COMMENTARY

Nova Scotia Has Spent Centuries Looking Out to Sea. Maybe It's Time to Look Up.

Isar's Spectrum reached orbit from Norway. Now Canso has to prove Canada can turn a North Atlantic launch pad into a durable space industry.

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Illustration: Nasty Canuck / AI-assisted.

Isar Aerospace just proved its Spectrum rocket can reach orbit from northern Norway. Now Canso has to prove something harder: that Canada can turn a launch pad on the North Atlantic into a competitive spaceport, an industry and a reason for more Nova Scotians to build their future at home.

On Saturday night, a German-built rocket rose from an island off northern Norway and did something that matters thousands of kilometres away, on another rocky Atlantic coast.

Isar Aerospace's Spectrum reached orbit on only its second flight, carrying five CubeSats and a technology experiment. Its first flight, in March 2025, lasted about 30 seconds before the rocket lost attitude control and received a termination order. Isar later traced the failure to an unintended vent-valve opening and loss of attitude control, made changes, built another rocket and tried again.

This time, it worked.

That matters in Nova Scotia because Isar plans to develop a dedicated Spectrum launch complex at Spaceport Nova Scotia near Canso. The company and Halifax-based Maritime Launch Services signed their facilities agreement in July, although the detailed statement of work and some program milestones remain unfinished. Their deadline was recently pushed to September 15, with Isar's first orbital launches from Nova Scotia still targeted for 2028.

Spectrum reaching orbit does not mean Nova Scotia suddenly has an operational orbital spaceport. It does remove one large question mark: the rocket Isar wants to fly from Canso is no longer simply a promising machine on an engineering drawing.

The more interesting question now is what Canada builds around it.

Canso has seen what happens when an industry disappears

There is something fitting about Canso being at the centre of this story.

For centuries, the community's fortunes were tied to the Atlantic. In the fall of 1989, National Sea Products announced that it would leave Canso and close its fish plant. The community found a buyer and, working with Ottawa, put together what became known as the "Canso deal." By November 1990, the reopened operation supported 268 full-time-equivalent jobs, but employment later fell sharply as quota, resource availability and processing economics changed.

When then-mayor Ray White appeared before a Senate committee in 2005, his description of the town was wonderfully economical:

> *"We are fighters and we are not giving up."*

He was talking about fishing, not rockets, but the lesson travels well.

Nova Scotia's fishery certainly isn't disappearing. Seafood remains the province's largest export industry, supporting about 19,000 jobs and generating roughly $2.2 billion in exports in 2025. The province's new seafood strategy also identifies pressures familiar to any industry exposed to changing markets: rising costs, labour shortages, global trade uncertainty and the need to diversify.

The lesson of Canso isn't that Nova Scotia should replace fishing with rockets. It's that communities become vulnerable when too much of their future depends on one employer, one resource, one market or one industry.

A successful spaceport should help Nova Scotia diversify, not simply give Canso a new dependency with a more impressive exhaust plume.

The launch pad is not the industry

Ottawa has already put serious money behind the project.

In March, the federal government announced a 10-year, $200-million agreement with Maritime Launch Services for a dedicated government launch pad and associated services at the multi-user spaceport. Maritime Launch is required to provide that capability at an initial operational state by the end of 2026 and spend at least 90 per cent of the lease money — $180 million — in Canada. Separately, Isar is developing its own Spectrum complex at the site.

That distinction matters, because the larger Canadian opportunity goes well beyond providing concrete and a place to light the engines.

Canada still depends on foreign launch providers to put satellites into orbit. Ottawa says its longer-term ambition is Canadian payloads launched from Canadian soil on Canadian-built rockets, with the separate $105-million Launch the North program backing domestic launch technologies as part of that effort.

Canso has geography on its side for some missions. Maritime Launch advertises unobstructed Atlantic trajectories spanning roughly 45 to 98 degrees of orbital inclination, including polar and sun-synchronous orbits useful for Earth observation, communications and security.

But the pad is only the front door to the industry.

Isar itself provides the lesson. The company says its new 40,000-square-metre production facility near Munich is designed for eventual capacity of up to 40 Spectrum vehicles a year, with a vertically integrated manufacturing model and most of the vehicle designed and built in-house.

That factory, the engineers inside it and the supply chain feeding it may ultimately matter more to Germany's economy than the spectacular few minutes when one of its rockets climbs into the sky.

Canada should want more than a pad that receives a German rocket, fuels it and sends most of the sophisticated engineering and manufacturing value back across the Atlantic. Useful infrastructure? Absolutely. A Canadian space industry? Not yet.

The bigger prize includes launch vehicles and propulsion, satellites, electronics, payload integration, testing, tracking and telemetry, specialized materials, cybersecurity, robotics, software, data services, maintenance, range operations and the suppliers that grow around advanced industries.

