

TRAVEL

WALKING CANADA'S CAMINO

A cancer survivor tackles the Island Walk, a 700-kilometre P.E.I. trail inspired by the pilgrims' route in Europe **By Jennifer Bain**

PHOTOGRAPHY, TOURISM PE/SANDER MEURS (SOURIS BEACH PROVINCIAL PARK)

HEMO GAVE ME A SENSATION I dubbed “Jell-O legs.” I clung to railings, steadied myself against walls and sometimes feared my legs would give out if I left the house. I’ve always been a fast walker who hurried through life, but as I rode out chemo and radiation during the thick of COVID-19, I mostly lay in a fog, watching TV, and wondering whether breast cancer would be the end of me.

An hour into the Island Walk on Prince Edward Island – Canada’s answer to Europe’s Camino de Santiago – a ruffed grouse stormed out of the grass along a red dirt road. The way it materialized made me think about the way cancer revealed itself without warning on a routine mammogram in 2021. I froze as the angry bird did one lap at my feet. The grouse stalked away, whimpering like a dog to draw me away from its territory and probably a nest. I also moved on, hoping to run into fellow walkers and share the unusual story.

I did the Island Walk alone, partly because my husband had to stay home with the kids, but also because I love my own company. Having cancer during the pandemic was also a solitary experience, because the hospital banned most visitors, forcing me to go to my lumpectomy, three chemo treatments and 19 radiation sessions alone. After ringing the end-of-treatment bell in January 2022, I promptly got COVID-19, and noticed my left foot was dragging. One stumble later, I had a broken wrist and a cane. Life again slowed to one fearful step at a time.

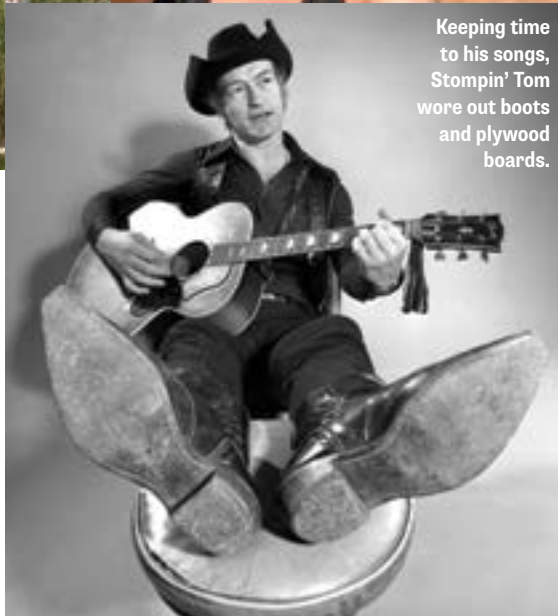
On my Island Walk in June, my wrist was healed and my limp was gone, but the foot drop had triggered endless ultrasounds and MRIs, which had found a bulging spinal disc and a possible cyst inside a leg nerve. The doctors assured me they didn’t suspect cancer, but I wasn’t convinced. As someone who battles generalized anxiety and illness anxiety disorder (what used to be called hypochondria), I find my mind now goes straight to cancer with every ache and pain. On this trip to P.E.I., I wanted to be well enough to do some trails and come back less ►



Covehead Harbour Lighthouse; sign marks Waypoint 18; the writer learned to slow down and prioritize simple pleasures.



Keeping time to his songs, Stompin' Tom wore out boots and plywood boards.



preoccupied with my health.

The P.E.I. walk was dreamed up by retired government policy analyst Bryson Guptill, 73, a Charlottetown resident who did the nearly 800-kilometre Camino Frances – featured in *The Way* with Martin Sheen – in 2016. The Camino has several routes, but all of them lead to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain, where Catholic pilgrims have journeyed since medieval times to visit the alleged burial site of Saint James the Greater. It has since evolved into a bucket-list trip for people seeking spiritual enlightenment, or simply a challenge. Three years later, Guptill walked the entire Rota Vicentina, a 263-kilometre, 13-section hiking/biking trail through rural Portugal. It felt like something he could replicate on P.E.I., with its pastoral beauty, ocean vistas, villages and friendly locals.

With three friends, all Camino veterans, Guptill mapped a 700-kilometre route that circumnavigates the province, following paved secondary roads, dirt roads, beaches and the converted railway path known as Confederation Trail (part of the Trans Canada Trail). “P.E.I. has developed the first real long-distance walk for ordinary people in North America,” Guptill said when we met at the walk’s start/end point in Charlottetown. “That will be the cachet of it.”

It quietly launched in September 2021 with a website and Facebook group, and the province helped with promotion and signs. That year, 50

people voluntarily registered on the Island Walk’s website. In 2022, there were 350 participants on foot or on bikes, but many don’t bother registering. Most tackle just a few of the 32 sections, ranging from 19 to 27 kilometres and taking between four and eight hours to walk. I chose four in the south, west, north and east, so I needed a rental car and shuttles to get me between start and end points. Three businesses now help co-ordinate trips, and Bill Kendrick of the tour company Experience P.E.I. arranged where I could stay and park, which can be tricky.

