

## Topten things to do while visiting Cape Breton Highland Retreat

**1. Slow down, do nothing.** If you want to get the best this place has to offer, I can't mention enough how you don't need to go anywhere. Today I sat in an adirondack chair for hours watching the seals fish just off the waterfall, a little farther offshore several dozen gannets were circling and plunge-diving into schools of mackerel. Farther out, perhaps a mile out, I saw a finback whale blow once and Cheryl saw a minke whale only a quarter mile off shore. Eagles, ravens and crows regularly cruise along the clifftop, scouting the beach below all day long. It's all right here. Terrific scenery, regular wildlife, the sea, and salt air right from the yard or lookout. The Buddhists next door teach "be here now," and we all have this tendency to cram as many sights and hikes as we can into vacation, and often forget to just stop and soak up the small wonders around us. So my top recommendation before all others is to just hang out. The best thing about this clifftop perch on the edge of the world is that the mountains and the sea and the sky all come together in a way that supercharges your batteries if you can only slow down enough to let it. At the very least, stay away from the car for a couple days when you first arrive, explore the neighbourhood and local hikes on foot before venturing outward to the National Park and the Cabot Trail.

**2. Gampo Abbey.** The Abbey is open to tours most summer afternoons and it's only a quarter mile walk back along the gravel road from my driveway to theirs, check the sign at the entrance. If they're closed you can still check out the Stupa (shrine) on the road and hike up "The Jimmy's Mountain" which is the lone hill you can see right from the cabin yard. The Buddhists call it Gampo Latse and the trail begins right across from their red sign. You don't need permission to hike up it. There's a fox hole-like hermit/meditation cave under a huge rock near the top (one person at a time only) where the trail splits into a loop encircling some shrines. From the cabin to the top and back on foot is only an hour or so. The trail is a little steep in places but not difficult.

**3. Rope to the beach at Archies Brook.** At the end of the gravel road, just a quarter mile past the driveway, there's a turnaround and parking lot for the Pollets Cove wilderness trail. Look for a small side trail going down into the brook right from the turnaround. It comes out to an opening above the beach where a rope will assist you down the cliff slope alongside the brook. It's scary the first time but you get used to it quick. The beach below is cobbled, and you can hike back to the waterfall below the cabin and hang out on the rocks there for the afternoon—swimming, snorkeling, reading, picnicking, sunbathing, and rinsing the salt off in the waterfall. But it's not barefoot friendly, wear footgear you can get wet when getting in or out of the water (like Texas or old sneakers) as well as for walking on the cobblestones. An easier beach access is to drive, bike, or hike the 2 miles to Red River beach. Park in the lot across from the white house that overlooks the beach, just where the road turns inland toward the bridge. There's a trail from the road through the meadow going down to the gravel beach. There's usually a freshwater pool just before the river crosses the beach kids can wade in, or you can use to rinse the salt off.



**4. Black Brook / Otter Brook / Pollet's Cove trail.** Beyond the trailhead at Archies Brook the old road continues round the corner and over a little bridge then past the yellow cabin where it narrows to just a footpath. Most folks using this trail are going all the way to Pollets Cove to spend a weekend or week camping in the wilderness. Just a half mile beyond the yellow cabin is Black Brook which has the sweetest drinking water of any mountain brook I know. At this trail crossing, you can follow the brook upstream to explore the little steep valley, or bushwhack downstream to a totally private beach if you don't mind your footgear getting wet. If you continue on the trail you'll begin a long steep ascent of switchbacks crossing the face of Black Brook Mountain for the next half mile. Check out the cracks and gullies where the mountainside slipped about 20 years ago. This is the hardest part of the Pollets Cove trail, and my recommendation is simply to go slow enough that you don't run out of breath by the time you reach the top, which isn't the mountain top, just the high point of the trail (8-900 feet). The trail continues fairly level for awhile then slowly descends until you come to the high meadows of Otter Brook. Most hikers don't stop for more than a drink and miss the attractions here. When the trail first leaves the woods, wander over to the cliff edge carefully and look down for a good belly woggle, the cliffs are 400+ feet high here, very dramatic and unlike any hike in the National Park! The meadow descends to the brook and the trail disintegrates into a million animal paths. The mouth of the brook has no beach to speak of but you can swim off the rocks if the water's calm. On the far side of the brook is a side trail that leads to an abandoned hunter's cabin about a mile upstream. Otter Brook is definitely worth a morning or afternoon exploring, with or without a picnic. If the steep trail doesn't daunt you, it's not even an hour each way from the cabin.

Continuing onward, cross Otter Brook by stepping stones or wading and find the trail leading back into the woods. It's another several miles to Pollets Cove and again the trail emerges from the woods into high meadows where you can see a wide valley where 2 salmon rivers meet and cross over the mile long beach. There's tons of driftwood for bonfires. Believe it or not this was an active but isolated pioneering



settlement with its own lobster cannery up until the 1920s. You can still find some old cellar holes and gravesites and middens. There's a fairly modern hunter's cabin (locked) back in MacLean's field (follow the ATV trail between the 2 rivers) about a mile in. It's very likely you may see other hikers, campers, and/or fishermen, not to mention semi-wild cows and horses, but there's plenty of room to spread out in the meadows and back fields. Beware of flash floods if you get a downpour, especially if you camp in the flat between the 2 rivers. The upper meadow on the far side of the cove is where I set up camp. See if you can locate the hard-to-find trails climbing to the top of Pollets Cove Mountain for some fabulous views of the back canyons and a taste of the highland barrens, and up top is the old telegraph trail that continues across the highlands to Lowland and Meat Coves, but that's more of an expedition than a hike. Altogether it's 6 miles or 2.5 hrs each way from my cabin to Pollets Cove.



