

# COMING HOME FROM AWAY

On a trip from rowdy St. John's to historic Bonavista, travel writer **Colleen Seto** learns why Newfoundlanders are always happy to come home

**N**ewfoundland ain't for the faint of heart. With its often harsh weather and rugged terrain, "the Rock" can seem downright inhospitable. And yet, Newfoundland is home to the most welcoming, spirited and generous people one is ever likely to meet.

The island itself holds such an appeal that both those who "come from away" – CFAs – and native islanders living elsewhere yearn to return to this enigmatic place. Never have I fallen so truly, madly and deeply in love with a land so hard and so fast.

Much of the draw of Newfoundland lies in discovering its infinite offerings, whether they are the local characters, the landscapes, the music, the art or the wildlife. This is why Ken Sooley, an IT account executive turned tour operator, started CapeRace Cultural Adventures. As a way of getting back to his Newfoundland roots, Ken has devised unusual eco-cultural tours for visitors to explore Canada's youngest province in authentic "choose-your-own-adventure" formats. Tours are unscripted and rely on participants to drive the action. So be forewarned. Adventure is the name of the game here. If you want scheduled activities or five-star hotels, this is not the trip for you. But if you have a natural curiosity, a carefree attitude and a propensity for fun, then giddy-up!

As soon as I set foot on the Rock, I was warmly greeted and introduced to a local dish – deep-fried cod tongues and scrunchions, which are small pieces of fried salt pork. Right there, even in my jet-lagged state, I knew I was in for a trip unlike any other. I breathed in the salty sea air and set off for my first stop, Admiral's Adventure B & B in the Battery neighbourhood of St. John's.

After winding down 40-odd stairs and planks to sea level (leave the stilettos at home, ladies!), I entered the front door and met Bruce Peters, innkeeper, sea captain and adventurer extraordinaire. Bruce is the epitome of Newfoundland hospitality, having converted the former fishermen's twine loft – basically a house on stilts, where fishermen store and mend nets, to an eccentric B & B akin to a houseboat. Bruce has slyly built the guestrooms around the existing rock cliff, so directions like "Go past the sofa and the rock" actually make sense here. Rooms are all full but you need a bed? No worries, he'll build you one. Seriously. In the few days I spent at Admiral's, I witnessed Bruce build both a guest bed and a boathouse floor to host a party. This is the type of can-do attitude I was amazed to find throughout Newfoundland.

Up and at 'em the next morning, my fellow travellers Liz, Chris and Jamie and I piled in the car with a map, a list of "leads" outlining potential people and places of interest, and palpable excitement for what the day might hold. The CapeRace is like organized "winging it" – the trick is you must be willing to go with the flow or, if neces-



(Clockwise from left) A view of the Narrows, the entrance to St. John's Harbour; Kathi and Al Stacey at a pub in Bay Roberts; Puffins flying and waves crashing at the Elliston puffin colony.



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sary, create the flow. We expected to take a few wrong turns, which we did, but we often wound up finding something we might not have otherwise. You can be both lost and found in Newfoundland so long as you’re open to new possibilities.

As a bunch of extroverts, we had no qualms about the freedom the tour offered and motored full speed ahead, going west along the Conception Bay coast towards the Harbour Grace area, about 100 kilometres from St. John’s. There, preparations were underway to welcome home local hockey hero Dan Cleary of the Detroit Red Wings with the Stanley Cup. Remarkable as that was, we had other treasures in mind. For me, it was all about finding an iceberg.

It was a prolific year for icebergs; by early May, the International Ice Patrol (ICP) had already counted 890 through Iceberg Alley, which runs from the northern tip of Labrador down to the eastern coast of Newfoundland. The alley is also where the *Titanic* sank in April 1912. As a direct result of that disaster, the ICP was formed to track icebergs, which can threaten international shipping lanes in Iceberg Alley. An average year sees about 500 icebergs with the peak in spring. The trouble was that it was already late June, so most, if not all, of the icebergs had already moved through the alley. Along the Baccalieu Trail, a name derived from the Spanish word *bacalao*, meaning “codfish,” we found a stretch of beautiful coastal scenery and fishing villages on the Bay de Verde peninsula. We asked the locals if there were any icebergs. Once we deciphered the thick accents of the region, we learned that icebergs had indeed been spotted in the last couple of days. That served to make me even more determined to find one.

