Join us on a virtual road trip to Victoria-by-the-Sea, P.E.I. as we investigate how a vibrant small business culture ensures this tiny town’s survival

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JOSH LEWIS
BACK in 1982, the village of Victoria, P.E.I., was a quiet community dominated by farming and fishing. Thirty-seven years later, the renamed Victoria-By-The-Sea is a bustling hub of small business enterprises. With a year-round population of less than 200 people, the village is home to almost 20 independent stores, restaurants and accommodation providers. If you’re doing the math, that’s roughly 10 per cent of the population who own or operate their own business.

Each summer, visitors flock to the town’s grid-like streets with their artisanal shops offering chocolate, glass, pottery, jewelry, candles, weaved products, coffee and of course, food. Many of these small businesses operate out of the owners’ homes, which are fittingly Victorian style. There are no franchises here and no large-scale manufacturing.

“That’s part of the charm,” says Eric Gilbert, who has a major role in running Island Chocolates, a business his parents Ron and Linda opened in 1987. “It’s just such an idyllic setting and it’s beautiful, but it’s also a real place. You go into these shops and you can talk to the owner. You can talk to the people who built the business, and their families.”
VICTORIA PLAYHOUSE was the brainchild of the late Erskine Smith and his wife Pat. Their daughter Emily now plays a big role in the operation and says there were “very few” businesses when the Playhouse opened. “It started a trend in Victoria of creative, cultural-related businesses and products, which in turn drew more people into the area and over the years has resulted in a very popular small destination town.”

It’s located in the exact centre of the village, inside the Victoria Hall, and the building has a charm that has been noted by performers and spectators far and wide. “We know we have a special building and we do our best to put special things on stage and really do that beautiful heritage building proud,” Smith says.

The Playhouse hosts theatre and musical concerts—with a focus on contemporary Canadian comedy—more than 70 nights a year. It draws an average of 7,000 people each season. This year’s performance slate is built around the Four Tellers, a group of friends who sit around the table swapping stories of the Island. “It’s an ongoing process of trying to figure out what is the best formula to attract audiences,” Smith says. Erskine, who passed away in 2013, was awarded a Diamond Jubilee Medal for pouring his life into the Playhouse. His work resulted in people who aren’t the theatre type being comfortable going to see a show, his daughter says. “Like farmers and fishermen from our area here. You wouldn’t have caught them going to a production at Confederation Centre (of the Arts, in Charlottetown) because it was intimidating. But they’d be like, ‘Oh, that’s Erskine Smith, you know, it’s probably safe for us to go see this show, Erskine says it’s funny and you know Erskine.’

“Some of those people are still coming 30 years later.”

HE ORIENT HOTEL, perched at the top of Main Street, dates back to 1900. The three-story wood building was first operated by Charles Rogers, who constructed several buildings in the village. It originally had a gable and ell configuration with an open verandah. It’s now registered as one of Canada’s Historic Places.

Richard and Wendy LaGrange are in their ninth season running the hotel as a bed and breakfast. “(Visitors) love the quaintness, they love how it gets quiet after 9 o’clock, and it’s a beautiful village so they see the history of the buildings when they go through,” Richard says. The Orient has seven rooms, one being a two-bedroom suite, and visitors are almost exclusively from off-Island. The hotel has almost no vacancy from July through September, Richard says.

Victoria has a unique business culture because of the people, Wendy says. When they moved from Calgary, she expected to have a very small circle of friends, but that hasn’t been the case. “It’s really something. Great, great people. People here would do absolutely anything for you, bend over backwards to help without ever asking for anything. They’re right there and they seem to know what you need.”

That community spirit was never more apparent than this past May when the LaGranges lost their daughter, Renee. “The whole community rallied around us. The church gave us their venue. The restaurants all closed down for the celebration,” Richard says.

