

Experience Newfoundland

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The StarPhoenix

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ST. JOHN'S, N.L. -- Pondering a map that has community names like Witless Bay, Chance Cove and Mistaken Point, visitors here must experience some trepidation navigating a rental car around this island.

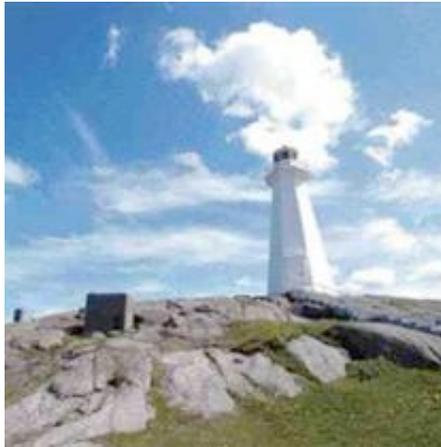
But getting lost and getting found again is what an off-the-beaten track adventure is all about in Newfoundland. At least that's what I discovered during a week-long expedition along some of the lovely parts of the Avalon and Bonavista peninsulas.

I had been invited to "test-drive" the latest new experiential travel product from CapeRace Cultural Adventures, a travel company that helps visitors craft a Newfoundland vacation into their very own "eco-culture experience."

Provided with a key that fits three authentic historic homes located in spectacular coastal locations, I headed out on the open road in my rental car. The mission: To get up close and personal with the starkly beautiful island and its people. Aiding the adventure was a map and a custom traveller's guide -- all the navigation tools I'd need. The only things I had to supply was curiosity and enthusiasm; and I had both.

Creator of this serendipitous flow is Ken Sooley, a former IT entrepreneur and Ontario resident whose family roots go way back into Newfoundland's past. With cousins, friends and in-laws scattered across outport communities up and down Newfoundland's eastern shore, Sooley not only presents an authentic traveller's guide, he also opens the door to the heritage of this vibrant region.

Sooley labels his trips as "experiential adventures," emphasizing that



CREDIT: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix
The lighthouse on Cape Spear, the most easterly point in Canada



CREDIT: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix
Iceberg hunting on the shores of the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland

Newfoundland is an ideal destination for travellers who desire more than a sun-baked beach.

I felt an immediate connection with that truth on the very first of a seven day CapeRace tour. That was when a pea-soup mist descended on Signal Hill, the famous landmark that overlooks St. John's, Newfoundland's harbour capital.

Signal Hill was supposed to be the first stop of my itinerary, but in truth, the Victorian Cabot Tower that stands at its summit had totally disappeared by the time I arrived at what I believed was the facility's parking lot. No matter. My secondary destination, as listed in Sooley's special traveller's guide, gave me the name of a local pub and its owner.

The Inn of Olde Quidi Vidi and its landlady, Linda, are located in the former fishing village of Quidi Vidi, now part of a fast expanding St. John's and just a short drive down from Signal Hill. In good weather, it's a pleasant cliffside walk. In this deepening mist, I would not have tackled it with a couple of Newfoundland guide dogs fitted with night-vision goggles.

But I did find the tavern. It was crowded, even more packed than usual because of a retirement party hosted by Noel, a veteran of the post office who was calling it quits after 35 years. It took all of three seconds to get into a conversation with Noel's family and friends. After 10 minutes we were swapping stories, buying each other drinks and tucking into steaming hot soup and munchies that Linda had put on for the event. We were also snapping pictures like crazy.

Ken Sooley had told us that there's no real wrong turn on a road around here. "You will always bump into someone who will end up in your photo album," he'd said.

Just across the road from the inn, I found another highlight nestled in close to the tiny harbour. The Quidi Vidi Brewery offers a tour of the facility which includes many samples of their delicious offerings. If you get Charlie as your tour guide, you'll wonder where the time went on the hour-long tour.

Charlie's secret is that he not only talks about beer, this genial fellow's tales extend to the colourful history lessons he relates while you're sipping the heady elixir. Charlie will take you back to the times of the early Basque fishers who first settled the shores here four centuries ago and travel through to the sinking of four ships by German U-boats just a kilometre from his house when he was but a dozen days old.

In between history, there's jokes and personal anecdotes on everything from maritime folklore to Newfoundland politics. It was the best eight dollars I spent during my stay in Newfoundland. I was so impressed, I snapped more pictures and even walked away with a six pack of their new Iceberg beer made from icebergs that drift down from Greenland each spring.

After a few more days of following the flexible CapeRace itinerary, there was a triumphant sense that after just a couple of hundred kilometres under our belt, we were gradually touching the pulse of this place. On our journey, we'd spotted an iceberg as big as my old school, viewed puffins -- Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial bird and a crucial player in the traditional "screech-in ceremony," a subject we'll get to later. We ate fresh lobster and snow crab just

off the boat and discovered just in time that capealin is a fish best left for a whale's dining pleasure.

More importantly, at least for me, I'd met up with Newfoundlanders who are never strangers for long.

We did have our share of mishaps, like locking the keys in the rental car on what was surely the windiest, coldest day I'd ever experienced this side of July.

Shivering over the cell phone, our misery grew when we found out that the only tow-truck in the small town was out on another mission of mercy. But even in bad weather, we discovered Newfoundland has more than enough rainbows. The trucker's wife agreed to drive out with a helper, a young fellow who turned out to be a mechanical genius who deftly penetrated our auto's security system with relative ease. My fingers warmed up long enough so I could immortalize their kindness on film.

Up in Bonavista, where John Cabot first made his historic landfall in 1497, we toured a replica of the Matthew, the tiny ship in which the explorer made his way across the Atlantic.

Sooley's beautifully restored heritage homes where he accommodates his self-catering guests, provides a perfect domestic setting to reflect on the town's long history.

If we thought we'd taken a few wrong turns getting here, think about poor old Cabot. Heading to what he thought was the spice route to the Indies, the poor fellow found himself in very different waters. No exotic spices here, but like us, the explorer's adventure proved serendipitous. He found cod, lots and lots of it.

From then on until very recent times, English, Spanish, Portuguese and French fishermen fished the rich waters off Cape Bonavista.

Towards the finale of our trip, we spent two nights in Heart's Delight, a tiny former fishing village along Highway 80 on the Avalon Peninsula. Further along the road were the towns of Heart's Desire and Heart's Content.

Our digs this time were in a refurbished fishers' cottage, complete with all modern conveniences and filled with antique furniture. The fabulous view of Trinity Bay was enough to make you lose your heart to a piece of real estate.

It was here that I became an honorary Newfoundlander. During a traditional screech-in ceremony -- so called because of the hefty slug of Screech, the provincial rum, you tip back -- I kissed a cod (frozen) and had the option of addressing the "nether" regions of a puffin (stuffed). Then I recited a tonsil-tangling commitment to loyalty. Sadly, no tax benefits or voting rights are given to honorary Newfoundlanders, but I do have the certificate. It's lodged in my photo album, alongside photos of all my new pals from the "Rock."

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IF YOU GO

- CapeRace has brought out three new trips, including CapeRace ICE, a land sea and air adventure that brings you close to Newfoundland's spectacular icebergs and icefields, CapeRace HIKE, an eight day hiking adventure geared towards the

active mid-fit traveller, and the Amazing CapeRace, an exciting trip for the corporate incentive travel market. All three trips are based on the company's original "Eco-Culture Experience" concepts which provide travellers with the opportunity to travel at their own pace.

- For more information, visit www.caperace.com.

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