

A COVE FOR PEGGY

WANDER THROUGH THE 200-YEAR-OLD VILLAGE, SOAK UP THE SPECTACULAR SCENERY, AND OF COURSE, SNAP A PICTURE OF NOVA SCOTIA'S MOST-PHOTOGRAPHED LIGHTHOUSE.

BY SUSAN ZIMMERMAN

Even though I'd read through the glossy brochures before my visit and thought I knew what to expect from the lighthouse with the dubious distinction, I was still eager to experience just what makes this cove click... and what makes a 44-foot-tall white, octagonal tower so camera-friendly. I was as curious as any lighthouse lover to see this centenarian and the cove it calls home.

Local Tobias Beale put me on the straight and narrow about the little village with the lighthouse, nestled on a narrow inlet on St. Margarets Bay overlooking the Atlantic. The cove got its start in 1811 with six families, then in the 1900s it surged to some 300 citizens. Today's population is about 35 full-time residents, according to Beale — in some ways, the newest "kid" on the cove. His family's only been there for about 40 years, while five of the six founding families still call it home. Beale, who was just 16 when his father relocated from Ottawa, moved away for a while but has now lived there for the last 22 years.

The village has a lot of charm, and I could see why people would want make it their home. There is one thoroughfare — Peggy's Point Road — that winds through the village, and then there are just the lanes that go to the church and about 25 private homes. The brightly coloured Cape Cod-style houses are old, but the oldest is the proverbial red schoolhouse, which was built in 1834 and is now used as an art gallery. Of course, there's an equally charming harbour with colourful boats and lobster traps (the fishing of choice these days). Peggy's Cove is meant for wandering, and for wondering what it would be like to call it home.

But if you're not moving there, the next best thing is to know how to experience Peggy's Cove. Beale has tips to get anyone off on the right foot:

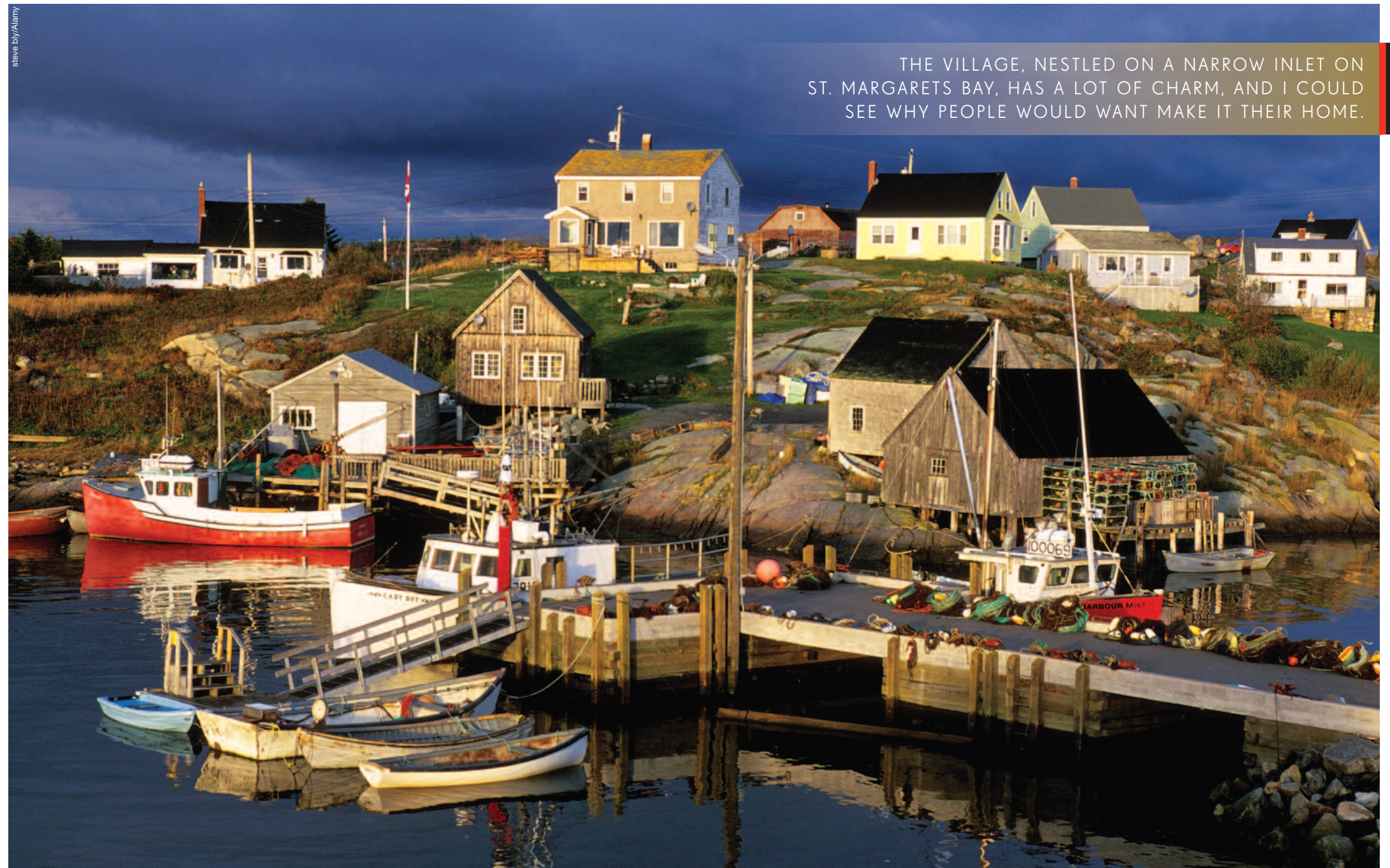
"The first thing to do is stop at the Provincial Parking Lot at the entrance just inside the village. If your legs are good, walk up the road to the lighthouse, then come back on the rocks. Be sure to spend at least a couple of hours and bring a picnic lunch or stop at the Sou' Wester (as in southwest)." The restaurant and gift shop has been the lighthouse's only neighbour since 1967. It's also the place to get the coveted Peggy's Cove stamp cancellation — a postmark bearing the image of the lighthouse — definitely something to write home about.

