



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 10 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## Cape Breton

It's October 14, 2015 and I'm off on a road trip from Montreal to the Canadian Maritimes to take pictures, capture some fall colors and visit used bookstores.

Heading north towards Rivière-du-Loup, the colors on the road are spectacular on the rare occasions the sun shows itself, but there is never anywhere to pull over so I'll come up empty of images on Day 1. After eight hours of driving I make it to the Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and have fish and chips for dinner at a fast food place next door where I see a Toronto Blue Jay hit an iconic home run in a baseball playoff game on TV.

Day 2 will be a day of blue skies, lots of photos and plenty of movement: Fredericton to Saint John to the Bay of Fundy to Moncton. First stop is Saint John where it's not easy to find a book at the three-room Dave Shoots Bookstore. It's a beautiful bright morning and I want to get back in the car as soon as possible but the very nice owner just won't stop talking (my first exposure to the exceptional friendliness and garrulousness of Maritimers), following me from room to room, forcing me to talk and shop at the same time. The titles are older than usual and I really can't find anything, so I grab *Photography and the Art of Seeing* by Freeman Patterson, a local photographer. I can tell by his photos that, just like me, he likes to scour the Earth for fragments of beauty.

I can't help but notice how few people there are here. I get some shots at the Irving Nature Park and stay close to the water as I drive east along the Bay of Fundy, stopping at picturesque spots like Alma along the way. With the biggest tides in the world (as high as 52 feet), the Hopewell Rocks are in the shade when I arrive in late afternoon; I'll have to return earlier in the day on the way back. I spend the night at the Comfort Inn East Motel in Moncton, the geographical center of the Maritimes.

The drive over the eight-mile long Confederation Bridge into Prince Edward Island on Day 3 is very nice but there's no sunlight and the tiny province seems even emptier than New Brunswick. It's frustrating because the big sky on this flat island is rimmed with blue, the clouds covering only the domed heavens like a gigantic pancake directly overhead. This is a beautiful part of the world and Maritimers are lovable but it's hard to not see the region as a backwater, a place mostly ignored or forgotten by Canada and the world. More than once, a local will use the word *depopulated* to describe their home, especially after the tourists have gone.

Downtown Charlottetown is bustling in a small-town way. I buy an overpriced book at Bookman on Queen Street. *Unknown World: Notes on the Meaning of the Earth*, by Jacob Needleman, is about the role humans play on this planet. The coast in Cavendish (Anne of Green Gables country) is spectacular but the emptiness is eerie and almost post-apocalyptic. I get some nice shots of the beach in strange, indirect light with dark skies.

I have a wonderful dinner of fishcakes at Rachael's Ristorante, the last restaurant still open but which closes tomorrow along with the Marco Polo Inn where I'm staying, a spooky old house on a hill where I listen to the wind howl and watch (from bay windows that overlook an old abandoned train station) the rain get thicker and heavier until the lightening starts and it is clearly a storm. Good – let it clean the air for tomorrow's photos. It may be chaos outside now but sun is in the forecast.

Freeman Patterson warns that "Making pictures can be a substitute for seeing and participating". I tell myself to be mindful of where I am, not just grab the photo and run. The weather is spectacular on Day 4: crisp and clear with just a little wind beside the sea. A perfect day to wander around the Island before I catch a ferry to Nova Scotia at 4:30. I start the day early and by 7:30 I'm on the beach where the deep red color of the eroding cliffs is wonderful and I get some nice shots in sharp autumn light. There are still no people about but there are plenty of foxes in the tall grass and on the road.



