



Moving to Tropical Canada

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You read it right ... “Tropical Canada”.

We learned about this bizarre phenomenon in the early ‘90s while on vacation in Montreal. It happened innocently enough while my husband Ken and I were riding a public bus back to our downtown hotel after a frenzied shopping spree. During this 20-minute interlude, upon learning that we were visiting “Yanks” from West Virginia, a cordially loquacious elderly gent shared his fondness for all things Atlantic Maritime.

His enthusiasm centered upon the mild weather and shellfish wonders of this undiscovered region to the East. During his eloquent oratory, he “imprinted” upon us the absolute necessity of visiting “the tropical part of Canada,” where amidst swaying palms the lobsters virtually jump ashore and the seafood delicacies exceed a gastronome’s wildest dreams. On and on with contagious gusto, he extolled the virtues of little-known Maritime Canada comprised of the provinces of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia, a landscape of windswept rock strewn shores, verdant spruce forests, and remote Celtic villages. The encounter with him was unforgettable.

A year later when the grind of our professional lives required time away to reboot, I suggested a jaunt up the Maine Coast, an area I hadn’t visited, and also a visit to that “tropical part of Canada.” Now Dr. Ken, a rural sociologist who grew up in Washington State showing animals at Canadian fairs and mixing with Canadian in-laws, said emphatically, “There’s no such thing as Tropical Canada! Still, he promised to search the net to see what he could learn about the Maritimes and promised he’d “report back.”

A few days later Ken shared his due diligence: “The only thing I can come up with is that the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick has waters as warm as Virginia Beach ... maybe the warm water tempers the coastal climate...” He also reported that this region has the highest tides in the world – 28 feet -- and the richest marine life. He also noted that New Brunswick is the sunniest Canadian province in winter and the only official dual language province.

So mid-July came and we set off in the car waving goodbye to our five Jack Russells and their babysitter to explore this coastal territory. We were armed with a loose itinerary and a compass setting pointed due north. Departing our home the afternoon of July 4th we were regaled with a fireworks display in Pennsylvania and the next day were captivated by Maine’s rocky seascapes and New England architecture not to mention the quaint antique shops on every gentleman’s farm.

So far ... so good: our coastal expectations were meeting anticipation. However, a sudden onslaught of ragweed rhinitis attacked the second day, rendering me an oozing, sneezing zombie. Always when the ragweed pollen hit West Virginia in late August, we headed across the Great Pond to Europe to spare me this pestilence. But here in mid-July on Maine's breezy coast, ragweed pollen was ruining my vacation fun.

So with me nodding out on OTC allergy meds knee-deep in wet tissues and my husband doped-up on internet facts, we headed up to St. Andrews by-the-Sea, described as a famous artsy resort, and then we thought we'd drive through the St. John Valley, along the Fundy Coast, and if time allowed, venture up to Shediac for some French ambiance and more lobster.

When we hit Calais, Maine, the international border town that crosses into St. Stephen New Brunswick 2-1/2 hours from Bangor and 30 km from St. Andrews, we missed the border crossing turn off and ended up entering Canada further north at McAdam. Driving for miles and miles in heavy forest; we were oppressed by the heat and humidity with the only diversion black flies pelting our windshield. Oh yes, and the occasional trailer enclave replete with a rust bucket on blocks, several pitiful clear-cut areas, and the ominous Georgia Pacific signs. This eerie, almost-Appalachian scene reminded us of the "West By-God-Virginia hollars" we'd left behind.

Realizing we were way off track, at the first intersection we headed south on Rt. 127 toward St. Andrews. We were racing the sunset south with our impatience to get somewhere palpable in the silence. (*I'm always anxious when we arrive at a new destination at night without a place to stay.*) As dusk closed in we found ourselves driving along the St. Croix River where cool evening sea breezes and ephemeral glimpses of the St. Croix River buoying our anticipation. We spied the tiny St. Croix Island, where 400 years ago Explorer Pierre Dugua Sieur de Mons and Cartographer Samuel Champlain arrived with a ship full of French settlers and supplies to establish the first European settlement in Canada. only to be decimated by scurvy; the few survivors ironically saved by the very Indians they feared.

Arriving in St. Andrews was like entering a fairyland; a pristine 18th-century New England fishing village moored in time with quaint sea glass-colored buildings, colorful flags and exuberant flower boxes lining quaint Water Street by the main pier and marina. King Street's imagination-perfect church steeples and perfectly preserved Loyalist clapboard homes climbed the gentle slope away from the Passamaquoddy Bay. After our Twilight Zone afternoon, we felt our optimism lift and even my allergy symptoms disappeared into the enchanting evening. With our luck running we secured the last room at the renowned Fairmont Algonquin Hotel, a huge castle-like Tudor resort property perched above town that in itself was worth the trip.

