

Westworld



Travel and Active Living from **BCAA**

gone local

Newfoundland on a
back-porch pass

BACK ON TRACK

Why train travel rules

TIN-CAN TOURIST

A well-preserved look at
B.C.'s cannery industry

The Rock boasts more culture than most visitors can absorb – unless they are embedded



“If you’re extra lucky, you’ll get yourselves invited to a kitchen party,” Terri Shea told Elle and me in the days leading up to our Newfoundland vacation. “Friends and neighbours get together and play instruments and sing and tell stories and drink. That’s the real deal out there.”

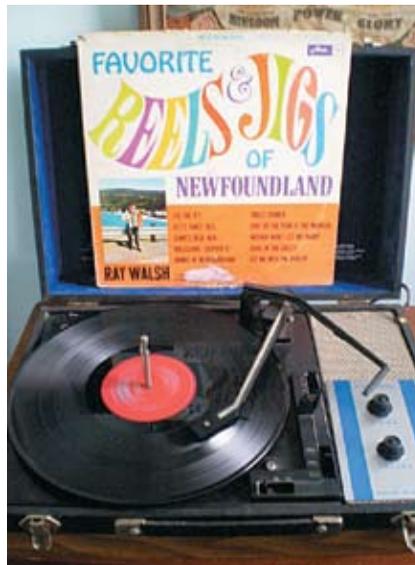
Shea, a close friend who hails from “the Rock” but now lives just down the street from our home on Bowen Island, had just “screeched in” the two of us in her living room. As per Newfie custom, the wife and I had then each downed a shot of cheap rum and kissed a frozen salmon. The coho was a West Coast stand-in for the cod that Newfies traditionally pull out of the fridge for the ceremony that awards honorary citizenship to those who, like us, “come from aways.”

So we’d necked with a fish. We’d been made titular locals and had the certificates to prove it – direct from the Internet via inkjet printer. But we both knew we were Newfies on paper only. We wanted the real deal.

Little did we know that on the last night of our future trip, we’d not only track down a bona fide kitchen party – complete with an old guy crooning fishermen’s ballads out of a ragged coil-bound notebook – we’d do ourselves even better. We’d actually *host* it. But then, we had a little help from Ken Sooley.

“WE’RE PROVIDING A BRAND-NEW CONCEPT IN experiential travel,” the 46-year-old president of CapeRace Cultural Adventures had said of his new venture, which was just wrapping up its first full season. “We have designed a way for people to become integrated into three local communities, and each has a different take on the Newfoundland lifestyle.” In other words, Sooley’s company could offer what Shea’s gag certificates could not – admission to the inner circle of a variety of small outpost communities up and down Newfoundland’s eastern shores, complete with meaningful and spontaneous interactions between visitors and locals. The initiative was unique in North America, delivering an uncanned and authentic sense of a place and its people.

How would it work? Simple. Sooley connects his clients with “fixers,” the kind of on-the-ground contacts a journalist might hire to establish local sources and get the inside scoop while on assignment in a far-off country. Want to try squid jigging in a working fishboat? Just call Jerry or Elizabeth. They’ll pop over, introduce you to the neighbours – here’s hoping you can understand a word they are saying – and suggest whom you might call and what



“It’s like the whole bottom of the sea is roari

you might offer to pay.

And so, for 10 days in mid-July, Sooley’s company would “embed” Elle and me in a couple of remote fishing villages, some of which look much as they did in the 19th century when the salted cod trade was at its peak. We’d bunk down in heritage homes that Sooley had purchased and restored over a period of several years, one in the historic Battery neighbourhood in St. John’s, the others in the village of Heart’s Delight and the town of Bonavista – houses as authentic as the communities they stand in.

The E.J. Sooley house in Heart’s Delight, for

example, belongs to Sooley’s grandfather. It still contains the original enamel appliances and fixtures, right down to the squeaky cast-iron beds and bare-bulb kitchen light we’d switch on and off via a dangling string. Meanwhile, up in Bonavista, the marvellously quirky Thomas Moulund house once belonged to a man involved in the great sealing disaster of 1914—a dark chapter of the province’s history in which 78 sealers were inadvertently abandoned on the ice floes to perish slowly in a blizzard.

The cold North Atlantic is just a stone’s throw from the front porch of the Thomas

Moulund house, but the closest we’ve come to it so far is the “berg bit” that Sooley has stashed in the freezer. He recovered the microwave-oven-sized piece of ice off the beach some months prior. On our first of three nights in Bonavista, it has become my routine to chip a few chunks off the salvaged berg and drop them in my tumbler of “Screech” rum, which I’m enjoying on the porch this evening with Lloyd – our designated local contact and Sooley’s sole contractor.

