

By Margie Goldsmith

# PLAYING THE BLUES In Atlantic Canada

“...music is a universal language and a harmonica easily fits into a pocket.”

The Mellotones, Halifax's most kickass Rhythm & Blues band, are onstage at Bearlie's, a Canadian hotspot for live blues. Much of the audience is dancing but not me. I'm quaking because I know they are about to call me on stage. What have I gotten myself into? I'm a writer, not a musician – an amateur compared to this sizzling hot Nova Scotia nine-member band.

I am in Atlantic Canada because I've been asked to write about three historic hotels. Visualizing crumbling buildings, threadbare furniture, and the smell of “old,” I planned to say no, but the firm that arranged the trip dangled a carrot they knew I'd bite: play with different musicians each night. I couldn't pack quickly enough.



Eight years ago, I took up the harmonica because I travel to many foreign countries and meet so many whose language I can't speak; music is a universal language and a harmonica easily fits into a pocket. Playing the blues quickly grew into my passion, and while it took me a long time to get over stage fright, I now go to open mic jams a few times a week in New York City. The

thought of playing with Canadian musicians was irresistible, especially as the timing worked out for me to go with a fellow writer, Lea Lane, a world traveler who has seen everything --- except me playing blues harp. She promised to drive, be my groupie and even my roadie.



The Westin Nova Scotian in Halifax is the opposite of dingy. I feel rich and pampered in my sunlight-filled room filled with sleek modern furniture and windows overlooking the Waterfront Boardwalk where two giant cruise ships are docked. They're so close I can make out passengers on the decks. While today visitors come to Halifax by plane or ship, in 1930 they arrived by train. Then called the Nova Scotian, this was the only Grand Railway hotel in Eastern Canada.

The hotel changed owners a few times, was renovated, and re-opened in 1996 as The Westin Nova Scotian. Amenities such as an indoor heated pool, Jacuzzi, and fitness center were added, but happily, the huge closets, built for the early guests who would arrive with their steamer trunks, remain intact, helping me feel a link with the hotel's grand past.

One thing I love about visiting new places as a writer is that I'm often joined by a hotel staff member who can fill me in on what's worth seeing. Area Director of Sales and Marketing Glenn Bowie joins Lea and me at the hotel's lobby restaurant. While we gorge on lobster croquettes, Cajun-blackened tuna, and



blueberry cream custard with vanilla-torched Acadian Maple Sugar, Bowie, who is also a bass player and has his own band, tells me about the band I'm about to join and accompanies us to Bearlie's, just a block away. I'm feeling very confident on my first International Music Tour.

So here we are. The musicians are terrific, especially the four horn players. It's not as though they need a blues harmonicist to slay the crowd -- they're doing just fine. But I am called up to play and the only thing I can hear is my pounding heart. The stage is tiny, especially with nine men crowding it, but I squeeze in between a horn player and

the bassist. They begin a slow soulful instrumental with which I am not familiar, but blues is blues. You don't memorize it. You play from the soul.

I close my eyes and play my heart out: long notes, short riffs, chords. When my solo ends, some of the band members smile at me. To an amateur musician, that's the best applause one could possibly receive. Later, when I return to my room at the Westin Nova Scotian, I stand at the window, still in a happy trance. The cruise ship lights are strung out like glittering diamond necklaces.

Normally, it takes two and one-half hours to drive to Digby from Halifax, but we're mak-

ing stops all along the way including Peggy's Cove, a perfect storybook fisherman's village where lobster traps and buoys and rusty anchors are stacked on shore. Brightly painted cottages dot the hillside and fishing boats of every color bob in the cove. At the top of the hill is an iconic red and white lighthouse on a rocky peninsula jutting out into the ocean. What a perfect time warp.

A few hours later we arrive in Mahone Bay, another picturesque village that is holding its annual Scarecrow Festival. Hand-made life-size cloth scarecrows are in front of every shop, dressed in real clothing, each looking vaguely familiar. On one lawn is Dorothy in

her ruby red slippers, the Tin Man, Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow and Glenda the Good Witch. The scarecrow band, KISS, complete with face make-up, stands in front of a music store. Other scarecrow musicians sit at outdoor benches



holding real guitars. We have lunch outdoors along with a man and woman scarecrow at a cute bistro before heading onward to Digby.

Because we're spending so much time exploring, four hours have already passed and we aren't even halfway there. According to Glenn Bowie, Route 10, a scenic back road with farms and horses and stacks of hay will take us to Digby, but there are no road signs. And then we realize we're lost. I'm not worried. Being in the car with Lea is very different than being alone and panicking. We call Glenn who manages to talk us back to the correct route. That happens not once, but three times in the next three hours. Thank goodness for Glen because the car's GPS isn't working. By the time we arrive at the Digby Pines Golf Resort and Spa, we've been on the road nine hours.



