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Sable Island: far off the beaten path

It's a challenge to get there, but visitors are rewarded with its wild beauty and sights of the rare creatures that call the sandbar home

WRITTEN BY GEORGE BURDEN AND DALE DUNLOP ON SEPTEMBER 4, 2012 FOR [THE MEDICAL POST](#)



Probably the most unusual and difficult place to visit in all of Nova Scotia is Sable Island, which lies almost 300 kilometres southeast off the coast from Halifax. Long known as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” because of the more than 350 documented shipwrecks that have occurred there, Sable Island is really a massive sandbar that stretches 42 kilometres along the edge of the continental shelf. Until recently, access to the island was generally restricted to scientists and the personnel operating the weather station there; however, in 2011 the island was designated a National Park Reserve, which means it is in line to obtain full national park status once Parks Canada decides what activities will be allowed there to protect the site, as well as settling First Nations’ claims to the land.

Shortly after the designation was announced last fall, three members of the century-old international Explorers Club travelled to the site—we two and our colleague Jason Roth were among a party of seven to be the first on site after this announcement. For those who want to visit this beguiling but challenging place, we’ll share our research on how to do it.



Sable Island is best known for its population of wild horses, and for being home to the world's largest colony of grey seals.

Maritime Air operates a charter service out of Halifax International Airport that will take up to seven passengers to Sable for the day. It is not cheap; for a full complement of seven expect to pay about \$800 each. And once a charter is arranged, there is about a 50/50 chance at best that it will leave as scheduled. This is due to the radically unpredictable weather on Sable. There is no permanent runway, so staff on the island must find a suitable landing area that is not too soft and is free of debris and obstacles, which include seals and horses. Thus, getting to Sable Island takes not only money, but patience as well. Is it worth it? Definitely.

Wild horses

Most people have heard of the fabled Sable Island "ponies." They are actually small feral horses that have adapted to the harsh conditions on the island. The horses may descend from the livestock of Nova Scotia's Acadian population; around 1760, during the time of the Expulsion of the Acadians, it is believed that a Boston merchant named Thomas Hancock helped himself to their horses from the mainland and deposited them on Sable. They subsequently thrived on the ubiquitous marram grass that sprouts all over the island.

The horses are not shy. Simply standing still will often attract them to venture close to you.

Another attraction is the world's largest colony of grey seals. Flying into the island, you will almost certainly see seals and horses below. Once on the ground, visitors are taken to the visitor centre, which is a two-storey house. Here guests are briefed on what they can and can't do, but once you leave the small fenced in compound where the staff lives there are few restrictions: Don't feed the horses, don't climb steep sandbanks as they can collapse, and be wary of the grey seals because they bite and the wounds almost invariably become horribly infected.

After leaving the compound it doesn't take more than a few minutes to have the island almost to yourself. You can go north or south on either of the two beaches or follow the horse trails through the interior to one of the many freshwater ponds where they tend to congregate. We were told that recently, a number of harbour seals were sunning themselves on North Beach only minutes from the compound. Further down the beach herds of grey seals were spotted, but all but the bravest took to the ocean as we approached.

The beachcombing on North Beach is simply the best in the province. Aside from a myriad of shells, all kinds of things had washed up, including a disconcerting number of bones, wrecked furniture and all kinds of nautical fishing floats. A sand-blasted antique bottle full of Sable Island sand makes a unique memento. You just don't know what you might see.

Turning inland, the horses are easy to find and they are not shy. Simply standing still will often attract them to venture close to you. For most people this will be the highlight of the trip, but there is much more to see. South Beach usually has tremendous crashing waves that would be the envy of many a surfer—if not for the fact that the waters are teeming with sharks that come here to prey on the seals.

Sable Island is also a birder's paradise, as it is a stopover point for hundreds of species of migrating birds, many of which are rarities on the mainland. Enthusiasts will undoubtedly get to add the rare Ipswich sparrow to their life checklists, as it breeds here exclusively.

All in all, Sable Island more than rewards the extra effort required to get there. Now that it is a National Park Reserve it promises to become somewhat more accessible, but still only to those with perseverance and

If you go...

www.maritimeair.com
<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mnh/nature/sableisland>
www.greenhorsesociety.com
www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ns/sable/index.aspx

stamina. The challenge of getting here makes the experience that much more special, and should help to protect the fragile ecosystem from overdevelopment.

George Burden is a family physician in Elmsdale, N.S., and Dale Dunlop is a travel writer in Halifax.