After checking in we were "some hungry" in the Canadian idiom. Being tried and true "Euro-philes" we searched out a small gourmet restaurant with fine wine. We trotted briskly through town, admiring the historic architecture and splendid gardens en route to the L'Europa, a highly recommended Continental restaurant owned by a young German couple. It was an unusually slow night, so in addition to superb cuisine (Las Moras organic Argentinian wine, silky lobster bisque, piquant duck a' L'orange, fork tender venison in a red currant sauce, and checkered chocolate mouse cake and maple crème caramel), we enjoyed an informative conversation with Simone and Markus Ritter, the proprietors. The vivaciously attractive Simone, a watercolorist, and the astute Chef Markus told us how much they loved St. Andrews having been lured here

by a German guide advising that the Maritimes offered the most opportunity in Canada for restaurant start-ups. After thoroughly researching the region, they told us they had decided on St. Andrews for its tourism potential and quality of life.

Talking to them fondly reminded us of a former German partner in my marketing firm. Toward the end of our conversation, feeling a bit high on the wine and conviviality, quite out of the blue, I said, "We should look at property tomorrow". My adventuresome accomplice for 30+ years concurred spontaneously. *I still don't know where the idea came from ... and now in retrospect I can only characterize it as "a true calling" of Biblical proportions.* And Simone reappeared seconds later with the business card of her Realtor, an oddball Maritime character whose quirky charm defies description. And as they say, the rest is history.

The next morning after seeing only three properties, one of which wasn't even listed, we placed an offer on a stunning 2-1/2 acre parcel of land in an older subdivision just north of town, called The Glebe because it was formerly church-owned land. Once an apple orchard, the gently sloping beautifully treed land overlooked a sparkling azure bay absolutely perfect with its perimeter birches, Tamarack, spruce and alders, ferns, rock outcrops and even a stream. Waterfront property with an island in view, but nothing manmade in sight! The idea of a shoreline property right on the Passamaquoddy Bay overlooking Minister's Island -- at about a quarter the price of anything we had seen in the real estate guides in Maine -- thrilled us. Considering the favorable exchange rate, the property price was the equivalent of US\$65,000 with negligible property taxes (\$600/year). It was accepted at 10 p.m. the same evening.

Over the next few days, we explored every nook and cranny of St. Andrews, meandering through the spectacular 27-acre Kingsbrae Gardens, attending an art exhibit at Sunbury Shores Arts and Nature Centre, shopping at the Thursday Farmers Market in the Town Square, and ogling the art galleries and clothing boutiques. We talked to helpful residents and were waited on by polite, articulate teenagers, an oxymoron we had thought.

We devoured tourist books and local novels to understand the historical and cultural facets of St. Andrews. We learned that during the Revolutionary War when trade between Britain and the Colonies was curtailed, this port was littered with scores of transatlantic sailing ships plying a triangular circuit to transport New Brunswick hardwood to Britain, deliver tea, spices and cloth to the Caribbean, rum to the Maritimes. Wealthy sea captains and merchants built stately homes on the hill above the more modest timber homes shipped intact to St. Andrews by the expat Loyalists from Maine. When the War ended, St. Andrews' trade with Britain had to compete once again with the colonies, but the town retained its wealth and prominence into the 19th century as a popular seaside resort for affluent industrialists from cities like Boston and Montreal who arrived by train

The elite came to enjoy the cool summers and famous "lack of hay fever" along with the stylized social life centered around the scenic shore and stunning Algonquin with its tea dances and casino. They came for the seafood and whale watching, the picnics, plays, garden, art classes, music, and I imagine a bit of social climbing.

We observed that whether through great city planning or a magical time warp, this lovely village of 1,700 had maintained its historical aura and had thwarted overtures from corporate chain stores and high-rise

condo developers. In a clamshell, St. Andrews still possessed the quaintness, charm and cultural leanings that had made it so popular with the upper crust in the past and with tourists in the present. And yes, we discovered in those days of old, they used lobsters in the fields as fertilizer, *so our Montreal friend wasn't fabricating a lot.*

We decided to extend our stay in St. Andrews so we could enjoy a dinner theatre performance (a modern Shakespearian comedy written and performed by locals), a performance by "Hot Toddy, an amazing eclectic maritime musical trio that fiddled the night away at a downtown pub. We ate _____ oysters on a bed of dulse (seaweed), munched freshly gathered bolleto mushroom toast, saucily sauteed fiddlehead ferns, rosti potatoes, succulent lobster, pecan crusted rack of lamb at the now famous Rossmount Inn where Chris Aerni, a Swiss Chef, has won accolades for his inventive gourmet cuisine based on fresh local products. We ate seafood quiche at the Sweet Harvest Bakery and Cafe, bought blown glass and prints by local artists, and stuffed our suitcase with sea glass jewelry and metallic fish. Basking on a bayside terrace, we sipped our blueberry Moosehead beer while basking scribbling poetically on colorful picture post cards featuring humpback whales, round-eyed puffins, meandering moose and languishing lighthouses. We exalted St. Andrews and announced our new property, which we hadn't a clue yet how we would use.

