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## Bicycles, dandelions, and Canada Day

**Two travelers celebrate Prince Edward Island's quiet charms on Canada's national holiday.**

**By Susan Weiner**

Coming off the Confederation Bridge, we turned west away from Charlottetown, the capital of Prince Edward Island.

"Keep your eyes peeled for a bike shop," said my husband, Allan.

Allan and I try to rent bikes wherever we travel. So when he'd been sent on a two-week business trip to Moncton, New Brunswick, naturally he had researched bike rides within day-trip range. Moncton has a lovely trail that runs along its broad river. But Allan's guidebooks insisted that PEI was best.

"Let's stop there!" I said, when we spotted a lively mall on a wharf in Summerside. I ran ahead to the information center. Hundreds of paper Canadian flags fluttered along the edges of the walkways, displaying a red maple leaf on a white field in between two red fields.

It was Canada Day, July 1, so the decorations didn't stop there. I saw banners, pinwheels, T-shirts, and hats of all sizes. They sprouted all over the buildings and on people's bodies. Most striking were the children – and a few adults – with Canadian flags or maple leaves painted on their faces.

"Is there a place where we can rent bicycles?" I asked. The agent recommended the Royalist Country Inn across the street.

An inn honoring Royalists, huh? Those were folks we Americans called traitors during our Revolution. It depends on whose eyes you're looking through.

We turned and scrambled across the road, so we'd beat any competitors to those precious bikes.

We got them and discovered to our delight that the Confederation bike trail started right there – it literally ran along the property line dividing the inn from a Burger King. BK was the last mass marketer we glimpsed.

In fact, we left the town behind in minutes, rolling over a fine gravel trail.

Soon we didn't see any buildings, just acres of trees, wildflowers, and farms, punctuated by an occasional biker-friendly bench or picnic table.

If we had been cycling back home in Massachusetts, we would have passed dozens of people, even on the trail we favor some 40 miles west of Boston. That would have been especially true on the Independence Day holiday. But Canada Day on the Confederation Trail yielded no other riders.

Of course, the trail is long, covering a former rail bed that runs 160 miles, so it may be congested elsewhere.

The only drawback is that it's basically an inland trail, so riders don't get much exposure to PEI's dramatic shoreline. But I found compensations. Lupines grow wild by the road all over PEI. The royal purple variety seems to predominate, but they mix with deep pink and white ones.

I felt especially enchanted by the lupines because I'd tried in vain to raise some from seed in my suburban backyard.

But what really fascinated me were the oversized dandelions. They were tall, and their puffballs were enormous. I'd be hard-pressed to fit three into my hand. Were they dandelions on steroids? Or was it something about where they grew? PEI's soil is a distinctive deep orange-red, colored by iron oxide. PEI is farmland, the

potato-growing capital of Canada, and we saw fields aplenty from our bikes.

I found the sameness of the sights from the trail soothing, but Allan became restless after about seven miles. We turned off the trail to explore some paved roads leading through a modest suburban and farming community.

Because the Confederation Trail is more than 217 miles long, we weren't going to be able to bike it all in a day. So, although we didn't have a map, we managed to wend our way back to Summerside, ending up in modern, commercial Canada at the Spinnaker's Landing collection of shops and food stalls, where we'd earlier visited the information center.

In honor of Canada Day, a large crowd listened as a man spoke patriotically about the sacrifices of earlier generations.

The Eptek Exhibition Centre next door had a changing gallery of Canadian history and arts exhibits. I also enjoyed its display on the PEI lobster industry.

But earlier I'd seen the Canada of unpackaged farms and monster dandelions. As interesting as it was to share a holiday with a neighboring nation, I couldn't help feeling regret at what I'd left on the Confederation Trail.

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