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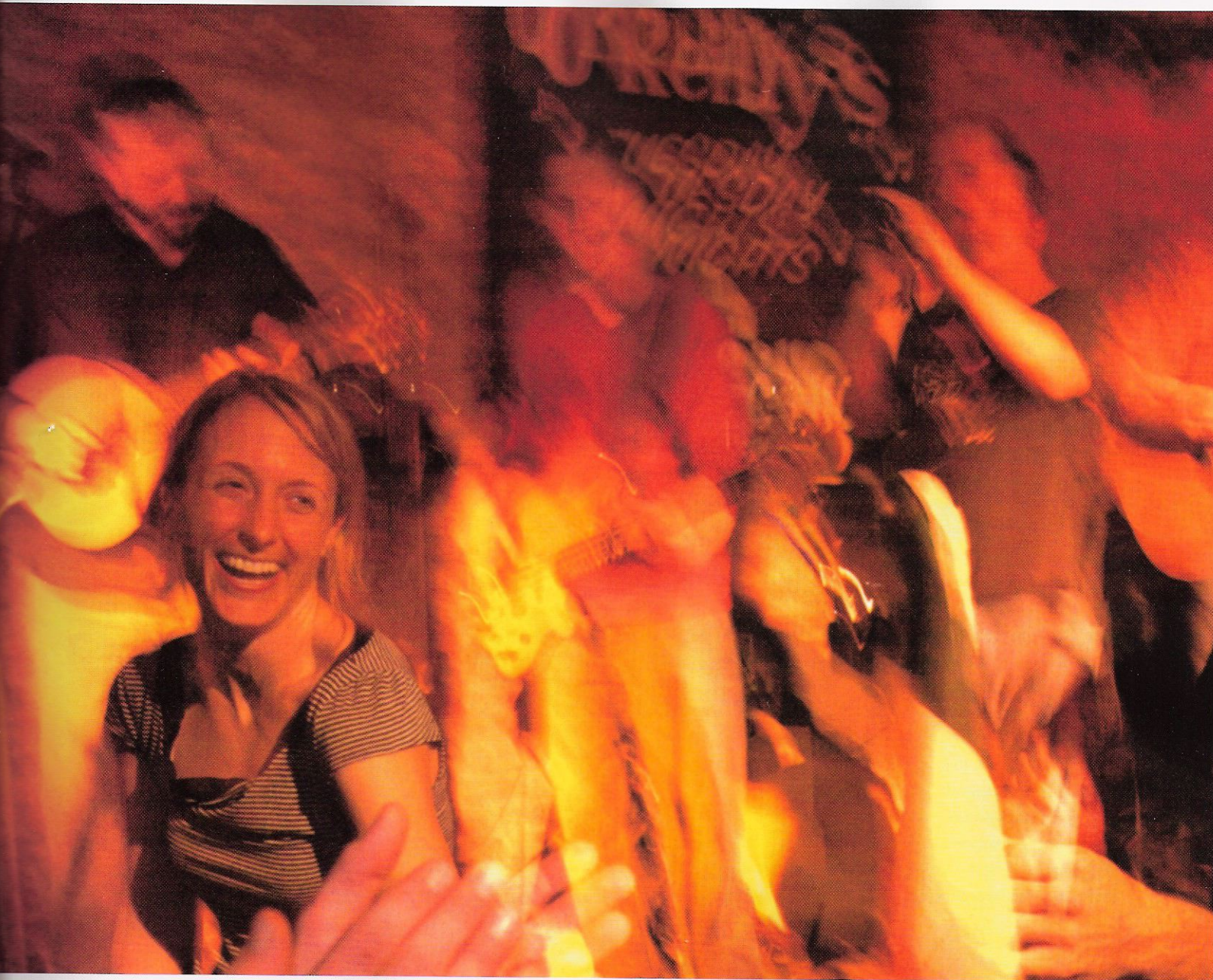
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Newfound friends

In Newfoundland and Labrador, cultural immersion goes well beyond meeting the locals. It's about living like the locals and maybe even having a kitchen party thrown in your honor.