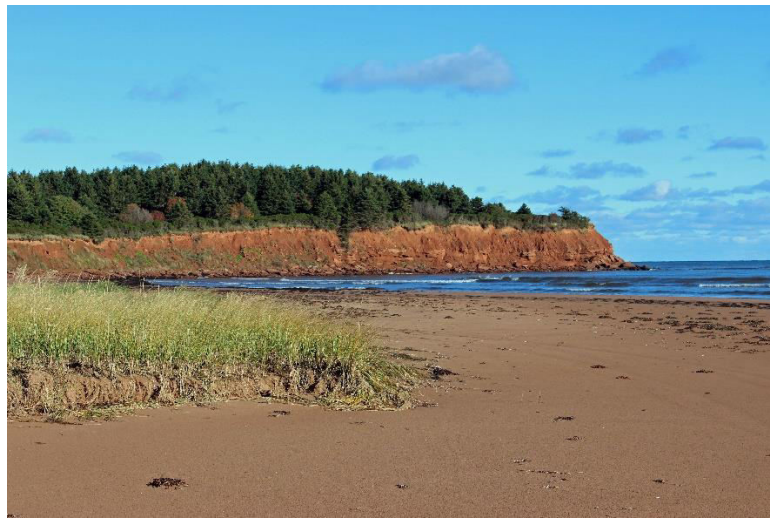
Bay of Fundy



Alma, New Brunswick







As it is on every road trip, the car radio is my companion. A woman on the radio says she doesn't believe in ghosts or God, then goes on to describe a very real supernatural experience she had. She's an intelligent, articulate writer but it is as if she is saying *I don't believe in heart attacks but I had one and this is what I think it means*. We do this all the time: ignore evidence and say things we know don't make sense. Maybe it's how we keep ourselves asleep to the mysteries that surround us.

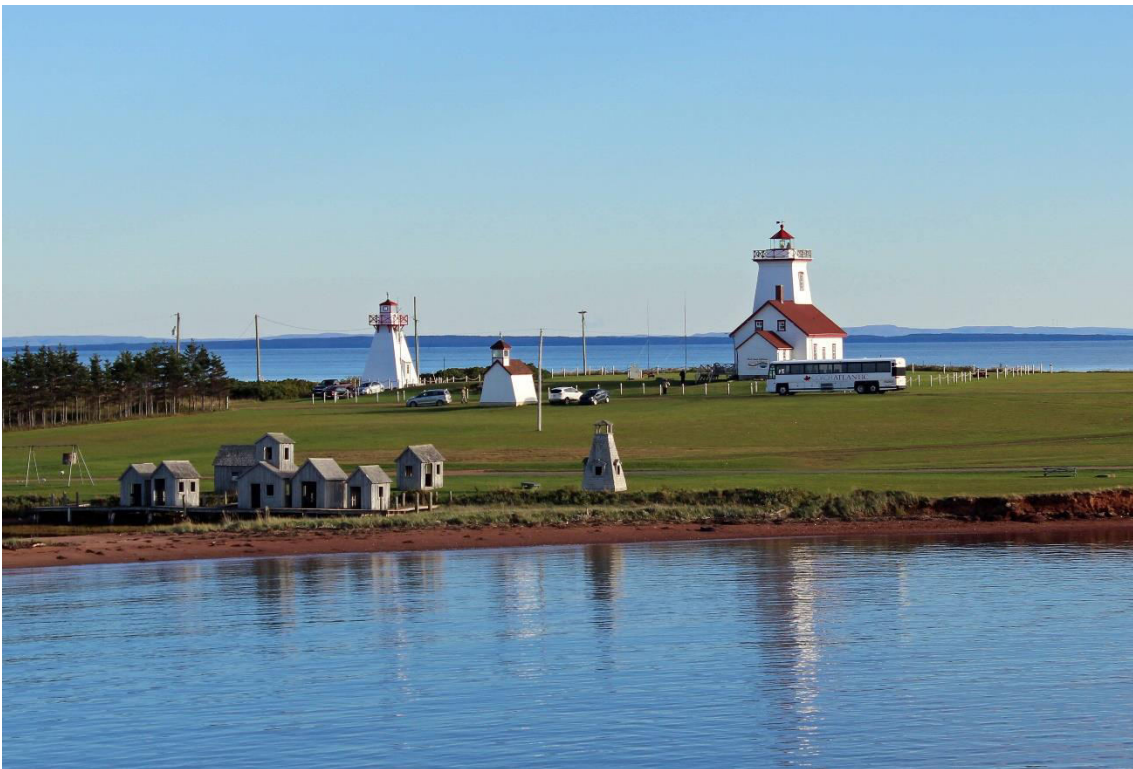
The driving is nice and the ferry is too, but heavy darkness descends in the wilds of Nova Scotia before I reach my destination: the Blue Tin Roof B & B in Livingstone Cove. My GPS gadget doesn't recognize this part of the planet and my phone goes dead as well. A detour on the highway leads me onto an extremely bumpy road into an even more dark and desolate area and, once back on the main road, I'm very relieved when I catch a glimpse of a small roadside sign in my headlights and stumble upon my destination.

