

Ontario Outing



BRIAN DEXTER PHOTO

The entrance to the new visitor centre, which showcases two national parks. Right, Timeslip Books, tucked away in the woods. It's Tobermory's first used-book store.



NANCY FALCONER PHOTO

Treasure trove awaits kids on Bruce Trail

New visitor centre, tower officially open

Book bunkie also adds to delightful surprises

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

TOBERMORY, ONT.—At the end of the 780-kilometre Bruce Trail, two new discoveries await the casual tourist and the avid hiker.

One is a product of years of high-level government planning. The other came together after a night of brainstorming by two artist friends.

The first is the new Parks Canada Visitors Centre, which officially opened this week, but has had lots of visitors take in its displays, which are still under construction, since June.

Asked when the centre will be finished, Ethan Meleg, outreach co-ordinator for Bruce Peninsula National Park and Fathom Five National Marine Park, replies cheerfully, "Never."

"The centre," he adds, "was built to be ever-changing and dynamic."

The two parks were created in 1987 along a 30-kilometre stretch of land and lake water around Tobermory and both are now showcased in the 1,300 square metre centre.

On the day our family of five arrived, canoe maker Chris Wabie was working just outside the entrance, building a traditional birch-bark canoe. He patiently answered all of our girls' questions about the "gooey stuff" (tree resin) and the best tools to gather natural materials such as tree roots. "I use these," he grinned, holding up his fingers.

His completed canoe is now on display.

As a park guide, Meleg is also the star of *Life on the Edge*, the centre's impressive, 16-minute movie which gives an

inside look at the parks — including underwater caves, shipwrecks and stunning, slow-motion shots of flying squirrels.

Favourite displays for kids include the stuffed, foraging black bear — the only way to see a bear up this close — and a toilet. The toilet is all part of an illustration of how many flushes it would take to fill the marine park here (The answer: 1.2 trillion.)

There's a replica of the Big Tub lighthouse — Tobermory has two busy harbours, Big Tub and Little Tub — with a mini theatre where you can watch a video on the area's marine heritage. There are also artefacts from the many local shipwrecks, including old tools and dinner plates.

There's also a new 20-metre lookout tower with a great view of the park and from here you can watch the glass-bottom boat tours leave the harbour. (We discovered too late it's best to arrive early or make reservations if you want to get on one of these boats as they frequently sell out.)

Following the Bruce Trail's signature white blazes back to town, we came across an unofficial side trail posted with a tangle of signs marking the way to Little Tub Harbour, Chi-Cheemaun (the big ferry to Manitoulin Island) and books.

Books?

Our 11-year-old daughter, an avid reader, led the pack along the wooded trail to a tiny red-trimmed board-and-batten bunkie which opened this year as Tobermory's first used-book store.

Already Timeslip Books has become a beacon to cottagers, boaters and the many students who take summer jobs in the area.

Owner Mike Kirkland is meticulous about his choices. On first glance, the books look new. He stocks everything from *The Hardy Boys* to a signed copy of General Norman Schwarzkopf's autobiography. There's also a good selection of Agatha Christie mysteries.

Kirkland and his potter wife Arlene Peters have an unusual arrangement with the bunkie's owners and their long-time friends, stained glass artist Lynn Belden and Len Norrie. In exchange for use of the bunkie, Arlene works in General Eclectic, Lynn's store next door.

"I'm the slave labour," Peters says, although the two women seem more like a comedy act.

The renovated 1867 house is truly what the sign says — eclectic. Its many nooks and crannies, or "vignettes" as

Belden calls them, contain high-end antiques and novelty items. There are new, hand-made baby jackets and vintage clothing, and flasks disguised as binoculars.

"I like the whole place to be a little theatrical," Belden says.

One of her best sellers is a fly swatter that barks "Gotcha" when it makes contact. She had our girls chase their dad around the store with it. A door mat that reads "go away" is also popular.

Belden does no market research and has no business plan. "I sell whatever I want," she says, "I have this underlying attitude that if I get stuck with it, I better like it."

Belden considers her business a hobby, her time in Tobermory a vacation. Like most retailers in Tobermory, she operates only in the summer. Then it is back to Toronto to work through the winter on large, commissioned stained-glass installations.

"I don't mind if people walk out without having bought something, as long as they've had fun," she says.

We did. But we also bought a pair of clever, collapsible, compact camping chairs with built-in insulated pouches. They will come with us next year as we work our way down the Bruce Trail.

Helena Moncrieff is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

Just the facts

■ Admission prices to the centre: Adults \$5.45; seniors \$4.70; youth \$2.70; families \$13.60 (includes Fathom Five Marine Park fee). For more information, call 519-596-2233.

■ For more on the Bruce Peninsula National Park and the Fathom Five National Marine Park, visit www.parkscanada.ca