**5. Red River Falls.** Hike, bike, or drive the 2 miles to the Red River bridge. Turn left there onto the Hinkley Glen Road and follow the gravel road along the river and across a couple bridges until you get to the parking lot and quarry at the end, about another 2 miles. If the road is impassable for a car on account of flooding or washouts, just park and hike the rest of the way. From the parking lot continue hiking on the same side of the river just a little ways (less than a quarter mile) until you come to the big pool. You have to cross in front of it to see the falls in the grotto behind. The water is very cool but still swimmable on a hot day, especially early afternoon when the sun penetrates the canopy overhead to help warm you back up and dry off.

**6. Cap'n Mark's Whale & Seal Cruise.** In good weather there'll be a number of cruises every day from June through early October out of Pleasant Bay Harbour, offering both zodiac and bigger boat tours. The other outfits are a joke and you're taking your life in your hands. Seriously. Whale watches are typically (but not always)

calmer in the early mornings and early evenings as opposed to late mornings or early afternoons, but check the water yourself, flat calm and no white caps even when gray and drizzly can be perfect for a boat ride. Bring drinking water and snacks. You really haven't seen Cape Breton until you've seen it from the water. I recommend going for it soon as you get a calm day, calm being more important than sunny—lack of wind and waves allows you to see much more (and to keep your lunch). Pleasant Bay Harbour itself is worth wandering around and a good place for meeting locals. There's a public and somewhat sandy beach, a ball field, mornings and evenings fishermen hang out working on their boats or gear, and there's the Whale Interpretive Centre overlooking it all. Two sides are for lobster and crab boats, the inland docks are where the whale watches leave from.



**7. Skyline Trail** (and other Park trails on the way to Cheticamp). Skyline is probably the most visited trail in the Nat'l Park, but worth it even when crowded for its big dramatic vistas overlooking the sparkling Gulf. The boardwalk part is a mile and a half, and there's a longer back trail you can do as part of a loop if you've got extra time or want to avoid tourists. Fishing Cove is like a less dramatic Otter Brook or Pollets Cove hike, but similarly difficult. Other trails worth stopping at heading towards Cheticamp are Bog (short and sweet), Benjies Lake if you haven't yet seen a moose, and my favorite beach hike in the Park is at Trout Brook. There's an interesting trail (original trail between the abandoned settlements here) at Trout Brook but I'm talking about simply going down to the beach and hiking about a mile northeast back towards Pleasant Bay until the beach ends in a series of little coves with standing stones—great for swimming under the dramatic cliffs here. It's an intimate spot not mentioned in any of the trail guides. Cheticamp campground has family activities like live music which you can find out about at the park HQ. Not far outside the Park in Cheticamp is the Frog Pond Café (at the Sunset Gallery) where you can get your internet fix and meet other travelers, with the best coffee for miles and classic French pastries.

**8. Get Lost.** Beyond Cheticamp follow the Cabot Trail up the Margaree Valley, past Margaree Forks and the Dancing Goat bakery, turn left off the Cabot Trail onto either the Big Intervale or Egypt Roads, cross the river and start exploring north and/or east, it won't be long at all before you've no clue at all where you are, and if you just keep going you can stay lost for hours, going through the many little hamlets and farms with lovely riparian vistas.



**9. Lone Shieling.** At the Pleasant Bay crossroads turn inland (east) and shortly you'll enter the National Park and after a few miles you'll start climbing the North Mountain which is even steeper than the MacKenzie Mountain going the other way. Lone Shieling is a little tourist trap of a crofter's hut and not much of a hike really but there's this awesome bit of old growth forest in this valley with some amazing sugar maples worth wandering around under. In spring-time I visit here almost daily while the buds burst and the spring warblers come through.

**10. Cape North and the other side.** When the winds are westerly and fog or clouds have piled up against the highlands in Pleasant Bay and it's all gray and drizzly, head over the North Mountain and you may find a totally different sunny and calm weather pattern on the east side of the island. It's only a 20 minute drive. Once you leave the Park in Cape North you can turn left towards Meat Cove and Bay St. Lawrence, but I recommend staying on the Cabot Trail a little longer for 3 of my favorite places at the top of the island. The first is the endless miles of sandy (and usually empty) beaches edging Aspy Bay. The best access is to take the Shore Rd just after the Dingwall turnoff which runs alongside South Harbour. You'll go past Eagles North where you can rent kayaks to explore the huge protected harbours behind Aspy Bay (which could be its own topten entry) but keep going another couple miles you'll eventually come to a little parking lot at the end with a short trail out to the beach where you can easily spend a whole or half day exploring and swimming or just sunbathing without a crowd.

Back on the Cabot Trail toward Ingonish take the scenic loop on the left that hugs the coast while the main road heads inland. Follow the scenic road until you come into White Point village, and look for the dirt road alongside the *Two Tittles Inn* that ends at a parking spot. That's where the trail out to White Point begins. You'll want an hour and a half to hike out to the point and the tittles and back. Afterward I recommend you continue driving along the scenic loop to Neils Harbour, where there are a couple excellent options for fish and chips or a bowl of chowder. Beyond Neil's Harbour and back on the Cabot Trail toward Ingonish are a series of Park trails along the Atlantic Coast, my favorite of which is called the Jack Pine Loop.