ON THE FIRST DAY, I tackled Section 1-2 from Dunedin to Victoria-by-the-Sea. After I dropped my car at Ebb Tide Guest House B&B in Victoria, I was whisked to Waypoint 1 by Bill Jameson. “I always tell folks if you ever get into trouble and need assistance, don’t be afraid to bang on someone’s door. If they can’t help you, they’ll find someone who can,” said Jameson, whose company, Bill’s Van Service, ferries walkers to and from the trails. “You’ve got my number so you can always call, and I’ll come and get you.”

I logged 17.7 kilometres in four hours before calling to be picked up. The only people I saw were an artist painting a field and two women with an off-leash

dog that almost knocked me over. The completist in me was ashamed I couldn’t hack 6.3 more kilometres, and while I could hear my late parents admonishing me to always finish what I started, I suspected they would commend me for making it so far. I took solace in knowing Guptill urges people to go at their own speed, a message conveyed in *The Island Walk*, a self-published guidebook he sells on Etsy and at Bookmark in Charlottetown.

On the second day, as the June heat brought out the bugs, I ruminated about discomfort. My feet were happy in my Blundstones, but my small backpack made my back ache. I chose Section 8-9, from Miminegash to Christopher Cross, because it passed by the Stompin’ Tom Centre in Skinners Pond, where Tom Connors set out from at just 15, after a rough start in life. He became the extraordinary, flag-waving musician who left behind hits like *Sudbury Saturday Night*, *Hockey Song* and *Bud the* ►



Spud, about a potato-toting truck driver from P.E.I., land of the “bright red mud.” This route followed a paved secondary road, with glimpses of the ocean and deceptively beautiful lupines, a weed and invasive species that takes over P.E.I.’s ditches every summer. I was two hours into a six-hour day when my neurologist called to confirm there was no cyst, there would be no more tests and wished me “the very best.” I wanted to tell him I had somehow healed so well that I was on a long-distance walking trip, but the call dropped after I thanked him. Cell service can be spotty on the Island Walk, which is a work in progress: It can be hours between communities, and that means, to put it bluntly, using the “facili-trees.”

Give or take snack and rest stops, I learned I can walk five kilometres an hour. The 25 C heat slowed me down, but I averaged 10 kilometres a day and enjoyed long stretches without ruminating about cancer. June, you see, means mammograms. The life-saving one in June 2021 found a small mass when I was 53. The first follow-up in June 2022 was clear, and I was ac-

tually on P.E.I., where I wept with relief at the good news. My “scanxiety” was at an unhealthy high before this year’s June 12 mammogram, but when the reassuring results arrived, I rejoiced that I would finally get to P.E.I. for the big walk and enjoy another summer.

ON THE THIRD DAY, I thought about regeneration. The blessedly quiet Section 17-18, from Cymbria to Dalvay, follows a cycling trail in Prince Edward National Park that’s perfect for birding. You can duck down to the beach here, where the cleanup from post-tropical storm Fiona continues, but the fragile dunes are now off limits, since just 10 steps onto the marram grass (a type of beach grass) can destroy the roots that keep precious sand from blowing away. My beach walk was cut short by temporary closures to protect the endangered piping plovers that nest and forage here every summer.

On my final walk, weary from so much introspection, I dropped my bags at Sirens Beach Motel in North Lake, where I finally met some fellow walkers. Del Falkowsky and her daughter Tenealle Scheps, from Diamond Valley, Alta., discovered the trail on the province’s tourism website while researching their East Coast trip. They inspired me to have fun and take

detours, so I hopped in the car and checked out a few parts of Sections 22 to 24. “We’re not married to the plan,” confided Falkowsky, who has done four Camino trails in Spain and Portugal and had just seen seals near East Point Lighthouse. “We just want to do some of the walk and see some of the island.”

Walking holidays force people to slacken their pace, look inward and connect with a place and its people. Guptill believes travellers fulfill Island Walk’s slogan, “Come Back Different,” especially if they’re at a crossroads – dealing with aging, separation or divorce – or they just want to get out of a rut. People tell him they’re charmed by the friendly locals and want to come back “just to do the island – not the walk.” He predicted it would “continue to grow the way it does now – organically.”

I finished my trip by going barefoot at Basin Head Provincial Park, where the “singing sands” emit a squeak when you walk on the beach, due to the high silica content. I photographed bald eagles sitting on rocks watching lobster boats, and crows foraging in fields. I ate fish cakes with mustard pickles and baked beans. My Island Walk journey, like my cancer journey, reminded me to slow down and prioritize simple pleasures. I only logged 3.7 kilometres the last day, but the cancer survivor in me was grateful to simply be alive and walking. ☑

Stunning view from a canola farm in Springbrook. Opposite clockwise from left: bald eagle near Sirens Beach Motel; detour to beach; fish cakes and mustard pickles at Landmark Oyster House, Victoria by-The-Sea; lupines flowering in Kingsboro

PHOTOGRAPHY, TOURISM PE/PAUL BAGLOLE (SPRINGBROOK); JENNIFER BAIN (BALD EAGLE, FISH CAKES, STAIRS AT PEI NATIONAL PARK)