

When the tide goes out, dinner is served

By Darcy Rhyno

A hike along the famous sea caves leads to a one-of-a-kind culinary experience on the ocean floor of New Brunswick's Bay of Fundy.

The tide is out. Way out. Football field-lengths of gravelly ocean bottom lie exposed at St. Martins on New Brunswick's Bay of Fundy coast as Red Rock Adventure guides welcome us to Savour the Sea Caves: An Ocean Floor Culinary Adventure. It's an event so tied to these tides that it's offered only once or twice a summer.

A guide points us toward the sea caves, which yawn from sheer, expressionless cliff faces. Wild tangles of trees cling to the top of the cliffs above the caves. We cross shallow streams over stones that shift like marbles beneath our feet, to a path cleared through carpets of bubbly rockweed until we arrive at the first cave.

We gather for a pair of stories about how the sea caves were created. Both stories, as it turns out, involve bathtubs. In Mi'kmaq legend, Glooscap needed a bath after creating the world, so his friend Beaver built him a dam at the mouth of the bay. After Glooscap's bath, Whale complained that the dam was blocking his feeding grounds. "He takes his giant tail," our guide Joe Brennan says. "Bam, bam, bam! Logs go flying all over the place. Voilà! The bay empties out. Then he slams his tail against the surface of the water. The bay begins its oscillating motion."

In the second story, a rift valley formed when the supercontinent Pangaea split apart. Twice a day, the tide forces 160 billion tonnes of water into the funnel-shaped, underwater valley. "It sloshes around like water in a bathtub, and thus we have the world's highest tides."

Still lingering at the first cave, we are given appetizers. Silver platters of local oysters chill on ice and kebabs of sweet peppers, cantaloupe and blueberries are served in Mason jars. What makes this especially remarkable is that all equipment and food must be lowered by ropes over the cliffs at low tide while the larger, more awkward items like tables are boated in at high tide.

We return to the path and it leads to a gorge gouged from the landscape by the tides. There's a crackling fire in front of a sea cave in the far cliff and a makeshift kitchen where chef Alain Bossé in his white chef's jacket, red plaid kilt and hiking boots is prepping bites from the bay. His shouts of welcome are almost drowned out by Acadian fiddle music. A sparkling apple wine is popped and poured. We're handed potato cakes topped with lobster claws served on a lemon-seaweed remoulade.

Bossé calls us together to introduce tonight's menu, starting with the food in our hands. The seaweed that's stirred into the remoulade comes from his kitchen cavern. "We literally chopped it from the rock," says Bossé. At a long table, we're served seared scallops with a sea buckthorn vinaigrette followed by the main of maple-planked salmon, edamame and succotash, all of it as fresh as the surroundings, and delicious.

Mike Carpenter and Jordan Jamison of Red Rock Adventure created Savour the Sea Caves through a Tourism New Brunswick accelerator program. "We were encouraged to reach beyond what we thought was possible," Jamison says. On a cold winter day, they brought Bossé and Jonathan Foster, from the Gros Morne Institute of Sustainable Tourism, to the caves to cement the concept. "The first cave was full of icicles," Bossé says. "It reminded me of being a child. I fell in love with it. I started planning how we could make this spectacular."

After dinner, Bossé shows us how to make our own dessert — truly delightful roasted, rum-dipped marshmallows and chocolate between ginger cookies — but also delivers a warning: "I don't want to scare you, but that water is all coming back. Right up to the top of the cliff. So, when we say it's time to go, it's time to go."

No problem. Just as soon as I finish my s'more. ■