BY JOEL YANOFSKY

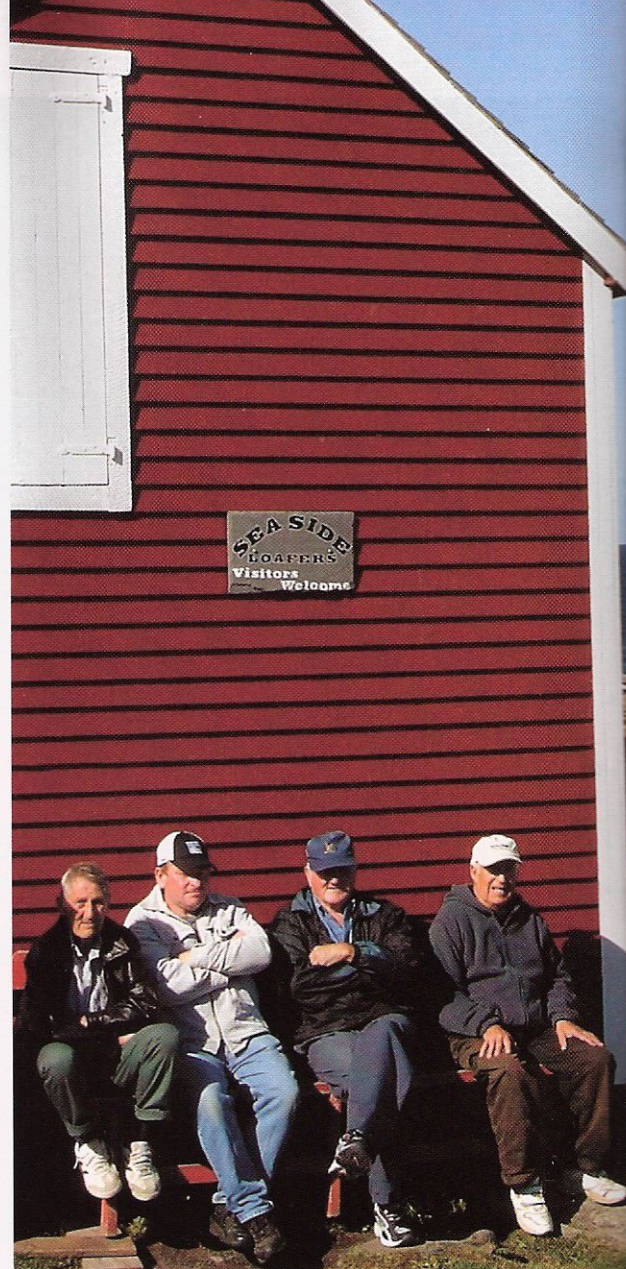
THE DAY BEFORE I LEAVE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR, CapeRace Cultural Adventures founder Ken Sooley calls with a helpful suggestion. He tells me to venture outside my comfort zone. “Be an extrovert,” he says. He offers this advice as if he suspects this is the one thing someone from a big mainland city might not be. He has a point. Where I live, being standoffish is a lifestyle choice.

Sooley created CapeRace in 2004. The idea: to give visitors an up-close-and-personal experience of Newfoundland and its people. For my week’s stay, I’ll be provided with keys to private heritage houses in St. John’s, Heart’s Delight and Bonavista. I’ll be among neighbors, who may just drop by. Even throw me a kitchen party – a lively gathering with friends, instruments and singing around a keg.

Anyway, that’s the refrain in CapeRace’s *Traveller’s Diary*, which proves invaluable. There are tips on everything from where to get your hair cut and where to get drunk to where to attend church services. The *Diary* also contains an inordinate amount of hiking information – Newfoundland isn’t called the Rock for nothing – all of which I’m ignoring. That includes tips on the trail up to Signal Hill Historic Park (where Marconi received the first transatlantic signal), which is conveniently located outside the door of my first residence, the Hipditch House in St. John’s.

In a way, my staying at Hipditch undermines Sooley’s master plan. I’m quite comfortable. The house’s decor is blue, white and nautical, and staying here it’s hard not to feel like a spoiled kid in a sailor suit. Located in the Battery district, my house is tucked into the cliffs of the Narrows and overlooks St. John’s Harbour. The Harbour is itself a kind of refuge from the rough, unpredictable North Atlantic. An “oasis port,” I’ve heard it called. So on an unseasonably warm September day, I gaze out at the calm water and watch my neighbors, in hiking apparel, make their way uphill.