“You know, when we was fixing this place up,” says Lloyd, “there were 13 layers



ing and heavin'. It's changin' "

of linoleum on the kitchen floor. When one piece wore out, the old guy just laid himself a fresh piece right on top. It took two weeks to get it all up." Lloyd decided to pay homage to the Mouland's century-long chronicle of renovations. And so, each step of the building's narrow staircase now showcases a different pattern of flooring, one for each decade it lay hidden underfoot.

After a few minutes, Lloyd and I are joined by Dorman, a neighbour from across the street who owns a nearby convenience store. As the three of us shoot the breeze, a grey whale follows suit in the background,

blowing plumes of salt spray into the sky a quarter-mile offshore.

Dorman, 57, explains how it used to be around here. "With the winter storms we get these days, you can har the floor of the ocean rumbling and groaning-like." He wears dress slacks with a starched shirt the colour of Dijon mustard, his hair Brylcreemed back. "It's like the whole bottom of the sea is roaring and heavin'. Mam said you would never used to har that. It's changin'."

The sea isn't the only thing in flux here on the brink of the North Atlantic. Lloyd and Dorman and I look out across the fields

(pages 52, 53) The Cape Shore Boys' squeeze-box player; Mouland house, Bonavista. (opposite) Hipditch house, Battery neighbourhood, St. John's; catered "Light House" picnic, Ferryland; hi-fi at E.J. Sooley house. (above) Porch party, Mouland house, Bonavista.

of swaying long grass, past the "flakes" – spindly replica cod drying racks the local historic society has installed for the benefit of tourists – and toward the houses scattered here and there along the gravel waterfront road that passes in front of us.

"This whole field used to be *full* of houses, see?" says Dorman, waving his arm at the emptiness.

"What happened to them all?" I ask.

"The people died or moved. Thar houses

AMA ONLINE HOTEL 2/3V

all either fell down or was knocked down.”

About 3,700 hardy souls call Bonavista home today, but like many other towns across Newfoundland, its population has been shrinking since 1992. That was the year the federal government placed a moratorium on cod fishing in an effort to protect those few fish that remained. With the stroke of a pen, a resource and an industry already beyond the point of exhaustion was legally pronounced dead. Tens of thousands lost their jobs. The province’s economy had become so dependent on the sea that many were forced to pack up and leave, an outmigration that continues to this day. Some 5,000 Newfies still move “aways” each year, including many of the younger generation, like our neighbour back home, Terri Shea. The remaining population is greying quickly; children represent only 15 per cent of the island’s overall head count.

“It was so different when I was nine or 10,” says Dorman. “This here main road was jammed with people, all of them takin’ in the catch, splittin’ it, houses and stores and sheds all over. And this road here back of us was a railroad track. They’d bring in coal on the ships and load it up on rail cars and deliver it around the neighbourhood, see?”

I almost can, though the tracks are long gone. The lane in question – well above the level of the surrounding fields – is more road-bed than road.

“And that old wharf?” The crumbling pier is just over the fence beyond the front yard. “My brother’s best friend drowned right thar,” says Dorman. “Mam says he was eatin’ a molasses sandwich and jumping ’tween the dories. Went right in. And he was gan. Just like ‘dat.”

“He couldn’t swim?” I ask, incredulous.

“None of us could,” he replies, then reflects. “There’s a lot of history thar.”

Indeed there is. And without Ken Sooley and Lloyd making the introductions, I wouldn’t have heard the half of it.

CapeRace appeals to a fairly specific kind of traveller, the sort who doesn’t mind venturing outside his or her comfort zone once in awhile. (The folks who were across the street from us in Heart’s Delight, for example, have a habit of setting up lawn chairs to watch the new arrivals. Evidently, there’s not a lot else to do.) But then, the public’s appetite for such raw experiences is on the rise.

“Ever since 9/11, people have been searching for something deeper,” says Patty Morgan, executive director of the Travel and Tourism



The author's wife, Elle, prepares scallops in Heart's Delight. (above left) The tiny Thomas Moulard House, as seen from the North Atlantic. (above right) Bonavista ice cube, from the freezer at Moulard house.

Research Association, an industry trade group based in Boise, Idaho. "They don't want the Holiday Inn with the pool and the continental breakfast." And though he has not heard of anything else quite like CapeRace in North America, says Peter Yesawich, whose firm Ypartnership tracks emerging travel trends, "the appeal of this kind of deep authenticity has certainly grown. And I only see it increasing," he adds, "particularly among the Millennials – sub-boomer travellers in their late twenties and early thirties."

The key to Sooley's operation is his self-published *Traveller's Diary* guidebook, available only to CapeRace clients. It's a compilation of local lore and essential info specific to the towns on the CapeRace loop – such as the rules of the classic Newfoundland card game 120s – plus the home numbers of Sooley's local contacts. "The neighbours are an interesting bunch and may drop by," he notes in one chapter. "Tell Harv I sent you and ask him about the unusual bingo games he hosts on Monday nights." (Apparently, with help from Sooley, the wily pub owner came up with an ingenious scheme to bring in the town's women, many of whom have husbands working aways in the Alberta oil patch: he doles out adult novelties as prizes.)

