

*World-famous music, welcoming people, and the joy of the dance, Cape Breton ceilidhs will reel you in.*



# The music lives here

I've only been at Cape Breton Island's West Mabou Square Dance five minutes when my mother starts chatting with a regular. "Do you dance all the sets?" she asks. "Hopefully," replies the lady. "It depends on the crowd."

I nod, and smile, and before we can say anymore our new friend is swept into the sea of people pounding the plywood in the centre of this little hall on the island's western shores. I sit, bobbing along to the music, in what is arguably Cape Breton's most storied square dance hall. "We've had people supposed to go back home and they stayed the whole year. They got into the dancing," says Jimmy MacInnis, who has run these dances every Saturday night for the last 21 years.

This music – the high-octane, highly-captivating fiddle and dance – arrived here over 200 years ago brought by Gaelic-speaking Scottish Highlanders. The tradition has passed through the generations so that today this flourishing community music forms the backbone of Cape Breton's world-famous

ceilidh culture.

On this Saturday night, we can actually hear the dancing as we make our way in from the parking lot. Inside, a group of teens take up three tables while clusters of people from their 20s to their 80s mill about. I watch a woman put her BlackBerry in her purse when a man comes and nods in the direction of the dance floor. They join Converse-clad teens in skinny jeans and plaid shirts, grandmothers and middle-aged men.

On stage, fiddler Andrea Beaton's fingers are flying. And everywhere I see joy. People are smiling. Chatting. Clapping. An exuberant whoop goes up from the dance floor.

"The music is really good," says Daniel Morreale, a 34-year-old organic farmer from Hamilton, ON who's lived in Cape Breton the past year-and-a-half. "It's not something you get to hear all the time; it's unique to this island. I like how there's a mix of young and old people alike. It's like a family environment, and the dancing is great."

Come summer there's a

ceilidh or concert every night of the week here from Glencoe Mills to Belle Cote, Cheticamp to Port Hawkesbury. "It's a lot of fun, and you're learning about the history of Cape Breton," says Mr. Morreale.

"The dances kept the spirit alive through all the hard times. This is Celtic spirit from antiquity. That's pretty special. You can't just go anywhere and see this. You realize there are still places in Canada with deep-rooted culture."

Square dances were dying off when MacInnis planned one as a fundraiser in West Mabou in 1989. "My mother came up to that dance and she said 'oh, it was great to hear that music.' Then I became a fan of making people happy."

Crowds have come from Germany, Australia, around the world, drawn by the live music and the fact it's for all ages (they don't sell liquor).

The next afternoon I pop into the Celtic Music Interpretive Centre, half-hour down Route 19 in Judique, where

flame-haired Mabou native Mairi Rankin is on stage in a kitchen-like, comfortably casual performance room that holds up to 130.

Opened in 2006 with a mandate to preserve Celtic music and culture, the centre is now a focal point for the music's history. Along with the performance venue, it houses archives, a major depository for Celtic music, and

an exhibit room with interactive fiddle and step-dancing lessons and a chronological history of how the music has evolved. Popular live lunch ceilidhs run Monday-Saturday in season. Sunday afternoon ceilidhs are year-round.

Another not-to-miss venue is Mabou's Red Shoe Pub, owned by the

singing Rankin Sisters. The former old-time dry goods store now hums with a line-up of top talent, homecooking and an intimate pub atmosphere June through October. Less than 10 minutes north, in the highland hills of Glenville, the Glenora Distillery, Canada's only single malt whisky distillery, offers twice daily free ceilidhs in its pub, as well as distillery tours, accommodations and fine dining.

Back at the Celtic Music Centre, musical director Allan Dewar, a popular pianist himself, says there's a lure for music that comes from the heart. "Most people who do it have a passion for it. It's the type of music that gets you energized. It's one of those things you have to experience."

As Mairi Rankin drives the beat, my toes are tapping, and the smile on my face says it all.

*Nova Scotia-based travel writer Shelley Cameron-McCarron visited Cape Breton Island's West Mabou Square Dance hall on March 27.*

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**If you go...**

**Celtic Music Interpretive Centre**  
5471 Highway 19  
Judique, Cape Breton  
(902) 787-2708  
www.celticmusiccentre.com  
Sunday ceilidh, admission \$7

**Glenora Distillery**  
1-800-839-0491  
www.glenoradistillery.com

**The West Mabou Hall Square Dance**  
Saturdays 10 p.m.-1 a.m.  
Admission: \$6  
Children under 12 are free when accompanied by an adult or guardian.

**Red Shoe Pub**  
(902) 945-2996  
www.redshoepub.com