It’s all I can do not to heckle. The truth: I’ve always considered hiking like being on a treadmill – only outside. When I finally do head out, I head downhill. Downhill is easy in St. John’s: It’s a city on a slant. I explore Outer Battery Road, a narrow street dotted with craft shops and the odd B&B. I’m enjoying the stroll on the innocuously named Harbourside East Concourse when it occurs to me that I’m not strolling anymore. I’m ascending



Close to home

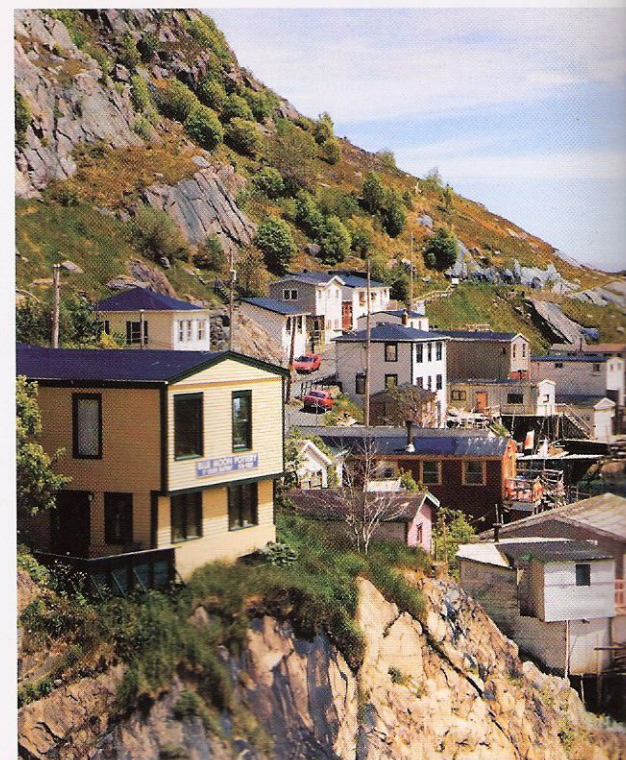
Sometimes bigger isn't better. Opportunities abound to stay with Canadians, whether at an inn or in a local family home. Here are a few standout experiences:

At **GEOS Language Academy Montreal**, feel like a member of the family by living with locals as you study French in the second largest francophone city in the world. Added bonus: You can practice your new language skills with your hosts at the dinner table. **1-888-685-4367**, geosmontreal.com

At **Firesign Art and Design Studio and B&B** on Quadra Island in British Columbia, take

intimate painting workshops with owner Nanci Cook (and no more than seven people) while staying on her lush 10-acre homestead. **250-285-3390**, firesignartanddesign.com

The **Dunroamin' Retreat** in Crag Lake, Yukon, is perfect for getting away from it all. Recommended for couples, you'll be one of no more than four guests at this quaint B&B. Join Jeanine Baker in one of her stained glass workshops, or rub shoulders with owner Suzanne Picot in the kitchen, where you'll learn traditional sourdough baking. **867-821-3492**, dunroaminretreat.com





Rumored to have more pubs per square foot than any other street in North America, George Street is the place to go for a good yarn and a refreshing pint.

the side of a mountain, staring down at a stunning but discomfiting view of the ocean and rocks, grateful to find a chain attached to the cliff face. I cling to it, wondering how I got up so high. How I ended up accidentally hiking.

This is, of course, a valuable introduction to all things Newfoundland. Be prepared for anything. Actually, forget that. Don't bother being prepared. Let yourself be wowed.