Digby Pines, originally a three-story hotel built in 1903 and called The Pines, became a World War I officers' quarters in 1913 until it was purchased by the Pacific Railway in 1917. The resort is across the road from the Bay of Fundy, one of the seven wonders of North America with the highest tides on earth, reaching 52 feet. We unpack in our rustic two-bedroom cabin complete with fireplace and have just enough time to change for dinner.

My performance is to take place about a mile away at the Sydney Street Pub, a cozy local hang-out with live music, and where a motor-

cycle is parked out front. I introduce myself to singer/guitarist Bob Marshall and his bassist, Paul Ryan. "Can you play Happy Birthday?" Bob asks. He looks apprehensive.

"Of course," I say, not telling him that it took me two years to learn the seemingly easy birthday song which is exceedingly hard to play on a harmonica.

"What other songs do you know?" he asks.

"I can fake anything," I say.

"The last person who told me he could play anything couldn't play anything," he says.

"I didn't say play," I respond. "I said fake." We do not seem to be off to a good start.

I go back to the table and join Lea. If I'm not going to be asked to play, at least I'll eat well. The waiter sets down a huge platter of poutine (an iconic dish of French fries and cheese curds topped with brown gravy) and then a seafood crepe stuffed with shrimp, haddock, Digby scallops and lobster. Naturally, right in the middle of the meal, Bob calls me up to play, which means first I have to race to the restroom to brush my teeth because you don't want food particles in your harmonica blocking the reeds.

We play a medium-fast blues song. Bob's voice - low and melodious - is really good, and the bass player is spot on. The audience screams out their applause as he introduces me as "the harmonica player from America." I figure he's going to say thank you and ask me to leave the stage, but he keeps me up for another four songs. When I finally step down the audience claps and I feel really good about my performance.

The following day, armed with sunscreen

and harmonicas, Lea and I drive south to Wedgeport for a private boat tour with Simone, an Acadian lobsterman. During the off-season, Simone and his brother run boat tours to his home, which he calls a shanty on one of 200 Tusket islands. "Shanty" is a strange word for a beautifully furnished cottage on a deserted pristine island. It is completely silent.



The only sound is the waves gently lapping against the shore.

Lunch is the most delicious seafood chowder I've ever had: lobster, scallops and haddock and a bright pink sauce, not the red Manhattan or white New England chow-

der colors with which I am familiar. This is followed by Rabbie Pie, a traditional Acadian dish of grated potatoes and onions, one that I don't love. Maybe it's an acquired taste.

Simone and I adjourn to the sunny porch where he pulls out his guitar and sings a song in Acadian. I don't understand what he's singing, but you don't need to know the words to play music. We play for a while and then take a break. "What does music mean to Acadians?" I ask him.

"Music defines our culture," he answers.

And as we sit in the warm sun overlooking the bay, I realize that music is my peace, my joy, and my happiness.

Dinner that night is at Digby Bay Resort's restaurant, Churchills, by far the best meal we've have in Canada: molasses BBQ Cornish game hen with apple juniper braised purple cabbage, buttermilk American popovers and zucchini stuffed with maple roasted rutabaga. Chef Dale Nichols comes out to greet us and



explains that the almost 100-year-old kitchen is too old to use, so he and his staff of 27 cook out of four trailers attached to the hotel. Hard to believe that such extraordinary cuisine is created in such makeshift circumstances.

The next morning, we take the ferry to St. John, New Brunswick for our final stop, the Algonquin Hotel in St. Andrews by the Sea. Built in 1889 as another railroad Grand Dame for the well-heeled to escape the heat and dust of the city, the hotel originally charged \$3.00 per night for a room or \$5.00 with a bathroom. And the bathtubs had four taps: hot and cold, fresh or saltwater. Soon, they built an 18-hole golf course, tennis courts, ballroom, bowling alley and billiards. Today, there's a spa, indoor and outdoor pools, but for me the best feature

is that all the bellmen wear kilts.

We head to the 127-acre Kingsbrae Garden with more than 50,000 perennials, 500 varieties of trees, shrubs and plants, meandering pathways, peacocks, and even alpacas in the children's garden. I've been to St. Andrews by the Sea before, but never had time to visit this spectacular tranquil paradise, just a short walk from the Algonquin.

It's our final night and I'm scheduled to jam with Sean Richard, who works at the hotel and is a singer/songwriter as well as the Saint John Idol winner. After dinner at the Algonquin's restaurant, Braxton's, Sean and I set up in the hotel gallery. This is not a formal music venue but more like a plushy living room. Peo-

ple pass by on their way to dinner or the bar. One woman stops and asks, "Are you professional musicians?"

"I am," says Shawn.

"I'm not," I admit.

"Well you should be," says the woman.

I smile, thinking about how terrified I was just three nights ago before I got onstage with the Mellotones in Halifax and in Digby where I was asked if I could play Happy Birthday. I'm playing my heart out and I couldn't be happier on my first international music tour, staying in charming historic hotels in beautiful towns. And maybe I'm not a professional musician, but what does that matter? I'm living my dream.