

charming places where its clients stay in rural Newfoundland. When the houses are ready for guests, he's close at hand, connecting the newbies with his friends and neighbours.

It was July 2007, two days after Russell's kitchen-party invitation, and well into our nine-day CapeRace adventure. The sun dipped low in the sky — a pearl-like orb behind fog whipping in off the North Atlantic. A blowing easterly stirred the waist-high grass in the fenceless yard, knocking lobster traps sideways and ripping T-shirts off nearby clotheslines. We were just settling down for a tumbler of Screech** over iceberg ice, when we heard a knock at the door.



It was Russell and eight buddies. "How's ya gettin' on?" he asked. Ruddy smiles, blue-eyed winks and bone-crunching handshakes all around. Before long, the four Cape Shore Boys — Wilson Hayward, Clar Hayward, Sammy Way and Brian Shirran — had set up on our porch, and all of us were tapping our feet to a lively rendition of "Rose in Her Hair." The down-home ensemble: two accordions, a guitar, a set of "Roman knockers" — basically, three painted wooden sticks fastened to a flat base that are clacked together — and an "ugly stick," a broom handle adorned with bottle caps, a tin can, sometimes an old shoe, plus a bow for sideways sawing action paired with vertical rapping. The "kitchen party" had begun.

As vacations go, this was a new one for us. Our usual trips involve attraction-hopping, hikes and tours, three restaurants a day and puffy duvets in chic-yet-generic hotels. CapeRace is a whole other ballgame. As is Newfoundland, AKA "The Rock," on Canada's wild Atlantic coast — a place so raw and remote, a culture so concentrated and distinct, it feels like another country altogether. It almost was. Newfoundland and Labrador didn't join the Canadian confederation until 1949. Some locals say before '49, residents drove Brit-style on the left side of the road.

We spent days roaming the emerald cliffs, bluebell-, buttercup- and wild-iris-carpeted bluffs, picking wild strawberries and wandering past endless, misty bogs encased in hunched black spruce bent sideways by sleet and wind. And on the last night, we had yet to come across anything packaged, canned, sanitized or even remotely touristy. Because Newfoundland is not about the \$69.99 puffin package. You go for the people.



While the intimate port-capital St. John's, North America's oldest city, bustles with candy-coloured saltbox houses, street festivals and funky boutiques, many of the "outports" — small, far-flung, former fishing communities clinging to the craggy coast — feel forgotten, forlorn, lost in time. There are abandoned buildings, boarded-up businesses, guys out of work standing around and living on "the package." But the thing is, they're happy to see you. Unlike some quaint New England seaside villages where busloads of prying outsiders have resulted in tourist burnout, these hamlets are filled with unfiltered reality. Folks stop you on the street to chat, even offer you a ride or a hand with the groceries.



Once the world's fish basket — with seas teeming with giant cod and whales, Greenland halibut, sea crab, lobster, seals and shrimp — ever-improving, giant-scale technology (helping foreign trawlers scour the ocean just outside the 320-km (200-mi) limit), big corporations and, many locals believe,

*It don't seem to matter the cut of his clothes
The gleam in his eyes and the way that he walks
And the true Newfie tone in the way that he talks*

*Oh, by the Lord dyin', by the thunderin' gee
How are you doin' you son-of-a-b?
You can't fool your old man by dressin' like that
You're still just a Newfie in a Calgary hat."*

Like clueless foreigners, we came for the usual and we complained about the rustic: fried food galore, creaky Victorian beds, no wine to be found, rough, poorly marked, potholed roads, gargantuan driving distances, non-potable water, no cell reception, no Internet, no phone. But what we found stole our hearts. And it wasn't just the cheery lighthouses on cliffs, the fields of blueberry blossoms, the turquoise sea, a dazzling iceberg drifting by, the thousands of screaming gannets, murrens and puffins, the smooth, perfectly round stones in maroon, sapphire and dove gray, the tidy, bright homes perched bravely above the tossing sea, the record player with a scratchy LP of "Favourite Jigs and Reels of Newfoundland," the refreshing absence of safety rails.