I meet Cathia Finkel at Auntie Crae's, a popular St. John's bakery. A former Montréaler, she has lived in St. John's for two decades. She fell in love with a Newfoundlander and Newfoundland, though not necessarily

One moment you're driving by "the barrens," the remains of Newfoundland's glacial prehistoric past, the next you're in a postcard-pretty little cove.

in that order. "This place receives people in its own style with a friendliness that takes some getting used to for someone visiting," Cathia tells me with a combination of pride and protectiveness. Then, as if on cue, the bakery transforms into a kind of public kitchen party, as accordionist Frank Maher, a local favorite, and his band play traditional tunes for a standing-room-only crowd. The audience is a mix of old and young, regulars and newcomers, those who arrive early to get a seat and those amazed by what they've stumbled into. "Every Tuesday at noon," Cathia says. "Something, isn't it?"

On family vacations, my wife prefers the scenic route. I prefer the straightest, duller distance between two points – I'm a destinations guy. But driving alone along the historic and scenic Baccalieu Trail from St.

John's to my second stop in the outport community of Heart's Delight, I realize arriving is overrated. The trip along the coast of the Avalon Peninsula should be 90 minutes. It takes me most of the day.

That's because there are *only* scenic routes here. What's remarkable about the drive is the shifting nature of the landscape. One moment you're driving by "the barrens," the remains of Newfoundland and Labrador's glacial prehistoric past, the next you're in a postcard-pretty little cove. I also find myself constantly meandering and backtracking, surprised, startled even, by a beautiful stretch of coastline or by a huge rock jutting out into the ocean like a slab of found sculpture.

The place names also prove irresistible. In Witless Bay, I take a boat trip to see the departing puffins, catch the briefest glimpse of a minke whale and get a little seasick. ("The North Atlantic is not flat," the boat's captain reminds us.) But really, I just want to say I was in Witless. I stop in Goobies, Cupids and Dildo for the same reason.

Dildo, for instance, is an island shaped like a small Spanish sword called a *bilbo*. This is one of a few likely explanations for the name. Still, this doesn't keep visitors from giggling, according to Gerald Smith, a guide for Dildo Island Adventure Tours. "I get calls from all over the world about the name. I tell people to come see what else we've got. Lots of history here," he says, glancing out at the bay. "And it's beautiful, don't you think?"

The *Traveller's Diary* describes the E.J. Sooley House in Heart's Delight as "a good place to hang out and relax." Hiking trails are recommended. However, with a view from my backyard of the sun setting on Trinity Bay, I opt for relaxing. The quiet can take some getting used to in Heart's Delight, though the E.J. Sooley House helps with the adjustment. It's like stepping back to a simpler time. The one-story cottage has been restored so that it looks much like it did when it was built in the 1930s. The outport decor is traditional and functional, complete with a daybed by the oven,

handmade dressers and washstands, and dangling light cords.

The locals in Heart's Delight are friendly, as promised. Donna Reid, who lives up the road, comes by as soon as I arrive to ask if I need anything. Then she gives me the lowdown on a few of my neighbors and some of the local activities. It turns out my timing is bad: There was one heck of a kitchen party last night.

Jerry Burton, CapeRace's property manager, lives two doors away and visits often with sightseeing tips or just to chat. Before I leave for Bonavista, he drops by one final time with a gift, a jar of moose. "Shot it myself in 2007," he says. "Did I tell you about that?"

Every story you hear in Newfoundland is an unraveling one, Cathia explained to me back at Auntie Crae's. They start small, then grow bigger, more elaborate. That's true of my conversations with Jerry. It occurs to me, as I'm leaving Heart's Delight, that I already know more about him – his upcoming carpal tunnel operation, his son's decision to attend a nearby college, how tough it's been working "away" in Halifax – than I do about my neighbors back home. I also know how to prepare a jar of moose.

No kitchen party in Bonavista either. I arrive late at the Thomas Moulnd House, a 100-year-old two-story building that is, like Bonavista, immersed in a rich but bittersweet history. Thomas Moulnd was one of the survivors of the Great 1914 Sealing Disaster, which saw 78 men perish after being stranded on an icefield. Located on the Mockbeggar Plantation, the now 300-year-old property is where Joey Smallwood, the province's first premier, strategized for his plan to have Newfoundland

