

I'm American, but the last place I wanted to take my family on vacation was home. So we headed north

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American writer Reif Larsen watches the sunset at Margaree Harbour Beach in Nova Scotia. Larsen lives in Boston, but decided to take his family on vacation to Canada.

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For our annual summer trip, my family made the collective decision to travel anywhere but our own country, the United States. Like many of our fellow citizens, we've become increasingly horrified by our current administration's descent into authoritarianism, corruption and juvenile belligerence. Fortunately, from our home in Boston, looking abroad did not require looking far.

That's right, we would visit our dear neighbour. Oh, Canada! The same country with which the aforementioned administration has initiated a trade

war, leaving diplomatic relations at a historic low. We would do our part to revive these relations. And besides, my younger son, Max (9), had recently announced Canada was "his absolute favourite country" despite having been there only once as a toddler.

We'd always had eyes on Nova Scotia, that angel-wing of a peninsula fluttering in the Atlantic. The province somehow seems both on the edge of the world and at the heart of it, a collision of cultures and empires and misty seascapes. My older son, Holt (12), a self-declared anglophile and lover of old technologies, had long pined to take an overnight train, and so we decided to travel to the Maritimes via Montreal, where we would catch VIA Rail's the Ocean to Halifax. This didn't really make sense, but then the best travel rarely does.

Bonjour, Montreal

A bilingual oasis in the middle of the St. Lawrence, Montreal is a walkable, welcoming city designed for people of all types to enjoy doing people things.

"Now *this* is a city," said Holt as we rode Montreal's subway.

Indeed, the moment I set foot on Canadian soil, I felt my muscles relax. I could not stop smiling. I even got a bit weepy. I was experiencing what I came to call a "Canadaze" – a trance-like state where you realize that this is how things can be, how things *should* be. Imagine a country that looks after its citizens *and* its visitors, where kindness is still cool, and health care is a human right and not some kind of administrative torture chamber. *Oh, Canada!*

My Canadaze lingered. Montreal is a city of festivals, and at least five seemed

to be unfolding during our brief stay. At the Festival International Nuits d'Afrique, we watched Kizaba, a sequined Congolese-Canadian future god, light up the stage before we strolled through the Quartier des Spectacles and stumbled into the Just for Laughs festival.

There we took our kids to their first comedy performance, *The Culture Show*, which featured a series of comedians of different ethnicities unpacking their different upbringings. The comedy was fairly inappropriate for our kids, who guffawed and smirked and felt old for understanding most of the jokes.

"I want to live *here* when I grow up," Max said afterward.

Montreal continued to make its case to Max. At Pichai, a neo-Thai restaurant,

the kids scarfed down divine pad see ew and a mountain of mango shaved ice. At Jean-Doré Beach, they spent the afternoon doing flips off elaborate water trampolines.

We stayed at the Fairmont Le Reine Élizabéth, one of two hotels where John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged their famous 1969 Bed-Ins for Peace. It also happens to sit directly above Montreal's Gare Centrale, so we simply took an elevator down from the lobby to catch the Ocean, much to our kids' delight.



Holt and Max walk to catch the train in Gare Centrale, right beneath their hotel, the Fairmont Le Reine Élizabéth.
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All aboard

The Ocean is not a fancy train. We had two old but serviceable sleeper cabins, where our kids pressed every button and flipped every switch, many of which did not work. Holt, an admirer of fading infrastructure, marvelled at how our cabin's bathroom lined up with the kids' bathroom.

"We could drill a hole and communicate," he said. "Or just tap out Morse code."

In the dining car, we munched on salmon and bread rolls ("More rolls, please!" said Max), enjoying the fact that we were sitting in a restaurant on wheels, tumbling through the Canadian countryside. The light grew long. We Canadazed. Eventually, we retired to our sleeper cabins, which had been converted to bunk beds. I would say I tossed and turned, but this is baked into the equation. I barely slept. Our kids slept like logs.

It's a privilege to spend an entire day on a train. We read, played mini-soccer in the hallways, ate in the dining car, churned through some epic card games of hearts and talked about how time moves differently in motion. I jokingly dubbed it the "Nova Scotia Screamer," but the name grew less apt as our arrival time slipped by one hour, then two, then three.

