

Finding generations of fun in Halifax

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Our goal was simple: Pick a destination for a mini family reunion that offered fun activities for three generations and didn't break our respective banks.

The vote was unanimous, with Halifax winning by a landslide.

Why was my family, who would be travelling from Toronto, Cape Breton, Fredericton and Moncton, so quick to choose Nova Scotia's capital for a week-end getaway?

It had been ages since most of the crew had spent much time in the city, but we all knew from past journeys that it had a terrific mix of things to do and see. We'd also kept tabs on changes in Halifax and were keen to explore some of the new stuff.

Of course, the fact hubby and I met and married in Atlantic Canada's largest city made our vote a no-brainer, especially since we postponed a return trip for our 30th wedding anniversary due to the pandemic.

Pondering your own family reunion and looking for a vibrant spot close to home? Here are three reasons to put Halifax on your radar:

1. Remember the old, see the new

Even though my travelling companions ranged in age from 20s to decades older, we each had memories of good times in Halifax. Over our sunny week-end, we had a blast visiting old haunts and discovering how many familiar sites had been transformed.

A good starting point for a flashback tour is the Spring Garden Road shopping area. For convenience and a wow factor, park underground at the Halifax Central Library, located at Spring Garden and Queen Street.

From the outside, the architectural masterpiece—opened in 2014—resembles a stack of books, each consisting of a massive glass rectangle placed atop the other in the direction of nearby streets. When you step inside, the scene from the ground floor atrium looking up might catch your breath. It did mine. Staircases criss-cross the bright, modern hub and lead to the various library floors. (Elevators are also an option.) Head to the fifth floor to check out the cantilevered section of the structure, a piece that juts out over the entrance plaza and almost seems to float in space. Saunter close to the window and the height may make you feel a tad wobbly (or maybe I'm just getting old).

If you survive the vertigo test, exit the library and pause to look around. Those who frequented Halifax in years past will notice changes galore, beginning directly across the street. What was the site of businesses like The Bank of Montreal and one of my favourite '80s hangouts, Thackeray's Restaurant, is now The Doyle, a seven-storey development featuring ground- and second-floor-level commercial space, with residential units in the floors above.

A glance left from the library entrance brings into view major construction in the block that once housed a long-time Royal Bank location, the Tudor-style Mills Brothers department store and, another of my old faves, the Thirsty Duck Pub and Eatery. Once completed, the eight-storey mixed development will be known as The Mills and front on Spring Garden Road, Queen Street and Birmingham Street. (Expect completion next summer.)

There are a multitude of other developments planned for the area, many adding a big chunk of residential space to the downtown core. We were awed by the changes as we strolled up Spring Garden towards the Halifax Public Gardens and excited to imagine the end product. We were also impressed by other improvements, like wider sidewalks with pavers, the 'undergrounding' of all wiring and the addition of planters, trees and seating.

Spring Garden is not the only part of Halifax that's had a noticeable facelift.

In fact, cranes have dotted the skyline across much of the city in recent years, with tons of work completed or ongoing on many downtown streets. Since my parents hadn't been to town in more than a decade, one of the most noticeable changes for them was the 120,000-square-foot Halifax Convention Centre on Argyle Street, which opened in 2017 at the former site of the Halifax Chronicle Herald newspaper, where their daughter started her career. (The original World Trade and Convention has since been converted to an arts centre.)

Another significant difference in the region is the removal of the Cogswell Interchange, a series of elevated streets being replaced with a more conventional street grid.

Then there's Halifax's north end, which has seen all sorts of growth, such as its Hydrostone District. 'The Hydrostone', as it's known by locals, is a



The author's mom makes a purchase from a vendor at the Halifax Seaport Market, a Saturday morning must. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

neighbourhood of quaint homes completed in 1920 along wide, treed courts. The nearby Hydrostone Market features a funky array of shops, services and restaurants. It's a great place to kick back with a coffee or tea, as is Café Lara, located on nearby Agricola Street. Owner Lara Cusson has created a gem of a space that offers both hot drinks as well as alcoholic fare and yummy eats. (Alas, we were all so full from munching Lara's goodies that we had to skip later plans to devour donairs, Halifax's official food. We may need a specific trip to taste-test those treats at the many places across the city now offering their pita-beef-tomato-onion-and-sauce messiness.)

2. Get your fix of history, culture and live entertainment

No matter the time of year, there always seems to be live entertainment on tap in Halifax. We enjoyed top-notch, toe-tapping tunes by a great act at The Auction House restaurant and a lovely violin serenade as we perused vendors at the Seaport Market.

If history is more your thing, Halifax has you covered. Take a drive up to Citadel Hill—the National Historic Site overlooking the harbour—where you can step back in time to the city's founding and learn about the four fortifications that have since been built on the site.