Approaching the lighthouse by walking up a short stretch of road really does add to the suspense of seeing it for the first time (even for those who have peeked at glossy brochures). In fact, I have to admit I was smitten by its towering presence atop a vast expanse of massive granite boulders overlooking the ocean. Naturally, the first thing I did was take my photo (doing my bit to maintain the lighthouse's supermodel status), then scoped out a rock of my own to sit on and stare into the ocean. I finally understood what put this lighthouse on the map.

I could see it's all about location — the cove's proximity to the open ocean made it prime real estate for a fishing village, but Beale clued me in even more on the cove's rock-solid reputation. "I think its popularity is because of the granite boulders and the way the lighthouse sticks out on a point. It goes back to the '20s and '30s when word got out that it was special and worth travelling to. After a very short time, adventurers and artists with an eye for natural beauty found the place. When you get out on the barrens, the rocks, the natural beauty is unparalleled."

The rocks clearly do "get under your skin." The flat, massive boulders on this sandless granite "beach" make great stone blankets for sitting, sunning and staring into the ocean. The miles-long expanse of granite is dotted with people doing just that, and it's vast enough for you to have a spot of your own without feeling crowded. I became enamoured by this ancient stone carved by the migration of glaciers and the ocean tides. The smooth stretch of glacier-polished rock that extends east from the lighthouse is almost 400 million years old, formed long before the dinosaurs.

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Back in the village, the sign in the window at Dee Dee's, a family-run ice cream shop, really got my attention. "Warning — Beware of DD's #1 fans — The scavenging seagulls who have been known to snatch cones from the hands of unsuspecting tourists."

The Berry Berry flavour is very very good, but could it be good enough to make seagulls go bad? Beale's 23-year-old son Julien assured me it's no joke. "It's happened to me, they just swoop in and grab it by the cone. It happens regularly if you're not careful." You have to be tough to live out here! Any flavour is up for grabs.

Peggy's Cove is certainly full of surprises, not least the art of William E. deGarthe. The Finnish painter and sculptor was one of those artists smitten by the cove back

in 1948. He finally made it his home in 1955, and made painting the cove and the sea his life's work. In 1977, at age 70, he began carving the 100-foot face of a granite outcrop behind his house with life-size images of the townspeople. After his death, his home became a museum to display his works. The \$1 admission is well spent.

As for the story behind the cove's name, the surprise is that there are two stories. The obvious one is simply that Peggy is a nickname for Margaret, and the village took its name from St. Margarets Bay upon which it sits. However, a more dramatic story tells about a woman named Margaret, the only survivor on a schooner that ran aground and sank in 1800. She became known as Peggy, and hence Peggy's Cove got its name... or so the story goes.

On the surface, Peggy's Cove sounds like a quick stop for a photo op and to check it off the list, maybe grab a bite of lobster and then be off. But be prepared. There's something about this little place that keeps you there... that doesn't let go so quickly. Sure, Peggy's Cove could be simply described as a treeless granite headland, or the cove with a lighthouse (or better yet, the lighthouse with a cove), but a cove for Peggy is so much more. Getting the picture of the lighthouse is definitely "worth a thousand words," but putting the camera down and really looking is even better.

A SITE TO REMEMBER

Just about a half mile northwest of Peggy's Cove at The Whalesback promontory is the Swissair Flight 111 Memorial, which commemorates the 229 people who died in the 2 September, 1998, aircraft crash about 5 miles offshore from St. Margarets Bay. The crash site is roughly equidistant between this memorial and another at Bayswater, located on the Aspotogan Peninsula on the western shore that's opposite Peggy's Cove.