After trying to locate a few MIA bergs, I began to think that perhaps the locals were simply too kind to tell us we had missed our chance. In our quest, we did see other notable sites such as the old cable station in Heart’s Content, where the first successful transatlantic telegraph cable came ashore in 1866. Unfortunately, my heart would not be content until I found an iceberg.

It wasn’t long before the island answered my call. Despite having earlier identified a group of houses as icebergs, Chris redeemed herself and caught sight of an icy jagged top as we rallied toward Heart’s Delight–Islington, a coastal town on Trinity Bay’s south shore where we’d be staying, about 140 kilometres from St. John’s. We veered onto a dirt path, and sure enough, we found not one, but three glorious icebergs in the cove of Western Bay. I ran so fast I nearly fell off the cliff in exhilaration. Another tick off my list of things to see before I die. Thank you, Newfoundland.

High from our successful iceberg mission, we arrived at one of Ken’s beautifully restored family homes in Heart’s Delight, the place that helped spur his idea for CapeRace Cultural Adventures. “My whole



The Admiral's Adventure bed and breakfast in St. John's, the most easterly B & B in North America.



life in Toronto was work," he recalls. "It wasn't until I came out to Heart's Delight and spent some time with my family that I realized how much fun they were having." And so, CapeRace was born. It hasn't just meant discoveries for visitors, but has also become a personal journey for Ken. "I'm finding out a lot about my family and why they are the way they are," he says. In fact, many of his family members are involved in the business, including his cousins Elizabeth and Donna, who along with Elizabeth's husband, Jerry, renovated and maintain the historic homes in which CapeRacers stay.

We hustled into the William B. Sooley house, planning to settle in for the night. That turned out to be wishful thinking. No sooner had we set down our luggage than Ken whisked us off to nearby Bay Roberts to attend a community event. It was the launch of the Pigeon Inlet Festival, a commemoration of the works of Ted Russell, one of Newfoundland and Labrador's most renowned storytellers, made famous by the *Fishermen's Broadcast* on CBC Radio in the 1950s.

It was an evening of music, humour, family and celebration – typical for any Newfoundland gathering. To wrap up, the crowd stood and sang "Ode to Newfoundland," the provincial anthem. Now, I'm not sure if my home province of Alberta has such a song, but I guarantee if we do, nary a person knows all the words. Here, everyone knew every word and sang it with such heartfelt enthusiasm that I choked up a bit. As I looked around the gymnasium, I saw several people overcome with emotion as they sang. Talk about loving your province. As Edmund Dawson, a Pigeon Inlet Steering Committee member, told me, "That's the way we feel here. I've been across Canada, and I'm always happy to come home."

That same sentiment was echoed by 34-year-old Stephen Crewe, a Newfoundlander born and bred who just recently returned to St. John's from Fort McMurray. As a native Albertan, I've met many Newfoundlanders who have ventured west for job opportunities. Some have become great friends and have settled in Alberta. When I heard Stephen had been working in Fort Mac, I asked him to share his story. He, too, had travelled west to see what fame and fortune might await him. He spent 16 months in Fort McMurray working every job including construction worker, courier, steam cleaner of heavy haulers (dump trucks used to transport bitumen), fuel and lube technician, parts runner and even ticket seller for a charity magic show. While the going was tough, he learned valuable lessons in Fort Mac: "It was stressful and hard, but worthwhile. That experience is worth something – I really learned to get things done. And I met a lot of great people."

In February 2008, Steve returned to St. John's with his girlfriend and can't imagine being anywhere else. "When I wake up, I'm euphor-

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ic. Everything is tranquil – it’s kind of magical. You need to get away to really appreciate it all. And the longer you’re away, the more you appreciate it.”

After sharing a drink and a dance following the Pigeon Inlet event, Al Stacey, a realtor from Carbonear, told me that he too understands the draw of Fort McMurray. He has two sons working in the oilsands, both as heavy equipment operators. “When you’re young, free and footloose, it just makes sense to go,” he said. “I would have done the same thing.”