Another excellent excursion is the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. A few members of our group took a tour to hear about real-life journeys of courage, hardship and resiliency. The museum's exhibits add rich descriptions of how nearly one million immigrants arrived at the port between 1928 and 1971.

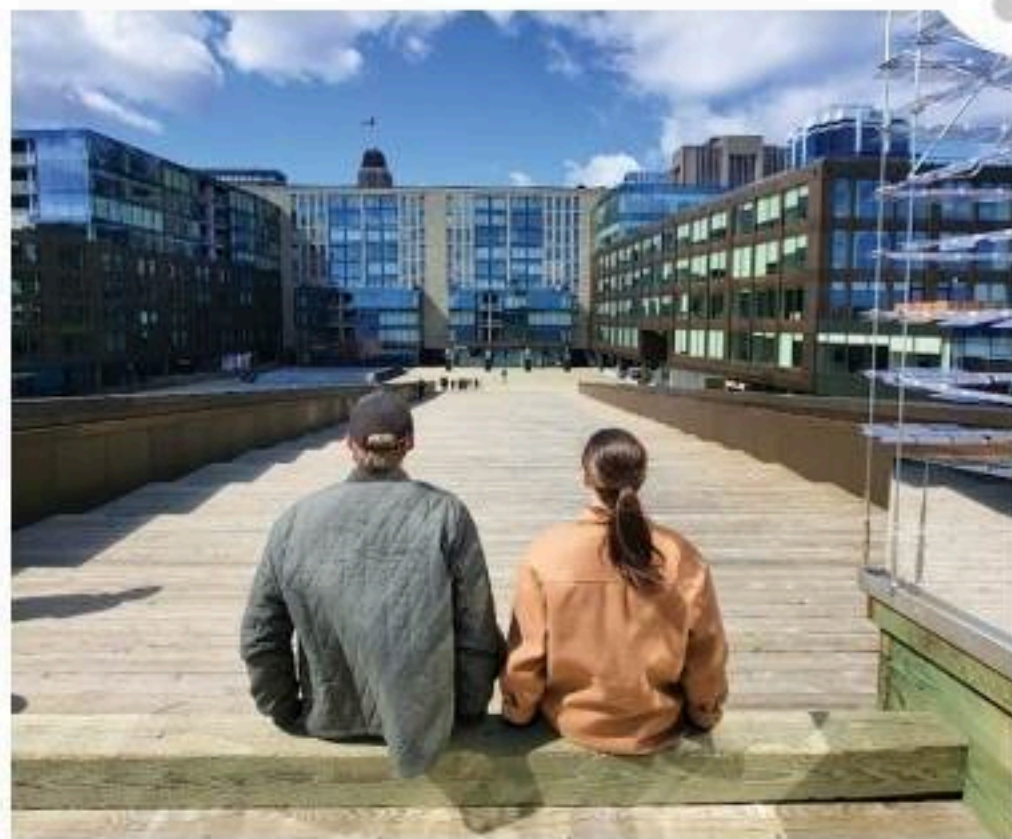
Also recommended but not reached on our busy weekend are the plethora of art galleries in Halifax. Next time, we're cloning ourselves so we can catch more attractions—or just staying longer!

3. Be salty

A visit to Halifax would not be complete for our family without a stop to the scenic Halifax waterfront. Our minivan of seven surveyed the vicinity first from the road before we disembarked near The Wave, an iconic sculpture on Lower Water Street. From there, we

bundled up and faced the salty breeze as we meandered along the wooden boardwalk towards the Lower Deck Bar and Grill. (There was no swigging of ales that afternoon but certainly tales of previous exploits.)

We considered grabbing a Halifax Transit ferry to Dartmouth, but a north wind made us opt for a quicker return to the van. Before we left, we took time to marvel at a few of the newer waterfront landmarks—Queen's Marquee, a zone of luxury apartments, shops and restaurants that also includes the magnificent Muir Hotel; and an assortment of unique art installations, including the wire-mesh sculpture 'Sail', and 'Tidal Beacon', a dramatic, 60-foot piece that sits atop the wedge-like 'Rise Again' building near the harbour's edge. Our family of art lovers soaked up the beauty before our last call at Queen's Landing: an enormous set of granite stairs that descend into the water, seeming to lure us all in for a dip. We headed home, debating who might take up the invite on our next adventure to the city.



The new Queen's Marquee district at the edge of Halifax Harbor boasts luxury accommodations, boutique shopping, fine dining and cool art. Here, the author's daughter and fiancé check out the area. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON



A tour guide at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 describes the arrival process of newcomers to Halifax between 1928 and 1971. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON