

The Island Walk

A photograph of four hikers walking away from the camera on a wide, sandy beach. They are dressed in outdoor gear, including jackets and backpacks. The ocean is visible in the distance under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The foreground is filled with numerous footprints in the sand.

**A Guide to Walking the 700 km
Camino de la Isla in Prince Edward
Island, Canada**

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Introduction

In 2016, my partner, Sue, and I spent five weeks walking the 800 km Camino Frances from France to Spain. It was our first experience in long distance walking, but it was not our last.

In April 2019, we returned to Europe and walked the Rota Vicentina in Portugal. We were especially taken with the 230 km Historical Way (*Camino Historico*) which passes through many small towns and villages not unlike the small towns where we live in Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. It occurred to us that we could develop a similar path in PEI which would pass through the Island's beautiful rural landscape, while adding many spectacular vistas of the sea.

We returned to Canada in May, and I set to work mapping a route for a Walk Around the Island. The route wouldn't include every harbour and bay – that would have stretched to more than 1,200 km. Instead, we focused on an abbreviated path using secondary roads, red dirt roads and the Island's Confederation Trail. The route would cover 700 km and would take at least a month to complete. That seemed like an achievable goal but setting out and doing it was more challenging than we thought.

Getting Started

Statistics Canada tells us there has been a steady increase in participation in active leisure in this country since the early 1990's. This increase has been mirrored in the USA and Europe, where participation in walking and hiking has seen the largest % increase of all outdoor activities over the past 10 years. In the USA, 33 million Americans listed hiking as a regular activity in 2009. This had increased to 44.9 million by 2017, a 36% increase.

Long-distance walking has enjoyed especially robust growth, with the Camino de Santiago being the most compelling example. In 1986, 2,500 pilgrims walked the Camino and received their Compostela (certificate of completion). That number grew to 300,000 in 2018 and will exceed that in 2019.

Pilgrims only need to complete the last 100 km of the Camino to receive their Compostela. Yet, a remarkable number (30,000) walk the entire 800 km Camino Frances. The Camino Frances starts in Saint Jean Pied de Port, France and crosses the French Pyrenees into Spain. This is the route that is the subject of the movie, *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen. It's a remarkable number of people and illustrates the

international interest in walking and the dedication of those who complete the entire Camino Frances journey.

A 700 km Walk Around the Island is less ambitious than the 800 km Camino Frances, but it is still a major undertaking. We liked the idea of walking in our own backyard and sharing the experience with our hiking friends. We also thought many others would enjoy the beauty of Canada's smallest province and the roads, trails and beaches that make it unique.

An island is an especially attractive venue for a long-distance walk. Walking around an island means you return to your starting place. This eliminates the logistical challenges of most long-distance walks – you don't have to ship your belongings hundreds of kilometers from where you started. If you're flying, you also don't have to make travel arrangements in and out of two cities. To Walk Around the Island, you just need to get to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island – it's an airport that's serviced by Air Canada, West Jet and several other airlines.

A less obvious advantage of Walking Around the Island is internal logistics. The distance from Charlottetown to North Cape is 154 km – one hour and thirty minutes by car. From

Charlottetown to East Point is 104 km – one hour by car. This means you're never far from motorized transportation if you need it.

Planning the Route

Prince Edward Island is Canada's smallest province, with a population of 150,000. Although the island is small, it has more kilometers of roads per capita than any other province. These roads vary from four lane, limited access paved highways to small dirt tracks that are only passible in the summer months. In addition, the Island has the jewel of the 24,000 km Trans Canada Trail (the Great Trail) – the Confederation Trail.

The Confederation Trail was the first section of the Trans Canada Trail that was fully connected within a province. The Tignish to Elmira section was completed in 2000. The section from Charlottetown to Iona was subsequently opened in 2014. The trail, which was built on an abandoned railbed, now extends more than 450 km to all parts of the Island. It is a non-motorized greenway (except in the winter months, when it's used by snowmobiles) and it's maintained by provincial government work crews. That means it's always in tip-top condition for walking or cycling – and it's a

pleasure to walk, especially in the late spring and early fall.

I started sorting out accommodations for a Walk Around the Island in August 2019. PEI is a small province, but it's a popular destination in the summer. With more than 1.5 million tourists each year, and more than a million overnight stays, vacancies in August are hard to find. Added to that, September has also been a great tourist month as the fall stays warmer than it used to. Even early October can be busy.

I started planning for an October 1st start, knowing that vacancy rates increase in the fall. At the same time, some restaurants and B&B's close by the end of October. Then, as I was calling places and sorting out accommodations, something magical started to happen – Islanders started to offer us free meals and accommodation. Our walk had started to capture the imagination of Island residents, and people wanted to become a part of this new adventure.

To take advantage of the offers of accommodation, we needed to recruit a few “trail angels” to transport us from our daily

stopping places to places where we would be spending the night.

The transportation issues were most challenging in the extreme ends of the Island – up west and down east. We found two volunteers – Dave in the west and Sara in the east – to help us out in O’Leary and in Souris. In the other places, we were able to get the people who were hosting us to provide transportation back to their homes.

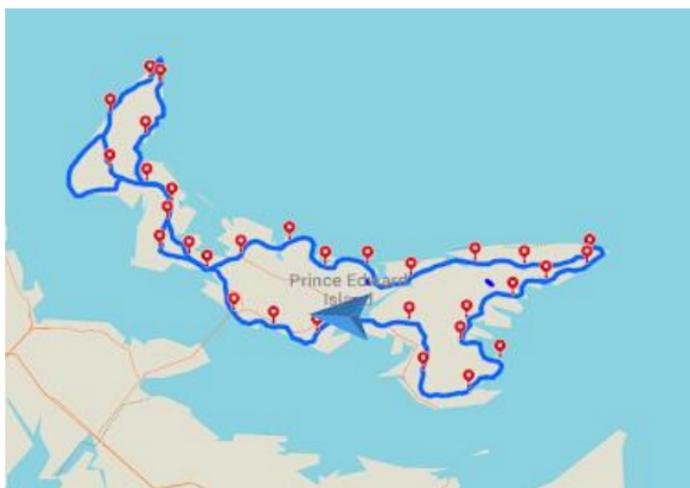


Figure 1 The Walk Around the Island route, with nightly stopping places marked by red balloons

As the route started to take shape, I was able to plan nightly stopping places that would have us walking from 20 to 25 km each day. The distances were based on a walking pace of 5 km/h, knowing that we wanted to be finished