour its role as the inspiration and the founding document for the building itself. The book was a 2003 Christmas gift from a Connecticut woman named Michele Ferre (said like "fence") to her husband, Mallory Bagwell, the owners of the cottage. "Our dreams of a second home by the sea are upon us," reads the inscription. "I delight in the thought of living on Prince Edward Island with you—sunrises...sunset...the solitude of the beauty surrounding us." Many of the pages still have pink Post-it Notes with plan





## FOUND RENTAL PARADISE? HOW TO GET INVITED BACK

**Leave the cottage like you found it** Wash your dishes. Take the garbage with you. The cleaning that happens after renters leave is really just a turnover (think: stripping the beds, doing a surface clean, and putting the furniture back in place). And take all your food with you. "A lot of renters think they're doing future guests a favour by leaving a half a bottle of pop," says Ross Halloran, the founder of Muskoka District Rentals. "But if the fridge was empty when you arrived, it should be empty when you leave."

**Be respectful of the neighbours** That means keeping the noise down and minding your watercraft manners—sound carries over water. "You can be sure that the owners will hear about it if you're being disruptive," says Mark Bordo, the CEO of Canada Stays.

**Follow the rules** "Respect that this is not an urban home," recommends Halloran. Learn the systems—should you limit showers to reduce water use or avoid flushing anything specific? Should you use their firewood or buy it in town? Are you allowed to use the water toys and boats? (Almost

certainly not. Ask where to rent and if the lake has power restrictions.) How should you store food, garbage, and recyclables so you don't attract bears?

**Be honest** If you say you don't smoke but then leave cigarette butts outside, you likely won't get invited back, says Halloran. Realistically, "things may happen," Bordo says. "Your kid may spill a bowl of spaghetti on the rug." Clean it up as best you can, and fess up to the owners.

**Treat the cottage as you would your own place** When in doubt, the experts agree, this should be your guide.  
—Lizian Bobedde





The family comes and goes through the screen door to the porch, where a pile of shoes inevitably accumulates. The dune is a classic P.E. scene. "You always have to go over one to get to the beach," Philip says. "But no beach has an approach as beautiful as this one."



sketches for the building or comments on design features they like. Each one of those features—an island countertop in a sunlit kitchen, a cubby wall for beach toys and fishing tackle—has inspired similar features in the final structure.

With this book of dreams as his plan, Malloy, a career educator who's good with tools, built the cottage himself over three summers. The fruit of his labour—inspired by cottage chic, built by a handyman hobbyist—is a Hamptons-in-Appalachia combination of luxury and rusticity. Many of the cottage's features are nothing special on their own: the kitchen, for instance, includes a nondescript sink, Formica countertops, and a rickety dishwasher. But, just like every other room in the house, it is spacious, sparsely decorated, and suffused with natural light from windows that look out over the gulf. The open-concept living area is dominated by the 16-foot-long dining table, built by Malloy's eldest son and painted seafoam green. This place welcomes all—a reflection of its owners' American extroversion. But it's the serenity of the place, the solitude of the beauty surrounding us, that defines it.

For us, serenity is a magnet. Lynn and I used to flirt with the idea of owning a cottage not far from our Southern Ontario home. We visited friends' places and rented a few as well, only to find that we wanted to put an even greater distance between us and our routines. Our city lives are like a hot-wired network of neighbourly courtesies, professional rivalries, commutes and meetings and programmed activities, carpooling arrangements and playdates. The point of a cottage is to get away from all that, so we decided to go as far as we could. If you cross the Confederation Bridge onto N.S. and drive until you can't go any further, North Lake is pretty much where you end up.

Prince Edward Island would seem an odd choice as an escape. The cottage is a 17-hour drive from our home in Peterborough, 90 minutes northeast of Toronto. We

# IT'S A SHORT SCRAMBLE TO THE SEA



have no family connections here and no nostalgic reason to make the trek. Oddly, N.E.A. also has by far the highest population density of any province in Canada: at 15.1 people per square kilometre, its density is five times higher than B.C.'s. And yet, no statistic could be more misleading. East of Charlottetown the population thins out fast, and once beyond St. Peter's Bay there's nobody around.

Nor are there any markers of consumer civilization. Once you're out of Charlottetown, the 75-minute drive to North Lake features exactly zero Starbucks, McDonald's, Burger Kings, or Tim Hortons. The towns that dot the highway occasionally have a gas station or a mom-and-pop fish-and-chips diner—the best being the Shipwreck Point Café in the town of Naufrage—but that's it. If you don't go out of your way to run into someone and strike up conversation, you never will. That's fine by us. For two weeks we sit still, so that our children get their parents to themselves, and vice versa.

Lynn found the Fensc-Bagwell cottage online, and what began as an initial email inquiry has blossomed into a distant yet intimate friendship. [Continued on page 97]

## 2 WEEKS AT SEA

(Continued from page 60)

Our arrival is always greeted with a welcome note and a bottle of wine; our departure always leaves behind a lengthy thank-you letter that includes an update on repairs and maintenance. Every year, Lynn sends Michele and Mallory a collection of the best photos from our time in their cottage, which allows them to take the measure of our boys' growth the same way they watched their own: back on the same porch every summer, limbs longer, smiles wider. I have yet to meet Mallory face-to-face, but I know his voice and look forward to speaking with him every year. We no longer ask them to hold our two weeks for next year. We've done this enough times now that we can count on one another.

