

Collingwood and the Bruce Peninsula: Trails, Beaches and Old Relationships

All I know on this long and winding trail through the woods, making sure that I don't trip over the randomly placed rocks, sizeable ones, most as big as seat cushions, some sticking up, some slippery with recent rain or just the dampness of the deep forest, or as I step over the thousands of roots that grow this way and that and then this way again, is that it had better look like a lion. That's where we are: Lion's Head. It's one of the attractions on the Bruce Peninsula and the walk is 2km through the woods, plus an extra 1km because the parking lot was full and so I parked in the little town (also called Lion's Head, so they're fully invested in the name) and walked the extra, which wasn't so bad. But this path is anything but even, stepping up over the rocky, rooty path, stepping down again, deciding which rock is safe, dry, level, and not going to twist my ankle. The forest around us is surely beautiful to see but we haven't noticed, our entire concentration is at our feet, on the path. The goal is to reach the cliffs and see the shape of the rock face falling below us which is said to look like a lion's head. So, as I stumble 90 minutes through the woods, I am thinking that it had better. Not a house cat. Not a lynx, a cougar, a cheetah or other feline. A lion. It had better look like a lion. Something from the Lion King even, I don't care if it looks animated. Mufasa will do fine.

There are side trails and one seemed worth taking, the map at the side of the trail showed it as being quite short. The name of its destination is Giant's Cauldron, a grand claim, so that piqued the interest. It was indeed short except that it consisted of mostly climbing up over rocks and the Giant's Cauldron was just a good-sized bowl set into a plateau. Yes, I could see where the name cauldron came from but seeing as giants haven't been in these parts for decades, maybe longer, their cauldron was in need of some upkeep. Another couple followed us but when they saw our underwhelming reaction, they didn't even venture the last 20 feet (seeing as it was mostly up over big rocks) and turned around muttering to themselves for having followed us.

When at last we reached the end of the trail, the world as we knew it fell away hundreds of feet to Georgian Bay below. There were no fences, guard rails or warning signs. Small children stood with their parents, and I heard other parents say, "I'd be holding onto them". A boyfriend was taking a picture of his girlfriend and he pleaded "stop moving closer to the edge". The height was dizzying but the view was spectacular. Without getting too close it was hard to tell what the cliff face looked like but if you moved a little further along, the edge curved enough to see what all the fuss was about and yes indeed, I could see the face of a lion. What a relief. The waves broke below, and the wind leaned into the rock and if I strained hard enough the low moan sounded a bit like James Earl Jones.

This is a COVID trip, planned and taken in 2020 because travel within the province is permitted and travel abroad to places like Paris, Rome and Ogdensburg is not. But we had never vacationed to the Bruce Peninsula, land of the escarpment and hiking trails galore, and two of the most well known and longest beaches in Canada, Sauble and Wasaga. A 5-night stay at a condo in Collingwood was arranged and here we are in late August as the summer has cooled. The drive from Ottawa took a little more than 5 hours across two lane highway that kept my speed limit under 100 and my gas mileage soared. We went from Renfrew to Collingwood on half a tank. Off to a good start!

Collingwood is at the edge of the Blue Mountains and is a ski and biking town. Trails are everywhere and ski hills decorate the ridge in the distance. We drove up the hill on the Scenic Caves road and were

rewarded with wide and long panoramic views of Georgian Bay. Plenty of other folks had found this spot as well. Not so many that you felt crowded, but enough to have a bit of an excited buzz about the views and the drop down the ski runs. The parking lot was half full and not one license plate was from outside of Ontario or Quebec. These are Covid times indeed. Main street Collingwood (Hurontario) was interesting with patios and shops, but otherwise the town has the same familiar stores and restaurants any other Ontario town has. But it has a nice harbour and many, many paths to walk or bike. And an unusual number of stores selling items for decorating the home, a product of the number of new builds happening for retirees moving here.

Collingwood is also the home of Arran's first serious boyfriend, where he settled after they parted ways years ago. So, on a trip with lots of driving and hiking and general time together, there is plenty of time for conversation, and conversation found its way to relationships past, for both of us. Fun times! No, no, it was fine, nothing said that upset either of us. But now that some of these relationships are 25 years or so removed, the memories are not as clear, not as sure that they were really about our younger selves. The fact says they were, but the feeling isn't convinced. Are these our memories or did someone else just tell us the stories?

