

It's Quite A Bridge! (Canada's Confederation Bridge)

By Jack Searles

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searles@adelphia.net



This last Summer my family and I vacationed on Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. Traditionally, the majority of people visiting PEI arrived on the island via ferry service between Nova Scotia and the island. This service was guaranteed to the smallest Canadian province when PEI joined the Canadian Confederation in 1873.

Specifically, the national government agreed to provide "continuous and efficient year round transport for people, goods and services" between PEI and mainland Canada. For years, however, other options for crossing the Northumberland Strait were talked about, planned and even attempted without much success... until recently.

In 1987 the Government of Canada sought proposals from the private sector for an environmentally, technically and financially sound alternative to the ferry system between PEI and the mainland. Proposals were generated, bids let and ultimately contracts signed on October 7, 1993 with the Strait Crossing Development, Incorporated, representing a consortium of Canadian enterprises, for the planning, engineering, building and operation of a bridge across the Northumberland Strait. This bridge cost \$840 million dollars to construct. Construction costs are fixed for Canadian taxpayers for the period 1997 through 2032.

The bridge is rated with a 100 year life. However, during the first thirty five (35) years period the Strait Crossing Development has responsibility for all costs and will collect and retain bridge tolls (\$35.00 Canadian collected as you leave PEI). In 2033, ownership of the bridge will be transferred to the Federal government. Bridge tolls are calculated based on 1992 ferry service costs plus inflation.

Well, on June 1, 1997, this engineering marvel dubbed the Confederation Bridge was opened to traffic. Let me give you some specifics about the bridge, which connects PEI with New Brunswick. It is 12.9 kilometers (8 miles) long and 11 meters (36.1 feet) wide with two lanes (one going each direction) with an emergency lane on each side of the road. The bridge, typically, is 40 meters (131.24 feet 11 stories) over the water with a navigation span (so ships can pass under the bridge) having a height of 60 meters (196.9 feet) above the water. The speed limit on the bridge is 80 km/h (about 45 mph) with no passing.

The crossing, assuming no delays, is estimated to take about 10 to 15 minutes. To aid those of us who really don't enjoy bridge crossings, a retaining wall obscures the view of the water on all but the navigation span.

The bridge is also lightly "S" shaped to reduce the hypnotic effect of straight bridges. Located in one of the windiest parts of Canada, it's currently the largest span in the world over a body of water that regularly freezes.

Justifiably, Canada is quite proud of its architectural giant. To commemorate the event, Canada Post issued on May 31, 1997 a se-tenant pair of stamps attached to a label that depict the Confederation Bridge. These stamps are designed to provide a three part panoramic view of the bridge from the New Brunswick side. The tab or label which joins the two stamps depicts the beginning of the navigation span on the bridge. The two stamps are valued at \$.45, the current Canadian domestic postal rate.

Crossing the bridge is certainly a not to be missed part of the PEI experience. I encourage those traveling in this part of Canada to see "the bridge" firsthand. For what it's worth, "the bridge" means many things to many people. Some islanders share its many positive aspects: increased island access, communication heightened, commerce enhanced. Others feel they'll be too "challenged" by the traffic and the numbers of people brought to them via "the bridge."

Only the future will tell the ultimate impact of this engineering marvel of the Confederation Bridge will have on the residents of PEI. For now, suffice it to say, PEI is a fantastic vacation spot populated by wonderfully hospitable people. For me, the bridge is a spectacular means to an end. If you're going to PEI, the bridge is worth the effort!

Sources:

Canada Post, "Hands across the Water"- Canada's Stamp Details (Vol 6, No 3, May/June, 1997)

Journal Pioneer. Confederation Bridge: Official souvenir edition. May, 1997.
Strait Crossing Development, Inc., "Confederation Bridge: For a Strait Forward Experience." Internet web page.