Al also pointed out that going away to work isn’t new for Newfoundlanders: “I worked in mining in Sudbury when I was young. Many of us had to go work away. This is my sons’ time and Fort McMurray is the place. In six or seven years, they’ll be back. They don’t mind the hard work because they see it as a future [and] a way to come home.”

Since Newfoundland has developed its offshore oil and gas industry, there is renewed optimism for a stronger economy and more job prospects. In fact, next year could mark the first time the province comes off the federal equalization program since it was established in 1957, officially taking Newfoundland off the list of have-not provinces. Its budget surplus for 2008-09 is forecast to be \$544 million, and Statistics Canada reported that the province’s economic growth last year was 9.1 percent, more than triple the national rate. This gives Newfoundlander oilsands workers the potential promise for careers at home as they gain experience in the field in Fort McMurray. “If the oil comes onshore, everyone will come home,” Al asserted.

“Coming home” – a phrase I heard over and over during my time in Newfoundland. It seems that every Newfoundlander, whether living in the province or not, will always be a Newfoundlander and eventually return here. It’s a title worn with such fierce pride that it’s hard not to feel a wee bit jealous of their strong sense of place.

But that’s not to say we CFAs can’t try our hand at becoming Newfoundlanders. The next night after a delicious lobster boil, we found ourselves at an honest-to-goodness kitchen party. The house was packed with musicians and partygoers of all ages, from 17 to 82, and we mainlanders were thrilled to be invited. That is, until they pulled out a bottle of the dreaded screech. The CFAs were to be “screeched in” – a ceremony that would make us honorary Newfoundlanders.

And this was serious business. Well, as serious as public humiliation can be. Former Heart’s Delight-Islington mayor Stan Reid, who happened to be the lead musician/singer for the band, performed the honours, which involved each victim – I mean CFA – trying all sorts of Newfoundland delights. This included eating smoked caplin, a small



(Clockwise from top left) A glorious iceberg in Western Bay; Kitchen party in Heart's Delight with the Over the Top band; Stan Reid presenting the cod during the screeching-in ceremony; The writer on the North Head Trail in St. John's.



Atlantic fish, and bologna, which is called baloney by Newfoundlanders, and swallowing a shot of screech. We also had to kiss a cod – of the dead and frozen variety – and after that we were challenged with tongue twisters as the locals got a good laugh. Once we each shouted, “Long may your big jib draw!” cheers rang out, and we were declared sons and daughters of Newfoundland. I will proudly cherish my screeched-in certificate forever.

The following day we trekked around the Bonavista Peninsula. The town of Bonavista is one of the oldest settlements on the northeast coast about 300 kilometres from St. John's. In Elliston, a few minutes' drive from Bonavista, we came upon the puffin colony, where we found hundreds of the little seabirds that look like a mix between parrots and penguins. It was a sight to behold to see them whizzing about on a windy, rainy and cold June morning.

It was also in Bonavista where I met amateur poet Wayne Taylor. As he recited his poem, “The Ocean at Our Door,” it summed up for me what being a Newfoundlander is all about.

*Be we gone near or far  
We crave to come home  
From wherever we roam*

*To be by the sea  
To be by the sea*



Newfoundland is a place and a people shaped by the sea. It's not an easy life, but it's a storied one. The people are all spirited because their lives here demand they be. If you don't have a sense of humour, you're not going to make it through the winter!

Now, having experienced the province and its people first hand, I understand what the Newfoundland allure is, and as clichéd as it may sound, it is the people. All week we experienced what seemed at first to be random acts of kindness from locals – a grocer calling his competition to find us butter; a mother packing up her toddler in the car to show us the way to a pub; a guide at the Random Passage Site staying an hour after closing to show us around. I realized later that these acts weren't random at all. Newfoundlanders truly are big-hearted. I've travelled many places and met many fabulous folks, but I feel especially lucky to have come here, and for these wonderful people to not only welcome me into their homes and businesses, but genuinely welcome me into their lives.

It's no surprise then that when Newfoundlanders are away, they long for home, not because it's where they live or where they're from, but because it's where they belong. ■