I spend a second straight night in a strange house where I'm the only guest, this one feeling much more like someone's home (I'm actually asked to take my shoes off before entering). It's a unique and beautiful house, designed by the owners. There's exposed wood everywhere, even two separate piles of neatly arranged and neatly trimmed firewood for the one-of-a-kind soapstone upright furnace in the large kitchen area on the first floor. The place reeks of wood, like living in a tree, and my hosts are very nice and friendly but a little too earnest (Jehovah Witnesses as it happens).

The man offers me something to eat and I mention the looming national election and get a glazed look in response. "We don't pay much attention to politics because we believe a new world is coming," he says. I feel like asking him who and what he thinks maintains social order, making it possible to live in so much comfort and luxury in the middle of the wilderness without having to worry about getting your throat cut.

Everything in the house is artisanal and perfect and uncomfortable, demanding special attention, with not just coastering, but double coastering (the plate of cold cuts he puts on the table actually sits on another plate which itself sits on a gigantic coaster!). I'm not a coaster person myself and I'm feeling even more spooked than last night about where I'm about to sleep. I have a sense that I'm going further and further into the wild every day. I saw three coyotes on the road today.







Day 5 begins cold and windy and overcast as I set out for Cape Breton. It rains all the way to St. Ninian's Cathedral in Antigonish where mass is barely tolerable with the priest droning away and small children screaming just so they can hear their shrill voices bounce off the vaulted ceiling directly back into the top of my head. But it feels good and right to stand up and take communion and to feel the deep tones of an old church organ resonate in my solar plexus.

The church is large and in need of renovations, with huge, unstained windows lining the walls, letting in lots of light on this grey, rainy day. In the Gospel story, the Apostles James and John are vying to be named No. 2 and 3 behind the Boss, but Jesus is skeptical and asks them if they are prepared to serve and sacrifice. Do they really understand what they are asking for, or are they just coveting the pleasures of power and status? An appropriate sermon on the eve of a national election.

I drive through rain most of the day with brief spurts of sunlight pouring through holes in the clouds providing opportunities for beautiful shots. And, finally, I catch some vivid autumn colors by the side of road. I pull over into a small roadside cemetery with sunlight so shifty and sporadic I find myself running back and forth three times from one side of the road to the other for photo-ops in two different directions. I eventually get a nice shot on each side and then I'm on my way again, up and down deserted roads, pulling over whenever the sun peaks out, which it seems to do in the most beautiful spots (though sometimes I have to wait).

