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Dutch Treat: Eastern Coast Cruise Blends best of Canada and U.S.

By Mary Welch

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I'll admit it. I want to go back. My 16-year-old keeps wants to go again on a Holland America cruise, and we have barely been home.

My son, Grady, and I went on a seven-day Holland America cruise to New England and Canada. It was fabulous in so many ways, but let's start with the location. We forget about how beautiful New England, and by extension, eastern Canada is. When we think of vacations - especially with children - our thoughts go south to Florida or nearby beaches or to destination trips like the Grand Canyon. If we turn our attention to a cruise, yep, it tends to be the Caribbean or - again if we want exotic - Alaska. But on this trip, not only do you get New England and Canada, but a lot of Scottish and British heritage as well. In fact, in Sydney, especially, the local brogue was so thick, we might as well have been in Edinburgh.

I'm from Connecticut and I haven't even brought my son up to Yankee land (as my husband calls it) before this trip. I forgot the crisp weather, the fresh-off-the-dock lobster rolls and men walking around with little whales sewn into their trousers. I forgot the thrill of seeing the history of the American Revolution before my eyes again. See! Over there! That's the Boston Commons. Oh my, Paul Revere's house.

The Holland America cruise was a perfect introduction. We started in Boston and boarded the Maasdam, a 720-foot ship that is designed to carry fewer guests while providing more space for maximum comfort. With about 1,250 passengers, we never felt we part of a mass mob of people. There were no lines at the buffet, no tables left unbussted. No hordes of passengers vying for a lounge chair by the pool or waiting for a computer to check email in the Explorations Library.



MS Maasdam at Sea Photo credit: Holland America

Holland America is famous for its service and it lived up to the billing. When my son couldn't get the previous night's orange sherbet, our waiter made a special trip to see if there were any available for him. When the answer came back negative, he was so apologetic that he couldn't please Grady that it was touching (meanwhile, Grady's finishing his second serving of watermelon sherbet).

We sailed from Boston to Bar Harbor, Maine. While some took an excursion up to Acadia National Park and had a New England lobster fest, Grady and I just walked around the quaint town with lots of late 19th century buildings and mansions still intact and viewed the whaling museum. We opted for a lobster lunch at a dockside restaurant and returned to the ship early so we could swim in the pool and I could take a long nap.

Most people on the ship we talked with fell in love with Halifax, Nova Scotia, our next stop. The town has a long scenic boardwalk where one could meander and listen to street music, grab some fish and chips from a dockside vendor



Grady McGill enjoying lobster in Bar harbor, Maine Photo by Mary Welch

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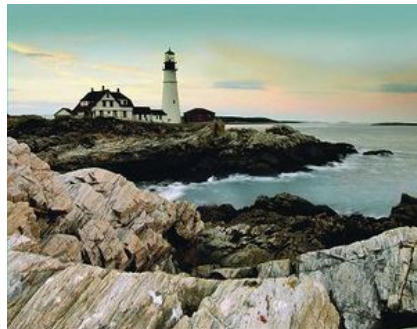
and learn some history.

But Halifax, perhaps, is best known for being the burial ground of about 150 victims of the Titanic. We have all seen the movie and the exhibition that came through Atlanta, but going to the site and hearing the stories will leave you shaken and inspired by the kindness of strangers in the face of unbelievable adversity. Fairview Lawn Cemetery contains the bodies of 121 victims. The locals decided to arrange the headstones in the shape of a ship's prow, a quiet nod to the manner of the inhabitants' death. Decades later when the Titanic was found, it was discovered that it sank at the same compass heading as the cemetery plots were laid out. Eerie.

Next stop was Sydney, an industrial town on Cape Breton Island that is trying to find some charm. But it is a city of music. We attended a small concert of a fiddler, drummer and keyboardist who explained that the local music is more true to its Scottish heritage than anywhere else on earth.

But outside the city, you will find scenery that promoted Alexander Graham Bell to exclaim, "I have traveled around the globe... but for simple beauty, Cape Breton outrivals them all." Not only does Cape Breton have its natural beauty, it also has the Fortress of Louisbourg, a 1744 French fort that offers a glimpse into life when the inhabitants were threatened by the British as much as Native Americans. Much like Williamsburg, Va., fort employees dress as they did back then and invite visitors to help bake bread, make a musket ball or tend to a garden. A delight for visitors of all ages.

A day at sea allowed one to experience all that Holland America offers. I participated in a cooking class while others played golf in the Wii station. There were plenty of activities for children including teens. A 9 p.m. dodge ball session for teenagers on the top floor of the ship was a lot of fun, especially as the sky was clear and stars and planets shined brightly. As with most cruise ships, there was plenty of entertainment and food that made the day at sea go by quickly. Of course, a trip to the spa helped as well. Prices were very reasonable. A wonderful hot stone massage and a facial was \$79. Yes, \$79 and it was wonderful.



Coastal Lighthouse  
Photo credit: Destination Nova Scotia

The next day we were back to Canada with a stop at Charlottetown in Prince Edward Island (PEI). The French founded Charlottetown in 1720, many of whom were expelled by the British in 1755 for refusing to take a loyalty oath to England. Of course, any well-read young girl knows that Anne of Green Gables grew up in PEI and taking the tour is a highlight. Delightful guides talk about the book, and descendants of author Lucy Maud Montgomery not only still live there but also

will speak with visitors and give even more insight. One of the people on the tour was a recently retired English teacher from Tennessee. Her husband treated her to this trip so she could see in person what she helped bring alive to hundreds of students in the classroom. To say she was overwhelmed would not be an understatement.

The next stop was Quebec City. Simple enough. It's a beautiful old French city with boutiques and bistros. It was hard to pick a bistro but we eventually settled on one and had French onion soup, escargot and pommes frites with spaghetti sauce. It seems Canadians – or at least French-Canadians – will eat anything with French fries including gravy, cheese, and mussels.

The trip ended in Montreal and we were ready to book a trip back to Boston rather than take the flight home to Atlanta. In fact, we posted the return by spending three days in Montreal.

There are several things to consider when taking a cruise, and this one has it all. First, the itinerary is different and will teach you and any kids you may choose to bring some history and a European/Colonial perspective. Holland America's service is second to none and the price point is a true value, especially in light of the service and amenities.

*Mary Welch is an Atlanta-based freelance writer. A former editor in chief of Atlanta Woman magazine, Mary has written for a number of media outlets including Business to Business Magazine, Pink, South, Glamour and Georgia Trend.*

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