No, Newfoundland was all about the people. It was Elizabeth and Jerry Burton in Heart's Delight, stopping by to invite us to hear their son, 17-year-old Jordan, play accordion, leaving us with a grocery bag packed with garlic-honey moose sausages, moose steaks and cod fillets. It was Donna Reid, shuttling us around in a summer downpour to visit a friend's miniature horses. It was Tom Lucas (and wife Joan) in the pink house in St. John's recounting how he was born in the green house "over der," with a gang of brothers and sisters; how he had worked his whole life digging ditches. It was Annie Smith's daughter, Mary Ann, who babysat the kids one night so we could clap and hum in O'Reilly's pub while a sprightly white-haired gent tap-danced a jig. It was

the couple from Gander in Cape St. Mary's who offered to *give us* their stroller so our kids could make the three-km (1.8-mi) hike across towering cliffs out to Bird Rock. It was the friendly guy at The Fish Depot in St. John's. We couldn't understand his recap of the catches of the day, but he cheerfully handed us the flakiest, most delicate halibut we've tasted, ever. "Der ya go. Two cold ones with dat, and you got `er all sewn up!"

Back at Thomas Mouland house, the party was winding down and darkness was creeping in. The deck vibrated under the beat of the ugly stick. The gang was finishing the wistful "Rose in Her Hair" and soon after, Russell's wife Hazel leapt up to dance a lively jig. Wilson Hayward, a gentlemanly charmer at 81, had just tossed me his binder and several nods of encouragement.

"Cain't hear ya! Sing `er out!" he hollered. I looked at my husband James and we smiled. This was a moment, right down to the wind, the scent of summer clover and the iceberg chunk our host had left us in the freezer. As the locals say, this was *the night*.



* Bonavista Historic Townscape Foundation Inc.

** Screech is Jamaican rum bottled in Newfoundland and Labrador.

*** The government closed the province's waters, Grand Banks and most of the Gulf of St. Lawrence to groundfishing, mainly for cod using giant trawlers. Limited line fishing for personal use is permitted in season.

**** "Capelin rolling" is when these small, silvery, sardine-like fish beach themselves en masse to spawn, usually in the foggy, cold, drizzly days of June. The capelin bring in the hungry whales and whole communities — residents gather them up in buckets and eat them or sprinkle them on their vegetable gardens as

fertilizer.

+ CapeRace Cultural Adventures

Outfitter extraordinaire Ken Sooley and his **CapeRace Cultural Adventures** gives visitors a chance for serendipitous, local encounters in Newfoundland and Labrador. He offers 10- and 13-day trips to the Avalon and Bonavista peninsulas, starting and ending in St. John's. The trip includes stays at your own private homes and contacts in each village, ready to help you catch a cod or find the best caribou pie. Before you go, Sooley sends you his own guide, with insider beta along the lines of "Tell Harv I sent you, and ask him about the unusual bingo games he hosts Monday nights," plus novels on local culture and non-fiction accounts to read in advance, and driving instructions to houses: "There are no addresses on the houses, but..." The package arrives in a fishing net.



It all started in the 1980s, when Sooley's grandparents Elizabeth Jane and Eddy John Sooley willed their Heart's Delight fisherman's bungalow to Sooley's father. (In the 1940s, the house was moved in sections via rail to its present waterfront location.) The house sat vacant for some time, until Sooley and sister Sharon took it over. Born in Ontario, Sooley hadn't been back to Newfoundland since he was 18. He returned to the family home at 35, and found it crumbling. Sooley recalls: "Dad said, 'If you don't do something with this house, I'll tear it down.' We rediscovered the place, and we were captivated."

In 1995, Sooley hired Jerry Burton, his cousin's husband, to restore it to its 1940s-era original state, including the colours, décor, furnishings and artwork. Sooley, a former IT exec who worked in Toronto and Ottawa, ON, as well as Hong Kong, began returning every summer. He discovered a completely new Avalon than that of his childhood memories. The abandoned historic houses gave him an idea: he imagined visitors, also enchanted by the area, touring and exploring, then settling down for the evening in their own historic house on the ocean. In 2004, CapeRace Adventures was born.

Since salvaging the E.J. Sooley house, CapeRace has done the same with four other historic homes. This winter, Burton

is restoring the "ouse" next door to the E.J. Sooley House in Heart's Delight, his wife's parents' home. The Bonavista Thomas Moulard house had 13 layers of linoleum on the floor. Sooley had Russell put a different layer on each stair for a patchwork effect. Hipditch House, a century-old former residence (home to 20 people!) in St. John's historic Battery neighbourhood, has a lobster trap for a lamp stand, an original tin lamp, an old manufacturing sign, 1930s photos, prints of historic flags and shelves animated with fishermen's floats and buoys. Even the duvet covers are custom-made using designs from shipping signal flags. When you arrive (the door's open), you find the keys to your three houses on the counter, along with a list of events and festivals going on in each place. Soon after, there's a knock on the door...

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