



SHIFTING SANDS, TIMELESS SPIRIT

THE ENDURING ALLURE OF SABLE ISLAND

Words and Photos by Melissa Goertzen



SHIFTING SANDS, TIMELESS SPIRIT

THE ENDURING ALLURE OF SABLE ISLAND

Rising from the restless waves of the North Atlantic Ocean, Sable Island emerges from the mist like a mirage—a crescent of shifting sand, located 300 kilometers southeast of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Famous for its wild horses and thriving gray seal population, the island is a fragile ecosystem. Shaped by time, tide, and the rhythms of life, it serves as a sanctuary for nature's quiet wonders—rolling dunes, grazing horses, and vast skies.

This remote haven is a place where grasses grow from decay, waves sculpt the sands anew, and the delicate balance of life and renewal unfolds in harmony with the ever-changing landscape.

Dubbed the "Graveyard of the Atlantic," Sable Island carries a haunting history, having witnessed over 350 shipwrecks. Its treacherous shoals, relentless currents, and fierce storms have tested mariners for centuries. Remnants of these wrecks—timber, iron, and artifacts—emerge from the sands, bearing silent witness

to the perilous journeys of the past.

The journey to Sable Island began with a sense of anticipation as the helicopter lifted off from Halifax Stanfield International Airport. Operated by Kattuk Expeditions, the flight took approximately an hour and a half, offering breathtaking views of the vast North Atlantic below. As the cityscape gave way to open water, the isolation of Sable Island became increasingly apparent. Finally, the sandbar appeared below, a slice of golden browns and emerald greens cutting across the sea.





The first footsteps on the island's rolling dunes and endless shoreline was both humbling and exhilarating, a reminder of the island's remoteness and the privilege of experiencing such a rare and fragile landscape.



Despite these harsh conditions, life flourishes. The wild horses of Sable Island are one of its most iconic inhabitants. Thought to be descendants of horses left on the island during the Acadian Expulsion, these resilient animals have adapted to the island's challenging environment, surviving on native grasses and freshwater ponds. Without predators or human interference, the horses live freely, forming tightly-knit herds that roam the dunes and meadows.

Nearly 500 horses call Sable Island home, thriving in harmony with the island's delicate ecosystem. Parks Canada plays a crucial role in their protection, maintaining a hands-off approach to let the horses flourish as a natural part of the landscape. Watching them graze against the backdrop of endless skies and rolling sand is a profound reminder of the beauty of unspoiled wilderness.





Equally remarkable is Sable Island's gray seal population, one of the largest breeding colonies in the world. Every winter, tens of thousands of seals gather on its beaches to give birth to their pups. The sight of these animals, with their sleek bodies and soulful eyes, underscores the island's role as a vital haven for marine life.

Beneath the hooves of horses and among the seals' rookeries, the island's vegetation tells a story of endurance and renewal. Nutrients from decaying seals that have reached the ends of their lives, along with remains of other forms of marine life, enrich the sandy soil, enabling marram grass and other hardy plants to stabilize the dunes. This delicate balance sustains life in a landscape constantly reshaped by ocean currents and winds.



Sable Island is carefully managed and protected by Parks Canada, which ensures the preservation of this fragile and unique national park reserve. As stewards of the island, Parks Canada oversees conservation efforts to maintain its delicate ecosystem and safeguard its iconic wildlife, including the wild horses and gray seals. Access to the island is carefully regulated to minimize human impact, and eco-tourism is limited to ensure the landscape remains undisturbed. Through their diligent work, Parks Canada preserves the island's natural beauty and cultural significance, allowing it to endure as a pristine sanctuary for generations to come.





Sable Island is a place in motion, its contours shifting as sandbars form and vanish, and dunes are sculpted anew with each storm. This impermanence, combined with its isolation, lends the island a haunting beauty and a profound sense of peace.



Amid the sound of waves, the calls of seals, and the soft whinnies of wild horses, Sable Island offers an extraordinary stillness. Its vast, uninterrupted horizon invites reflection, providing a rare escape from the demands of modern life.

To visit Sable Island is to encounter a realm where nature dictates its own rules. From its shipwreck-strewn shores to its unique wildlife, this fragile yet enduring strip of sand leaves an indelible mark on all who walk its shores. Sable Island is more than a place—it is a testament to endurance and the beauty of an untamed world.







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