"This is because long-distance passenger train travel is massively underfunded in North America," Holt reminded us. Holt's dream is to start a modern Zeppelin company. Not that a Zeppelin would have helped us get to Halifax any sooner. We finally arrived at 11 p.m., over four hours late, and collapsed into a bed that did not rattle and rumble at our wonderful harbour hotel, Muir.



Larsen's son on the VIA train from Montreal to Halifax. On the train Larsen and his family read, played mini-soccer in the hallways and entertained themselves with card games.

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Hello, Halifax

The next morning, urbanist T. J. Maguire gave us a tour of the Halifax

waterfront, which he had helped transform into a whimsical mixture of eateries, playgrounds, piers and amphitheatres. Outside our hotel, a large series of steps descended into the sea, next to a series of even larger steps that ascended into space. Above them rose *Tidal Beacon* by artist Ned Kahn, a wire tower illuminated by the tides and weather, like a futuristic lighthouse in constant conversation with the sea.

Maguire showed us the Salt Yard, a cluster of eateries in small sea shacks at odd angles that forced you to alter your path and linger. So we lingered and watched the light unfold across the harbour.

Like the tides, our time in Halifax was fleeting, but we still managed to watch Spain win the World Cup and dance with a few excited Haligonian-cum-Spaniards in the streets. *Vamos!*

Cape Breton chowder hunt

One of the true gems of the universe, Cape Breton is a place of shifting weather and dreamy vistas, where Scottish, Acadian and Mi'kmaq cultures intermingle. On the way, we stopped at Murphy's Fish & Chips in Truro for Max, our resident chowder lover. And thus began our informal search for the "Best Seafood Chowder in Nova Scotia and Possibly the World." Max deemed Murphy's (8/10) a strong opening contender.

Our Cape Breton base was the lakeside town of Baddeck, with its peach of a harbour, the Freight Shed restaurant (chowder: 9/10), and the utterly enticing Alexander Graham Bell museum. Holt was especially taken with Bell. After the telephone made him famous, Bell fell in love with Cape Breton, built a home there and turned the area into a base for his experiments. He helped launch the first airplane flight in Canada and pursued a lifelong obsession with hydrofoil boats, most of them beautiful failures.

One cannot go to Cape Breton without absorbing its music, and we saw plenty of ceilidhs – informal Gaelic fiddle jams where we learned the difference between jigs ("jiggety jig" goes the rhythm) and reels (more of a "Mississippi hotdog" rhythm). Max was enthralled. We contemplated giving up our lives back home to form a roving family fiddle collective.

From Baddeck, we sailed Bras d'Or Lake, drove the Cabot Trail and visited Margaree Harbour Beach at sunset, where Holt rerouted a small stream into the sea, one of his favourite pastimes, and Max smashed rocks and called it art.

Toward the end of the trip, we visited the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site on an appropriately moody, misty day. The 1740s French fortress is populated by earnest re-enactors – ideal for Holt, who has identified full-time re-enactment as a possible career path. I often prefer re-enactors who are strictly historic and grow confused and flustered when you show them your smartphone, but these re-enactors moved freely between then and now.



Larsen and his family sail on Bras D'Or Lake in Cape Breton.
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We learned why salted cod was so valuable in a French Catholic society that abstained from meat 140 days a year, the proper way to load a musket without blowing off a leg, and how to sing a love song in Mi'kmaq. Max uncovered a traitor among the guards and helped get him publicly humiliated in the stocks, which he later regretted. We agreed that fortress life on scant rations was miserable, though Holt had already begun planning his own Minecraft fortress with working cannons and a proper sewer system. We all have different ways of processing our Canadaze.

None of us wanted to leave. On our last day in Nova Scotia, already in withdrawal, we finally tried the best chowder in the country and possibly the world at Charlene's in Whycocomagh (10/10). It was generous, rich and delicate, brimming with seafood yet balanced in flavour. Basically, Canada in a nutshell.

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