

CREATIVE CLASS

A road trip around Cape Breton reveals a pervasive, contagious, creative spirit among the island's residents

BY TARA NOLAN



PHOTO BY DESTINATION CAPE BRETON

Perhaps it's the long winters and utter remoteness that ignites sparks of creativity among those who call Cape Breton home. Or perhaps it's the island's rugged beauty and rich maritime heritage that inspires a variety of artistic mediums to be born. Whatever it is, Cape Breton is teeming with artists and it's easy to reveal them one by one as you tour the island—many can be found along the famous Cabot Trail.

"Cape Breton is the creative island—in every nook and corner there is someone who can write and compose and fiddle and make," says Lori Burke, the executive director of the Cape Breton Centre for Craft & Design (capebretoncraft.com). "We live in a remote part of the world where our economy is very much dependent on the creative industries and tourism," she adds.

This organization, in the heart of Sydney, Nova Scotia, aims to nurture both established and nascent artists with a vast array of programming and services. It's also the perfect launch point of the Artisan Trail that's been established to lead visitors to all the wonderful galleries and studios that ring the island, which in and of itself is worth seeing.

The day I visit the Cape Breton Centre for Craft & Design, I marvel at the silver jewellery with colourful gemstones on display for the current exhibit. German-born designer Diana Morrissey of Gemfan (gem-fan.com) is there and explains the cuttlefish technique that inspired her and how she has settled into the artistic community.



THE INSIDE OF PROUD TO BE HOOKERS HEADQUARTERS.
PHOTO BY TARA NOLAN



LINDA WRIGHT'S COLOURFUL POTTERY. PHOTO BY TARA NOLAN



END GRAINS WAITING TO BE MADE INTO LARCHWOOD BOARDS.
PHOTO BY TARA NOLAN

After a long drive through the woods to Big Hill Pottery (bighillretreat.com), potter Linda Wright invites us into her converted barn for coffee (out of her handmade cerulean mugs). As we sip, she weighs out some clay and demonstrates how to “throw” a bowl, which looks effortless in the hands of the artist, but proves challenging when my amateur hands are given the opportunity to try.



WILLIAM D. ROACH CARVING IN HIS WORKSHOP. PHOTO BY TARA NOLAN



ONE OF DIANA MORRISSEY'S RING DESIGNS.
PHOTO BY GEMFAN

At Larchwood (larchwoodcanada.com), we are taken through the steps that are used to create the gorgeous end-grain cutting boards that have become popular among chefs because of the larch's dense softwood and anti-microbial properties that makes the cutting action easier on the wrists.

Pine is folk artist William D. Roach's preferred material. His Sunset Art Gallery (sunsetartgallery.ca) and collection of quirky outbuildings, that include a café and his studio, are adorned with some of his work. However it's worth going inside to see all the colourful, intricate carvings. The man has a real sense of humour that he applies to his work! In his workshop, Roach patiently hand-carves a whale as he provides stories of his life in Chéticamp and his love for his medium.

The Proud to be Hookers (proudtobehookers.com) sign elicits a childish giggle as we pull up and discover a building packed to the rafters with the colourful hooked rugs and wall hangings that have made this little creative outpost famous. Sadly, rug hooking is a bit of a dying art, owner Lola LeLievre tells us. The collective used to have about 100 members, but it's down to about 30, mostly senior, members.

The island is seeing young people move back to set up shop. Shannon and Ryan Costelo, for example, turned the fresh goat milk from their herd into a business called Groovy Goat Farm & Soap Company (groovygoat.ca).

Glass Artisans (glassartisans.ca) has a rotating artist residency program that sees glass blowers from around the world come to be inspired by the island and use the facilities.

During my visit, a young man named Fabian creates an intricate jellyfish from several colours of glass.

Sarah Beck welcomes us into her studio and store called Wildfire Pottery (wildfirepottery.ca), where she buffs up some of the puffins she's made using



GROOVY GOAT FARM & SOAP COMPANY. PHOTO BY TARA NOLAN



A PUFFIN IN PROGRESS. PHOTO BY TARA NOLAN

the Japanese raku technique. Meanwhile, her husband, musician Paul Cranford, picks up his violin and plays some Cape Breton tunes. It's not uncommon to find yourself tapping your toes to an impromptu fiddle session along the route.

And leave room in your suitcase, because it's likely you'll find something that you'll want to take home to remember creative Cape Breton.

WHERE TO STAY IN CAPE BRETON

There are a number of accommodation options, from rustic to well-appointed:

- Cabot Shores (cabotshores.com) offers cottages, yurts and geodesic domes for a more rustic retreat in Indian Brook.
- Island Sunset Resort (islandsunset.com) features spacious, comfy cottages in Belle Côte with beautiful views of Margaree Harbour.
- The English Country Garden Bed & Breakfast (capebretongarden.com) offers sumptuous suites and delicious breakfasts.
- For a more luxurious stay, the Keltic Lodge (kelticlodge.ca) in Ingonish Beach, with its renowned golf courses, features newly renovated rooms.