While Collingwood was where we stayed but it certainly was not the end of the driving. It is a further two and a quarter hours to reach the tip of the Bruce Peninsula and the little town of Tobermory. For a region known for its rugged trails, the highways sure are straight. I was amazed at how many highways went on in the distance as far and straight as the eye could see. If someone was driving too slowly then passing was not a problem.

Tobermory must be awfully quiet in off-season but this Covid summer has made it busier than in the past, and it's not just because of those travelling by ferry to Manitoulin Island from here. The first time we arrived was mid-day. Parking spots were few and tourists were many. A walk to the point to rocks and a lighthouse was fine, and the main drag which circles around the Dunks Bay harbour was interesting enough. We wanted to take a boat tour but had to book for a couple days out and returned for a second visit, this time arriving at 9:30am and the town was just waking up. We even got a parking spot close to where our boat was moored.

The boat cruise with Wave Adventures lasted a couple of hours and gave a fascinating look at the shoreline geology: Rock beaches formed by storm waves pushing sizeable rocks great distances onto shore ... Flower pots a hundred feet high created by erosion (Terry the tour guide explained the different types of rocks and how that happened) ... And grottos, the main attraction, which are water caves. Hikers had made their way there by land and some were down in the caves. Teenage boys were jumping into the water though that can be a dangerous activity, so we were asked not to encourage them. Other hikers would appear high, high above, not realizing that while the rock ledge they stood on was 10-20 feet thick, below that ledge was air, more air, still more air, then the rocky shore being pounded by the waves of the lake. I would not have wanted to know I was out on that ledge.

Returning from Tobermory the first time we checked out Sauble Falls (a pleasant place, a wide-ish river and multiple places where it tumbled over rocks, and folks carefully walking across the safe bits and even jumping into a pool from the top of a small waterfall) on our way to Sauble Beach, consistently rated as one of the best beaches in Canada. It was later in the day and by then parking was plentiful, and also free after 5pm. I was determined to swim so we made our way to the soft sand and found a spot to plop ourselves down. It was windy. No, that statement does not capture the true volume of

wind. The wind was so loud that it felt like we had camped in the median of the 401 with a convoy of trucks passing. That's more accurate. Sand blew everywhere. Some may still be in my nostrils.

The wind would not deter me, I was there to swim, and I knew that there were sand bars every few dozen feet, so I pretended that those waves were inconsequential. No, no they weren't. I got into a brawl with the waves. It started as soon as I stepped in as the waves kicked me on the shins. This was no lapping or splashing, this was a "how dare you step here, I shall kick you angrily on the shins". The water was warm, so I accepted the temper tantrum and waded deeper. My calves then took a kneading that the strongest, pissed-off masseuse couldn't have matched. I was getting pounded, buffeted, abused. Quickly I moved to swimming shorts depth, a depth that we men usually enter gingerly, but I wanted to get deeper and find a sandbar I could claim and so I braced myself on. Well, it wasn't the water temperature that shocked me, it was the repeated blows below the belt. Very unsportsmanlike. Keep moving, keep moving I said, wincing in pain. However, the waves coming at me were intimidating, starting higher than me and breaking right where I was attempting to stand. Punches to the gut, blows to the ribs, slamming my chest. I was in a scrap and I was losing!! Yes, there were screams, most of them deep and manly but a few were soprano as shots below the waist kept occurring. I leaned forward and struggled further, sure that the next sandbar was feet, perhaps inches, away. After 10 more minutes of the fight, and not having found the sandbar and possibly not gained any ground at all, I gave up, staggering out of the waves, battered and bruised, the waves roaring in victory behind me. I went to my corner and collapsed.

From descriptions we had read, we expected Sauble Beach to impress and Wasaga Beach to be a little tired, past its prime and tacky. We found the opposite. Yes, Pedro's mini golf and gift shop at Wasaga beckoned in a way that only those beach community establishments can, but still Wasaga Beach felt more accessible, had more length to wander your day away, and the swimming was great. There were stores right on the beach, however, with food and clothes and the like. You could get your Timmies with sand still under your toes. I thought this was awfully relaxed of the city planners until we realized that due to the record high water levels of the great lakes, the sand had been allowed to encroach inland and these businesses used to be across the road from the beach! The road, in fact, was now under the sand. The hope was the water level would return to normal levels and they could have their road back and the beach would also get wider again.