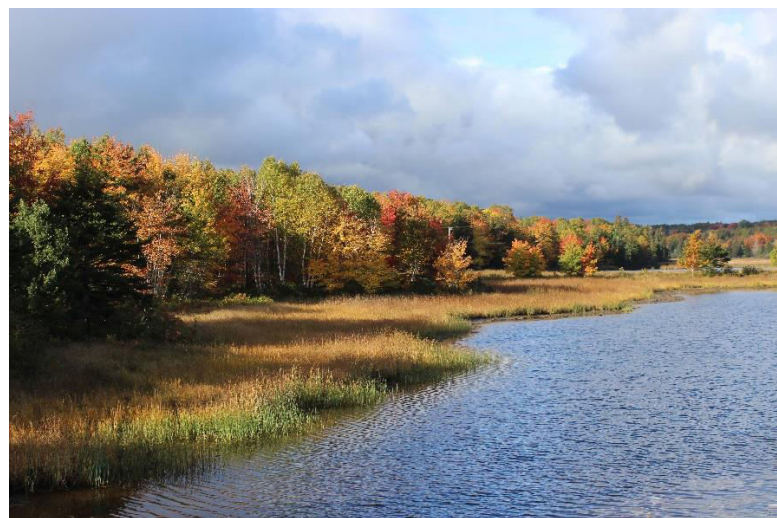
I find the sea again at Cheticamp, an Acadian village which is the western starting point of the Cabot Trail. There are actually people here, but not many, and the Cornerstone Motel where I will spend the night is closing tomorrow. Not for the first time I get the impression the World is folding shut behind me as I move further east. I like the motel, which is just a few hundred yards from the entrance to Cape Breton Highlands Park, and I like the friendly (and of course very talkative) owner who gives me lots of good advice about the Trail. I love the room too, which couldn't be simpler, like an artist's rendition of the generic, low-rent motel room. Grey-beige carpet, beige walls and a soft green/brown/beige floral-patterned bed spread make it feel like a second home to a pilgrim and I leave my bags and set off on the Trail to drive to Pleasant Bay and back before nightfall. The light is bad so I don't get any shots, but my first glimpse of the Trail is wonderful.











I start Day 6 with breakfast at the Evangeline Café beside the harbour in Cheticamp, with good coffee and Acadian music playing in the background. Today is Election Day, cold and windy at first with a mix of sun, clouds, rain and even a bit of snow in the forecast, but the sun defies all the oracles and soon comes out to stay on the spectacular Cabot Trail. I will get some truly beautiful shots today.

At one point in the middle of nowhere with no signs of civilization, I need to pee so badly I pull into an empty clearing off the road. I have no idea why the clearing exists (maybe it's a parking lot for snow removal trucks) but it's the perfect place to take care of business with a view of the sea over the trees and a sense of communion with the land I'm watering beneath me. I linger in the clearing to soak in the silence and appreciate where I am, somewhere between White Point and Neil's Harbour at the northeastern tip of Cape Breton. I imagine myself alone in the wilderness, alone on this beautiful planet, and I experience one of those Pilgrim moments I know I will remember.

In the evening I watch the election results in my room at the Highland Motel in Sydney and it's surprisingly very emotional to witness the defeat of the narrow-hearted, xenophobic government that has ruled my country for ten years. It's an incredible relief that millions of Canadians will savor in the coming days. The new leader speaks with unbridled optimism about inclusion, openness and "sunny ways". Like so many others who didn't even vote for him, I'm more than pleased to buy in and give him the benefit of the doubt. And if he succeeds, Canada might become an example for a world that could use a few sunny days. It's certainly true that when we approach the world with Love, everything turns good, and so it must be true on a larger, even political, scale.

I have an interesting conversation at breakfast on Day 7 with a former carny living in the motel. He looks to be my age and he's quite the mobile entrepreneur now, currently peddling popcorn, maple syrup and apples to tourists on cruise ships. He says he took yesterday off because it was a "fruitcake ship" (lesbians and gays) docked in Sydney Harbor. I try to soften him up, suggesting that maybe the fruitcakes have lots of money to spend, but he says it's against his religion.











I ask him about the ferry to Newfoundland and what someone told me about moose being out of control in that province (they were introduced a hundred years ago and have no predators) and he says, “They sure are, I don’t drive at night for that reason and if I have to, I follow a big truck.” I tell him I saw a moose for the first time yesterday slowly walking across the road on the Cabot Trail. And he was crossing at a moose crossing, right next to a sign with his picture on it!

It’s grey today and supposed to stay grey but the mood is very good after last night’s election. The rest of the trip is planned: after a short visit to Halifax it will be mostly driving through New Brunswick and Quebec to get back home. I’ve got enough photos already, this part of the trip’s mission definitely accomplished.

The Trident Bookstore Café in downtown Halifax is a perfect ten, super well-curated with Buddhist origins and delicious, freshly roasted coffee. I find two books easily and have a nice conversation with the owner.