Canso doesn't need to beat Florida at being Florida

Canada should also resist the temptation to market Canso as Cape Canaveral with warmer coats.

Florida has a physics advantage for many eastbound, lower-inclination missions because launches closer to the equator can take greater advantage of Earth's rotation. It also has generations of infrastructure, suppliers, range experience and launch cadence. NASA notes that Cape Canaveral and Kennedy are especially well suited to west-east and equatorial missions, while Vandenberg in California is preferred for many north-south and polar missions.

Texas brings another model entirely: at SpaceX's Starbase, development, manufacturing, testing and launch of Starship and Super Heavy are concentrated at the same site.

Canso's case is different. Its value lies in open-ocean trajectories and access to the mid- and high-inclination orbits that matter for Earth observation, maritime surveillance, communications, defence and polar missions. Those aren't obscure applications for a country responsible for an enormous territory, three oceans and a strategically important Arctic.

Canso doesn't have to win every launch. It needs to become very good at winning the launches for which Canso makes sense.

That brings us to the obvious Canadian question.

What happens in February?

Winter is a legitimate competitive issue. Pretending otherwise won't make investors, insurers or launch customers forget where Nova Scotia is.

The project's 2018 environmental assessment — prepared for an earlier Cyclone 4M configuration — identified extreme winds and temperatures, clouds, precipitation, fog, ice formation and lightning as conditions capable of affecting infrastructure and operations, and called for launch-weather guidelines covering pre-launch, launch and post-launch activity. The assessment also contained specific restrictions for the vehicle contemplated at the time. Those old vehicle-specific limits should not simply be transplanted onto Spectrum; Isar and Maritime Launch will need criteria for the rocket and facilities they actually intend to operate.

What we shouldn't do is compare Canso's February to an imaginary Florida where the weather always cooperates.

NASA's current Artemis II weather criteria include restrictions for temperature, surface and upper-level winds, precipitation, lightning and cloud conditions at Kennedy Space Center. Other vehicles have their own limits, but the larger point is obvious.

There is no weather-free spaceport. There are spaceports that learn how to operate in the weather they have.

That is why Andøya may be more relevant to Canso than Cocoa Beach.

Isar's other launch complex sits on the coast of northern Norway. Spectrum's first flight took off there in March 2025 and its second reached orbit there this weekend. The company has also encountered exactly the kind of constraints northern operations bring: strong winds pushed a March 2026 launch window back, while another attempt was lost after an unauthorized vessel entered the offshore danger area and consumed enough countdown time that the launch could not proceed.

That doesn't prove Spectrum can launch from Canso 365 days a year. Two flights don't establish an annual operating cadence, and Norway is not Nova Scotia. It does show that Isar isn't building its launch business around palm trees and guaranteed sunshine.

The boat incident also illustrates something easily missed when people picture a spaceport: the ocean is part of the range. SpaceX-style booster recovery isn't the immediate issue here. Isar publishes Spectrum as a two-stage launcher, and its own Andøya experience shows that an orbital range still has to keep offshore danger areas clear. Vessel coordination, tracking, emergency planning and debris contingencies all become part of operating beside the sea.

Canada already knows something about difficult marine operations. The Canadian Coast Guard runs winter icebreaking in Nova Scotia from November through May, with a 12-hour target response for Nova Scotia and the Bay of Fundy under normal conditions. It also operates marine communications and vessel-traffic services in Atlantic waters.

That is not evidence of a dedicated Coast Guard spaceport support arrangement. We have no basis to imply one. It does mean Canada is not learning cold-water marine operations from scratch.

There is a cultural point here too, provided we don't turn Nova Scotians into a postcard. Generations of people working off this coast learned that the North Atlantic is unimpressed by anybody's schedule. You prepare for difficult conditions, respect what you cannot control and know when not to go.

Spaceflight works much the same way.

Maybe Canada's harsher environment isn't only something the space industry has to overcome. If we become exceptionally good at operating safely in it, that competence can become part of what Canada sells — particularly in Arctic communications, polar Earth observation, maritime surveillance, remote operations and northern sovereignty.

That's more interesting than trying to build a smaller Cape Canaveral.

Build the ecosystem, not just the launch site

Nova Scotia isn't starting from zero.

Dalhousie's Space Systems Lab has engaged more than 200 students through its work, and its LORIS CubeSat became the first CubeSat from Atlantic Canada placed in orbit. Arad Gharagozli, who founded the lab while studying engineering at Dalhousie, later founded Halifax-based Galaxia

Mission Systems. Dalhousie reported in August that Galaxia had grown to nearly two dozen staff, many of them Dalhousie Engineering graduates, while continuing to offer co-op opportunities to students.

That's the kind of pipeline worth paying attention to: students work on space hardware, experience turns into companies, more students get exposed to the work and some discover they can build a space career without automatically moving to another province or country.