The most challenging wandering we did was not on the beach of course, but on the trails. Lion's Head trail did not have two consecutive level steps the whole way, some 4 or 5 kilometres in the loop we took. But it was fun, good exercise and the view hard to match. Another trail we enjoyed was Hogg's Falls, near Flesherton. This was a 5.3km hike through different types of forest, pines changing to maples and others, through meadows too and along a stream. It is hard to be covid-minded and socially distance from others you meet on the narrow path but when horses came along, we were quick to give them their six feet of space. The falls themselves are close to the parking lot, so we saw them first and last on the hike. The falls have an impressive drop of 25 feet or so. There was a rope that other hikers used to repel down to get closer to the falling water. A short drive away was another falls, Walter's Falls, in the town of ... Walter's Falls (who'd have guessed?). We drove there but didn't get to see the attraction. It is now privately owned by an Inn and Spa and we and others were told that we couldn't see it unless we were a customer of the inn. Another couple offered to buy drinks, maybe even lunch, but their offer to spend money there was declined. Hmmm. This is very secretive. What nefarious goings on were happening with Walter's Falls I wonder?

Speaking of nefariousness, we noticed an unusual trend as we read about the local highlights. There are, or were, a large number of mills in the area. And every one of them seemed to have had an occasion where they burnt down, typically around the turn of the century. The descriptions were similar, rather ordinary histories of such and such a mill followed by the inevitable, predictable final sentence: but the mill was burnt down in 19 hundred and something. Did no one compare notes? Did a serial arsonist knock off a slew of the local mills back in the day? Where was Murdoch while this was happening?

Another unusual trend was the friendliness of everyone we passed on the street, on the trail, in the stores. People met your eye and wanted to be acknowledged like we were neighbours, maybe even distant cousins. Folks were saying good morning until well past 2pm. Very suspicious indeed.

Our final hike was near Wiarton. I'd like to call Wiarton a humble town but that might give the incorrect impression that it's nice. Known for its prognosticating groundhog-day Willy, I'm not sure there is a reason to visit the town itself any other day of the year. Houses lining the outlying streets were nice enough, but downtown was old and sketchy. Pawn shops stood shoulder to shoulder with establishments that were bordered up or selling everything at 80% off before they closed their doors for good. Other stores were not open on Sundays and Mondays and then closed their doors at 3 in the afternoon the rest of the week. We walked there at 4pm and there was little left accessible. To make matters worse, the main intersection was torn up and construction a-happening at full volume. You could not carry on a conversation within a block of it. Cars were detoured through the parallel streets, but the core of town was so rundown that what businesses remained may not have noticed the disruption. For a town that only comes to life once a year it doesn't so much as go to sleep the rest of the time as it stops shaving and forgets to change its undergarments.

We did park near the Wiarton waterfront for a roughly 6km round trip hike to the ruins of a local mansion. The trail took us along the lake for a piece, with the escarpment looming above us, then we circled up a 20-foot metal spiral staircase to the McNeill property above. The shaky old staircase did not have my confidence, but I suppose it stayed in place for over a hundred years so what are the chances of that rusting causing it to collapse under my weight? At the top, in a clearing some 100 yards from the escarpment edge, are the ruins of a grand house built in 1882-1890 by wealthy politician Alexander McNeil. It was the place to be for parties and dinners when Alexander was the local big shot, but in time it became neglected and vandals set fire to it in 1976 and burned it down save for the large stone walls. We took another trail along the escarpment ridge to Spirit Rock, which inspired a deep philosophical discussion on matters spiritual and the like, but we did not resolve any great mysteries in the two or three minutes the discussion lasted. So, as we turned the talk back to old relationships, we made our way back to Wiarton, tried not to look at downtown as we passed, and drove away.

A final word on the trip is about the food. It is important when travelling to partake in the local delicacies and as best as I could tell, as we skipped from little town to little town, the most commonly offered fare was a treat made from dairy, containing fruits or other sweets. They call it "ice cream". There were signs in every town, often on every block! Partake I did. Chocolate with salted peanut butter flakes, vanilla caramel ribbon cashew crunch, mocha almond fudge, Skor treasure chest, sponge toffee butterscotch swirl. Some other flavour names were longer and I don't remember them. Starbucks has nothing on these long, convoluted descriptions. There wasn't a bad tasting one in the bunch. If I moved here, I would have to eat ice cream every day (wait, I eat ice cream every day now,

there goes that argument). They even have the Chapman's factory in Markdale! So, I felt compelled to have this "ice cream" thing in Lion's Head, Sauble Beach, Collingwood, Tobormory, Flesherton, Wasaga Beach and Thornbury. But I did not have any in Wiarton, Owen Sound or Meaford. That would be too much. One has to show some restraint.