

Walking the Ocean Floor

By Michele Peterson

Atlantic Canada's Bay of Fundy offers adventure and inspiration.

The Bay of Fundy is a place most often defined by superlatives. Home to the largest tides ever recorded on earth, it has rock formations older than the Appalachians and cliffs that were once taller than the Rockies. It's so biologically diverse, it's even been designated a UNESCO World Biosphere reserve.



SANDPIPER

But for me, as I walk the sand at low tide, the most awe-inspiring thing about New Brunswick's Bay of Fundy is how tidy the ocean floor is. There are no tangles of seaweed. No fish bones. Here at Hopewell Rocks, when the tidal waters retreat, they reveal a cinnamon-hued ocean floor as smooth as caramel icing. For someone who grew up near the Red River of the Canadian prairies, where the murky surface hid catfish as fat as a longshoreman's thigh and thick sludge buried whatever got carried in on spring floodwaters, the most remarkable thing about the Bay of Fundy is its undulating expanse of smooth ocean floor.

Located 30 minutes from Moncton on a cape overlooking the Bay of Fundy, the Hopewell Rocks Park was created to preserve and showcase this dramatic landscape. At the Interpretation Centre, I learn that the time between low and high tide is around six hours, meaning there is a three-hour window where visitors can walk on the ocean floor before 100 billion tonnes of water, drawn by the gravitational force of the sun and the moon, pours in, filling the basin to the height of a four-storey apartment building.

It's a steep descent down a staircase to the tidal flats from the lookout over the bay. I pause at Lover's Arch, a popular spot for photo-ops, and then continue past Bear Rock, another of the famously photogenic flowerpot formations. Sculpted by millennia of erosion and accumulated sediment deposits, these otherworldly flowerpot rocks rise from the ocean floor as though natural cathedrals. It's incredible to imagine that within a few hours, water will be lapping at their tops and fish will be swimming where I'm standing.

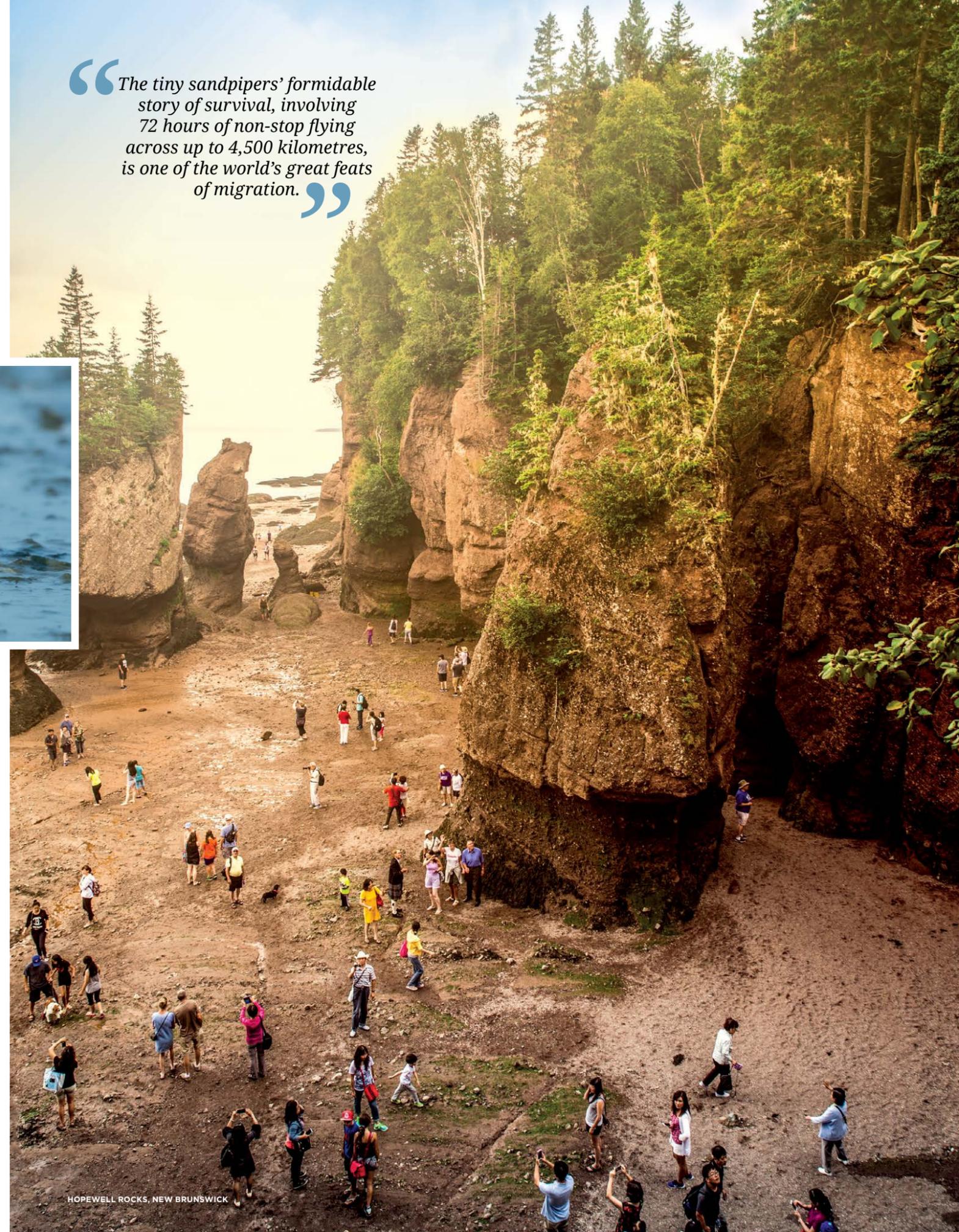
Next, I head to Demoiselle Beach, a pebbly cove tucked away at the southern end of the park. Here, a different ecosystem of mud flats and salt marshes provide important habitat for millions of migratory shorebirds, including 75 per cent of the world's population of the semipalmated sandpiper, to fuel up on mud shrimp, while en route from the Arctic to their winter home in South America. The tiny sandpipers' formidable story of survival, involving 72 hours of non-stop flying across up to 4,500 kilometres, is one of the world's great feats of migration.

As I skirt the marshlands, a flock of shorebirds, flashing dark feet and white wings, thrums overhead in such abundant numbers it appears like a school of fish. It's a mesmerizing sight. And proof that at the Bay of Fundy, small miracles of nature can be just as impressive as the mightiest.

Travel Planner

Insight Vacations offers *Landscapes of the Canadian Maritimes*, a luxury escorted tour featuring a stop at Hopewell Rocks on the Bay of Fundy.

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HOPEWELL ROCKS, NEW BRUNSWICK