Nova Scotia also has adjacent strengths in shipbuilding, defence, ocean technology, sensors, autonomous systems and advanced engineering. Atlantic Canada has more than 200 defence firms and nearly 10,000 direct aerospace and defence jobs, with capabilities ranging from advanced shipbuilding and aircraft maintenance to sonar, simulation and cybersecurity.

Those aren't rockets, but advanced industrial clusters rarely begin with every piece already labelled for the industry that eventually uses it. Engineers, technicians, researchers and suppliers move between related problems.

The province still has to make the broader proposition work. Statistics Canada reported that Halifax's average asking rent for an available two-bedroom apartment reached $2,350 in the first quarter of 2026, up 5.4 per cent from a year earlier. Attracting high-value companies and workers while housing becomes harder to afford is not a minor side issue. Housing, electricity, broadband, roads, schools, healthcare and transportation are industrial infrastructure too.

A spaceport cannot become an island of 21st-century infrastructure while the communities around it are expected to get by on good intentions. If governments want advanced industry to grow outside Halifax, the place around the jobs has to work as well as the launch pad does.

Count what stays — and count how often it can launch

There are already large economic numbers attached to Spaceport Nova Scotia.

A 2023 Conference Board of Canada briefing, completed with funding and support from Maritime Launch and using project-spending data supplied by the company, projected that spaceport construction would support an average of 748 annual full-year jobs in Nova Scotia. Once operations were fully ramped up, it projected around $300 million in annual Canadian GDP and close to 1,000 annual full-year jobs across Canada.

The important caveat is in the timetable: the model expected the spaceport to reach full operating ramp-up in 2027. The project schedule has moved considerably since then.

Those projections aren't useless. They are a baseline Canadians can eventually measure against reality.

How many Nova Scotians get hired? How many local firms enter the supply chain? How much engineering happens here? How many graduates stay? How many new companies form? How much intellectual property gets created in Canada? How many launch providers use the site? Most

importantly for Canso, how much economic activity is still happening between launches?

We should add another number to that scorecard: **launch availability**.

Isar and Maritime Launch say their Nova Scotia complex has the potential to support as many as 40 launches a year by 2029. That is a company-stated ambition, not demonstrated capacity. Getting anywhere close will depend not only on rockets and pads but on weather, range clearance, staffing, turnaround, logistics and the ability to recover quickly from a scrub.

So show us the numbers. How many days a year are realistically launchable? What conditions cause most scrubs? How quickly can a vehicle recycle? What does winter availability look like? How does Canso compare with Andøya and Vandenberg?

Don't tell Canadians Canso is year-round. Prove how much of the year it can actually work.

That's not hostility to the project. It's how an infrastructure project graduates from promise to capability.

There is still plenty to prove elsewhere too. Maritime Launch said in July that permanent utility and entrance facilities were moving through tender and design while planning advanced for a launch-vehicle integration facility and additional road extensions. Isar and Maritime Launch still need to settle their statement of work and program milestones by September 15, while additional infrastructure under their agreement is targeted for completion by the end of 2027.

Canada's proposed Canadian Space Launch Act, which would establish a permanent federal framework for launch and re-entry, is still at second reading in the House of Commons.

There is a lot of distance between today's enthusiasm and a mature Canadian launch economy. That's exactly why this is the right time to decide what success should look like.

Give people a reason to stay — and a reason to come home

Nova Scotia has spent generations watching some of its young people leave for opportunities elsewhere. The old story is changing: between April 2025 and March 2026, 17,949 people moved to Nova Scotia from other provinces while 14,198 moved out, producing positive net interprovincial migration of 3,751.

The goal shouldn't be to stop people from leaving. Going elsewhere, learning things and seeing the world is not a provincial emergency.

The opportunity is to make coming back a competitive choice.

Imagine a Nova Scotian kid getting interested in space at school, studying engineering at Dalhousie or learning a technical trade, doing a co-op with a local aerospace or satellite company and eventually discovering that the serious job in the field isn't automatically in Ontario, California,

Texas or Europe.

Better still, imagine somebody who already left finding a reason to bring the experience home.

In 2005, Canso's mayor went to Ottawa arguing that small communities needed long-term commitment if they were going to diversify and survive. Twenty-one years later, Canada is preparing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars building sovereign launch capability on Canso's doorstep.

We ought to have learned something in between.

A launch pad is not an economic strategy. But it can become an anchor for one.

Nova Scotia has spent centuries making a living from what lies beyond its shoreline. Building a space industry doesn't mean turning its back on the sea. The open Atlantic is part of what makes Canso useful in the first place, and the difficult environment that shaped life around it may yet become part of the operating culture Canada brings to space.

Canso doesn't need to become our Cape Canaveral.

It has a chance to become something more distinctly Canadian.

A rocket leaving Nova Scotia will make a spectacular photograph. An industry that gives Nova Scotians more reasons to stay, return and build will matter a lot longer.