The Fensc-Bagwell cottage, like most oceanfront homes, does not sit at the water's edge. Neither is it tucked away in the woods nor hidden behind a stand of trees. It's in a grassy clearing, 100 feet or so from shore. The reasons for its vantage point are purely practical: when you live by the sea, the best way to protect your home from the elements is to expose it to them. The North Atlantic winds and storms routinely punish the shoreline and fell trees, so no one around here builds right on the water or surrounds their home with forest. As fate would have it, this strictly utilitarian and functional rationale also makes for a great view of the ocean. The only vessels we have ever spotted offshore belong to the lobster trappers from North Lake harbour, who double as sport-fishing guides for tuna anglers in the summer.

The boys begin their afternoons playing Frisbee and flying kites in the clearing, until they're ready for more water play. From the edge of the property it's a short scramble down a steep, 30-foot slope to the sea. It's too rocky to spread a towel onshore, and the footing in the water can be jagged or slippery or both. But what makes our beach bad for swimming makes it great for exploring, because it's home to a menagerie of creatures: hermit crab, rock crab, lobster, oyster, clam. The boys catch them by the dozen. They wade out no farther than their shins to find them all at their feet.

They also find them on their dinner plate. We don't eat what the boys catch, though. Instead we make the 20-minute drive into Souris and head to the Lobster Shack, a tiny outpost on the beach that sells only local oysters, lobsters, mussels, and clams. We gorge on all of it while we are here, freshly harvested from the sea.

We've learned a few things about seafood over the years. First: bigger doesn't mean better. The smaller lobsters, especially the one-and-a-quarter pounders, are usually more tender. Also, there's an easy way to avoid boiling lobster to the point of chewiness: buy one that's been already cooked by a local who knows exactly when to pull it from the pot.

Oysters, meanwhile, are best shucked not from the side, but from their narrow hinge. Wiggle the blade of the oyster knife until it's wedged in tight, then simultaneously twist and lever. My father taught me this technique decades ago. I recently taught it to one of P.A.L.'s former political luminaries. After a lifetime of eating oysters, he had no idea shucking them could be so easy.

The boys love eating seafood—they talk about its delights for weeks before we get here—and part of the reason is because it entails tossing their parents' heavily-enforced table-manners rule book out the window. They attack bowls of steamed mussels using an empty shell in their right hand as a pincer; they pick up a mussel with their left, pluck it out with the pincer, and pop it in their mouth. They crack and crunch and split lobster craypoces with glee, sucking the meat out of the legs as if through a straw. They even slurp oysters raw from the half-shell, to their parents' endless delight.

But I always hold back a dozen oysters and a lobster or two. While Lynn tucks the boys in, I head back to the kitchen to shuck, twist, and crack—and uncork. She comes down when they're asleep, and we enjoy a meal of our own as the sun sets through the kitchen window. By the end of the first week we've got sufficient distance from our city lives and routines to bring some perspective to them, to open up about successes and worries, to hash out disagreements and to forge new plans. Every major career move either of us has made, every grand plan for family life and travel, was hatched over a plate of Colville Boys and a bottle of Sancerre. ■

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### 2 WEEKS AT SEA

(Continued from page 92)

The sun has set, and Lynn and I watch as a dragon emerges. It is at rest, its wings folded tight over its giant, arched spine, its long snout rests at the edge of the cliff that overlooks the Gulf of St. Lawrence, its breath heaving in rhythm with the surf.

The dragon is not a real dragon but the neighbouring wooded lot west of the cottage. During the day it's nothing more than a bunch of trees and shrubs. But at night Lynn and I have noticed that the foregrounded silhouette of the thicket against the evening twilight turns it, unmistakably, into a dragon in repose, a key character in our own Original Game. The dragon is our city lives, the fierceness we bring to it. This is where it sleeps.

Every night, Lynn and I will go out and sit on that porch, in the lee of the dragon's bulk, to continue conversation and watch the light dissipate over the ocean's infinite expanse. On this particular night the air is warm and fresh. Neither wind gusts nor mosquitoes invade our space. As darkness engulfs us the fireflies rise up from the thicket.

But out there, in the middle of the gulf, a storm is making its way out to the Atlantic. Giant thunderheads, just visible in the dark, glow brightly as they discharge lightning, over and over. We're too far to hear the claps, but each bolt is perfectly visible as a crooked, searing blade of light, cutting through the cloud as if through flesh. We watch, trying to anticipate the next flash, but each one catches us by surprise, and leaves us catching our breath. It's better than fireworks.

This place offers up thunderstorms every year. Sometimes they come directly overhead, sometimes they are out in the distance. Always they are cathartic and cleansing, our own private Burning Man. This cottage is where we take the measure of the world and our place in it, and where we imagine what shape our lives will take next. We are seaside cottagers because we don't want to be able to see the opposite shore. We want the broadest possible horizon. 🐉

Two-time National Magazine Award winner Philip Profile has been sleeping systems from the half-shell since he was 13.

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