Just down the street, Pier 21 (the entry point for most Canadian immigrants in the 20th century, which is now a museum) is practically empty of people and very moving. I’m shown digital images of the handwritten entries recording the arrival of my father in 1930 and maternal grandparents in 1906 and 1908, and a tour guide tells stories of the waves of people who passed through here. I’m reminded of a First Nations leader on the radio the other day who was asked about the government’s xenophobia towards refugees. She dismissed it as a case of old settlers complaining about new settlers. Another man on the radio had written a book about how we shouldn’t get so worked up about invasive plant and animal species – we need to relax and let nature do its thing. Everything is constantly changing, and nature actually loves distressed, post-industrial environments. He says the way people talk about these invaders is similar to the way they talk about immigrants and the threat of terrorism, based on an assumption that newcomers bring death and destruction when in fact they most often bring life.

Day 8 is a day of driving from Halifax to Moncton on a bright sunny day, but the light is white and slightly hazy and there’s not much to photograph until I reach Hopewell Rocks, which are disappointing again the second time around. The ocean floor is drab and colorless with the tide out and the water a muddy, unappealing brown. The “flower pots” (trees resting on huge pillars of rock) are impressive but too big to photograph in any way interesting, especially in this flat, white light. I find a book in Moncton, however, and make some money translating a document on the road in a Tim Hortons donut shop.





The Hopewell rocks

I give up on the Needleman book. He seems very learned and intelligent and I like the subject, but not the way it's written. The book has an index, however, so I go directly to the Gurdjieff (my favorite teacher) parts before abandoning it. Gurdjieff says if we do not work to become more conscious, the Earth will fall down. Everything has a purpose and "the evolving part of organic life is humanity... If humanity does not evolve it means that the evolution of organic life will stop... Failure to evolve may lead to destruction." I take this as the essence of the book.

Day 9 is a grey, rainy, slightly melancholy day spent mostly on the road. The bookstores and art museum in Fredericton are disappointing. (I remember being impressed with the museum's permanent collection during a visit forty years ago, but the collection is on the road at the moment.) It rains all day, heavily at times, but after translating another short document in yet another Tim Hortons, I make it to the Motel Cartier in Rivière-du-Loup where I get a nice shot (the only one of the day) of the enormous red neon sign on the roof and its partial reflection in puddles on the damp, illuminated asphalt of the parking lot.

I have a fantastic dinner at the Rotisserie St. Hubert attached to the motel and I'm beginning to feel that this has been a very good trip. I didn't find very many books and they didn't have a chance to play a role but, as always, they would prove their significance later. And, most important, I saw, shot and experienced some very beautiful parts of the Earth. I'm exhausted and struggle to stay awake with just one morning left on this trek. I'm only four hours away from home but I'll take my time and move slowly down the old river road in the morning.

I'm on the road at seven on Day 10, before the sun has fully risen on my left as I head down the St. Lawrence River on my right. I get one last beautiful shot of a town by the water in early morning light before I decide it's time to get on the AutoRoute and head home.

The two books I found at the Trident Bookstore in Halifax would provide the texture that would flesh out the meaning of this road trip. In *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Stephen Mitchell says that "Entering the Kingdom of God means feeling, as if we were floating in the womb of the universe, that we are being taken care of, always, at every moment." He eliminates all the nonsense tacked on to the Gospels and identifies the essential teachings of Jesus as boiling down to one thing: presence. If we can stop ourselves from constantly looking forward or backward, the Kingdom (this Earth) is at our feet.







In *Light at the Edge of the World*, anthropologist Wade Davis says that “What (indigenous cultures) have done... is to forge through time and ritual a traditional mystique of the Earth which is based not only on deep attachment to the land but also on far more subtle intuition – the idea that the land itself is breathed into being by human consciousness.”

A few days after I return a short video will go viral on the Web: (<https://youtu.be/njTmKCPEXwY>). The video seems to show the Earth breathing, an effect apparently produced by strong winds in the canopy causing the roots of trees to pull and lift the forest floor. And it seems like more than a coincidence that the video was shot in Nova Scotia, where I just came from and where I experienced the Earth as a living organism with winds, tides, trees, sun, animals and rain. An Earth that breathes, just like me.