Residents brought food to the family and to the church. “It was really something to see. I think that’s what makes the village special.”
NEXT DOOR TO THE ORIENT is one of Victoria’s oldest businesses, the Landmark Café, opened by Eugene Sauve in 1989. Originally from Quebec City, Sauve says his move to P.E.I. in the early ’70s came by accident, he says. “My sister was at UPEI. I popped in to see her 45 years ago and I haven’t left.” He met his wife Julia on the Island and had their kids, Rachel and Oliver, there.

“I just had a feeling this village was going to take off. It’s a beautiful, unique little village that could only blossom.”

As others have alluded, it wasn’t that way before the Playhouse. “When I moved here, kids couldn’t wait to get out.”

From its founding in 1819 to the 1950s, Victoria had been a “thriving community” with boats bringing visitors and farmers unloading their potatoes onto the ships, Sauve says. That changed when the TransCanada Highway bypassed the town (directing visitors and cargo elsewhere) and was exacerbated by the construction of a causeway which Sauve says impacted its deep-water port. But there’s been a revival in the past 30 years, initiated by the Playhouse.

That growth is what attracted Sauve to the town, as did the fact he could buy a house for just $20,000. The café used to be a convenience store and after some effort, he got the owner to sell. “The Playhouse was across the street. It was a natural fit.”

Michael Stanley is a second generation artisan who grew up watching his father work at his pottery wheel and his mother at her loom.

Open for more than a decade, By-The-Sea-Kayaking offers a variety of outdoor activities and equipment rentals.
JUST 50 METRES FROM THE CAFE is the Island Chocolates building, a landmark of Victoria. Built in 1883, it was formerly the home of Wright Brothers’ General Store, an institution in the community, and has since been restored to its original state. “The shop maintains a lot of the heritage and history of the building, so that’s kind of a draw,” says Eric Gilbert. “My sister (Emma) and I grew up here making chocolate with our family ... it’s great for us to be the second generation, carrying on in the village.”

Despite the small population and seasonal economy, Gilbert says P.E.I. is a great place to open a small business. “It used to be a tough slog, and people would be like, ‘A chocolate factory in Victoria-By-The-Sea? That’s never going to go.’ But you put in the time, you build it up and suddenly it’s rolling.”

Gilbert doesn’t just make chocolate. For the past 10 winters, when the shop is closed, he works with cocoa bean farmers in Ecuador, Honduras and Guatemala. “I tried to find ways that I would be still involved with chocolate but in other aspects of it,” he says.

FORMER NEOPHYTE restaurateurs Fred and Lynn Fall are now in their sixth season running Beachcombers on the Wharf. “We had never owned one, so we thought, ‘Hey, it’s worth a try,’” Fred says. “It just grows every year. Busy, busy.”

The restaurant is designed for views. Every table has a window looking out on the deck. “When people sit on the deck, they watch bald eagles flying around, they see fishing boats or sailboats coming in. It’s happening right there,” says Fred. “We take things like that for granted because we live on the Island, but these people are in awe of the views. It’s just so hard to find a little seaside village now that’s as unique as Victoria.”

Beachcombers sources as much local food as possible. “When they’re fishing we get (lobster and scallops) right off the boats,” Fred says.
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CASPAR GEURTS (above) came a little farther than most to establish roots in Victoria. He moved from the Netherlands five years ago to start a cottage business. A woodworker by trade, he started with two cottages and now has six. He finished the latest one, with three bedrooms and a deck, in July. "They’re pretty big, and we’re cheaper than the rest, so that’s the reason people like us."

Geurts definitely enjoys the people, compared to Holland. “People are more friendly. People are not in a rush. It’s very safe here. And if you want to achieve something, you can do it.”

THE LOBSTER BARN, owned by Jenny and Jackie Myers, is another restaurant that takes advantage of its location on the wharf to source fresh-from-the-boat seafood. The Myers sisters are in their ninth year with the Lobster Barn. They also get busier every year. They buy anything that’s in season. “I didn’t think we could top last year because of (Canada) 150, but our May sales were up (from last year),” Jackie says.

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