We talked to expats from France, Australia and Germany. And at the internet café by the laundromat, Ken discovered that St. Andrews's latitude is the same as Portland, Oregon ... *not quite tropical.*

Residents regaled us with tales of the vibrant winter social scene and cold weather fun when the tourists evaporate and the town is reclaimed by the locals. ...activities from curling teams and ice skating to community theatre and dine arounds. They mentioned the town-wide three weeks of holiday season buildup to Christmas and Boxer's Day. We were graciously invited to tour a new million dollar villa built by a Toronto business couple to inspect their builder's craftsmanship and get advice on the home building process over a nice bottle of Cab.

At our future neighbor's home, a charming family headed by prominent fish scientists specializing in Lobster and Halibut, we sampled their home made wine, beer and gravelox made from farmed salmon. Lounging on their massive deck with its 280 degree Bay view and brand new hot tub, the sunlight reminiscent of that in Provence, we witnessed an incredible spectacle. An aerial dogfight directly overhead between an osprey and eagle over the Osprey's freshly caught salmon still dripping from the sea. We toured our new neighbors' incredible organic vegetable garden popping vine-ripe hardy kiwi in our mouths like grapes (*not quite tropical, but seeming closer*)

In our short but revealing visit to St. Andrews, it was impossible to ignore the many lifestyle clues that that this place was pretty sophisticated under its casual trappings of Birkenstocks, toques, and fleece. We smugly concluded that this must be the most incredible coastal community in North America ...a safe haven full of interesting, international people, a vibrant arts and culture scene, where people were well informed eco-activists, and, last but not least, education and families were the top priorities. A place where even the teenagers were polite!

Returning home via the Quoddy Loop Route, we island hopped on the Deer Island Ferry landing in Campobello Island where Roosevelt had his picturesque summer home – truly a page out of a L.L. Bean catalog—and now an international park.

Back in West Virginia, when we told our friends of our St. Andrews property purchase (and impending move to Canada), they were shocked that we weren't talking about Provence or Tuscany our formerly favorite vacation haunts. But moving north, becoming "expats" in Canada -- especially in "tropical" Maritime Canada -- was off all of our radar screens until the infamous exploratory trip north. Like us most of our friends had no clue where this tropical area in Canada was located. So we started carrying a map of the Northeast to point out that St. Andrews was just minutes from Calais, Maine.

In the next year, the fates moved rapidly in our favor -- our house and 20 acres in the WV hollar sold in record time and within the next year we developed house plans and started building a lovely one-storey home on our New Brunswick property. After living in a cramped townhouse with the five Jack Russells for a year in WV, we purchased a 5th wheels so we could be present on our property during the last month of the construction in March. In spite of references, contracts and trips up to review progress, plans went awry when the builder declared bankruptcy and walked off the job. For the next six months, we finished the house ourselves. This stressful period tested our marriage and our commitment to St. Andrews, but both survived and flourished as a result.

With the help of the NB Provincial Nominee Program, we were granted "landed immigrant" status (in record time—less than six months), affording us most of the rights and privileges of Canadian Citizenship. I started a Canadian marketing company and . because of the financial hit on the house, Ken went back to work as Dean of Academics for a newly established graduate school of business, based in nearby Fredericton, the provincial capitol mostly telecommuting from home.

Fast-forward 5 years later and we are dual citizens developing an eco-friendly 21-acre subdivision called Estate St. Croix (www.estatestcroix.ca) in St. Andrews, and loving every minute of our life in Tropical Canada. Though working, we find time to golf, kayak and tend an acre garden full of perennials, roses and organic produce and socialize regularly with six terrific couples and travel. We are super active in the community, serving on boards and enjoying several clubs. Ken makes wine, carves birds and builds stone walls – skills he has learned in St. Andrews. I have created a sprawling perennial garden that was featured on the Seaside Garden Tour last year and jump at any opportunity to take on a remodeling project and practice my faux painting..

Now totally absorbed in our new life, with more close friends, civic involvements, and business opportunities than we ever could have imagined, we are seasoned (not seasonal) residents of Tropical Canada and true-North residents. Indeed, we have a month more of winter than we did in the mid-Atlantic (garden zone 5 as opposed to 6), but we're so busy with our enriched lifestyle that we hardly notice.

Like Garrison Keller says, "Here all the men are rich, the women are good looking, and the children above average." Every year we feel more at home and frankly in love with our Tropical home. We'd swear that the weather is getting warmer although we had a record level of snow last winter like the rest of North America. However, with global warming gathering steam, we may well have moved to Tropical Canada!

What we reply to the locals who ask us why we moved here is "Yes, Charlotte, there is a Tropical Canada, a warm, inviting place visitors feel compelled to come to and once here never want to leave. It's called St. Andrews by-the-Sea (*and by coincidence our County is called Charlotte*).

Since we arrived, we've seen an increasing number of "expats" move to St. Andrews each year from the lower 48. Of the 100,000 people from the U.S. who move to Canada annually, we are getting our share as well as from Europe and Asia.

Frankly, we're getting a little worried that our sociable friend in Montreal has been spending too much time on the bus chatting to gullible strangers about Tropical Canada.

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