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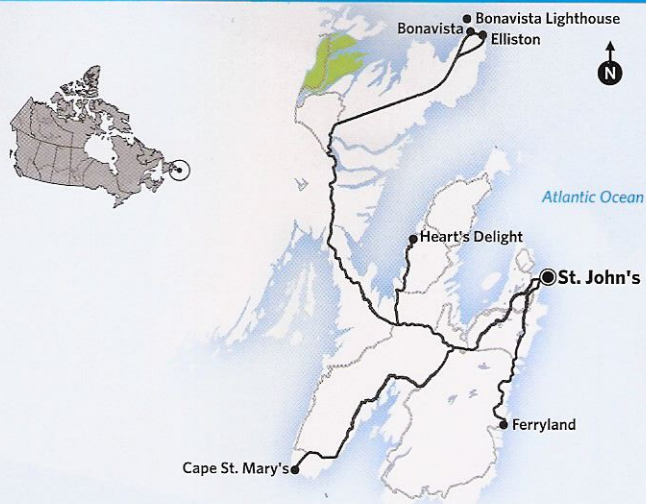
join the Canadian confederation in 1949. A walk around Bonavista will also take you past carefully stacked rows of lobster cages and fish flakes (the wooden racks used to hang cod when cod was still plentiful), which seem to be on display largely for the sake of tourists. Not unlike *The Matthew* – the life-size replica of the preposterously small ship that Giovanni Caboto, a.k.a. John Cabot, somehow sailed across the Atlantic to Newfoundland in 1497.

The Flat Earth Society, commendable for its stubbornness if nothing else, insists that Newfoundland is one of the four corners of the world. Driving at night from the Moulnd House to Cape Bonavista along a winding, foggy stretch of road, I can see why. You feel like you're heading into the ocean and off the edge of the world. Cape Bonavista is where Cabot supposedly first made landfall. According to legend, his first words were: "Buena vista!" What else could he say?

Back in St. John's for my last day, I'm figuring, as with hiking and scenic routes, I'll give being an extrovert a try. I drop in, unannounced, on my neighbor Deanie Pittkin. She's a Newfoundlander but, like most people here, lived away for a time – in her case, in Virginia. Also like most people I meet, she's returned. She rented the Hipditch House a few years ago to throw a family party, and liked the spot so much she bought her own place three doors down. Now, every morning she hikes the Harbourside East Concourse. "I made it as far as the chain," I confess. "Yes," she says, "the chain gets a lot of people."

Later, Cathia, perhaps tired of my complaints about missed kitchen par-

Newfoundland and Labrador



TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

National Geographic included custom travel company **CapeRace Cultural Adventures** as part of their 2008 "Tour of a Lifetime" series.

647-284-3696, caperace.com



Experience

L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, where you can find the continent's earliest remains of European culture, and **Gros Morne National Park** are UNESCO World Heritage sites found in the province. whc.unesco.org



Sleep

Ten minutes from downtown St. John's in the Battery neighborhood, modern decor meets 19th-century fishing village at the **Hipditch House**. caperace.com

In the town of Bonavista, three hours from St. John's, be prepared for a kitchen party at the **Thomas Moulnd House**. caperace.com

Heart's Delight isn't a Valentine's Day present – this picturesque Newfoundland town is home to the **E.J. Sooley House**, an authenti-

cally restored home that comes complete with handmade dressers and washstands.

caperace.com



Eat

Located in a 100-year-old former hardware store, **Auntie Crae's** has remained true to its roots, maintaining the original architecture and now thriving as a place to pick up local partridgeberry jam or freshly roasted coffee. 1-709-754-0661, auntiecraes.com



Getting here

Major Airport:

St. John's International Airport (YYT)

Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism.

1-800-563-6353.

www.newfoundlandandlabrador.com



Fun Fact

Newfoundland and Labrador is so far east that the province has its own time zone (3.5 hours west of Greenwich).

For more on Newfoundland and Labrador, please see page 69.

ties, throws me one. It feels more like a dinner party, with food, drink, music. I regale a neighbor who drops by with my elaborate opinion of just how beautiful this place he lives in is. This extrovert stuff isn't so bad. When he finally gets a word in, he asks me if I used the men's washroom at the Irving gas station in Clarenville on the way back from Bonavista. "There's a picture window," he explains. "Best view ever from a washroom." Somehow, I'm not surprised. ■