Sooley has certainly picked the right place to launch his new-era travel experiment. This

trip is my first foray into Newfoundland, and I've never felt so much a foreigner inside my own country. Our youngest province is a region apart – a time warp to a more innocent age, largely untouched by the soul-draining crush of mass tourism. It's a place where the culture has evolved in isolation from the rest of Canada, the result of small outport communities that for centuries were effectively cut off from one another by fierce winters.

As for the Newfie dialect, it can be as impenetrable as the province's harsh interior landscape: the thousands of kilometres of scrub and ponds known simply as the Barrens. Then there are the mannerisms: Newfie men greet each other with a quick left-to-right sideways nod, and I know I'm starting to fit in when I experience the tradition firsthand outside the Bonavista Foodland grocery. Considering Newfoundland's relative accessibility today (it's a 6.5-hour direct flight from Calgary), it remains one of the most unpackaged and unpretentious places on the continent. Yet for all its distinctive charms, it is refreshingly open to outsiders. That reality

Continued on page 80

EMPIRE 1/3V

AMA LIFE ADVISOR 2/3V

gone newfie

Continued from page 57

was only underscored on 9/11, when the small town of Gander opened its doors to the 6,500 unscheduled guests who found themselves stranded here when U.S.-bound flights were diverted by the closure of American airspace.

WE CAUGHT OUR FIRST TASTE OF THIS LEGENDARY hospitality in Heart's Delight – almost halfway through our 10-day sojourn, after three days traipsing the cathedrals, back streets and hilltop cannon batteries of St. John's. Elizabeth and Jerry, our designated local contacts, were still travelling back from Nova Scotia when we arrived at the charming oceanfront E.J. Sooley cottage. We'd feared we'd be on our own in this blip-sized outpost, with no TV, radio or board games, not even a pub or coffee shop to show up at, and rain in the forecast to boot. The only available source of diversion: a pre-stereo record player tucked away in a cabinet and a copy of *Reels and Jigs of Newfoundland* – one of a clutch of profoundly scratched-up old LPs, the novelty of which wore thin after just a few cacophonous minutes. But then Donna Reid knocked on the door and introduced herself as Sooley's cousin.

"Say, you know, the capelin are supposed to star' rollin' any day now. Would you like to go out tammara morning to see if we can see 'em?"

The capelin are a needle-thin fish, relatives of the freshwater smelt. For much of its life, the species lives in deep water, but in June and July its numbers "roll" up on Newfoundland's beaches to spawn by the tens of thousands. The locals show up to watch and pull them out of the surf in buckets, either to smoke and eat or dig into their gardens as fertilizer. The roll is apparently quite a spectacle – a frenzied oceanic orgy attended by hungry gulls, seals and sometimes whales – and certainly one of the highlights of the year for the people of Heart's Delight, population 663. And, said Reid, as luck would have it, the procreation party might well kick off tomorrow morning.

The dawn was just breaking as Reid drove us down a rutted, unmarked dirt road to a bluff overlooking a quiet cove. We peered out through the wet windshield.

Though Reid assured us that conditions were perfect for getting it on capelin-style – it's raining, she said, and a frigid north wind was blowing down from Labrador – evidently the fish weren't feeling particularly frisky

that morning.

A neighbour pulled up alongside and rolled down the window. "Hey, Donna," he said, "see anything out thar?"

"I think I can see 'em offshore, the water looks dark, but they're not comin' in," our host replied.

"Funny that, you'd think they would."

"Yeash, we've got the narth wind," she noted.

"Yeash," the friend answered with a chuckle. "The wind we don't wont don't even bring the capelin in."

The following morning, we were about to motor out of the driveway for the long haul up the Bonavista Peninsula when Jerry and Elizabeth – who is another of Sooley's cousins – stopped by. They'd just returned from their vacation and were hoping to catch us to say hello before we left. We chatted for a bit, and though we'd had a great time in their village, doing not much of anything except wandering the bluffs, picking wild strawberries and taking the odd day trip, they felt bad for mostly missing us. They wanted to send us off properly.

"Can we talk you into taking some moose sausages with you?" Jerry offered.

"They're really, really good ones."

If there were such a thing as an official protein census of Newfoundland freezers, moose would doubtless come out in the count way ahead of hamburger. The beasts have thrived here since the first pair was introduced from Nova Scotia more than a century back, and hunting them is for many a way of life. The population is now so healthy that the province's long-haul truckers weld heavy steel-tube grills – called "moose cages" – to the business end of their rigs to minimize the damage of inevitable collisions.

"That would be lovely," I told Jerry. "If you can spare one or two links, we can probably tuck 'em into the top of the cooler."

"Great, I'll just run over and get 'em."

DAYS LATER, HAVING CONSUMED OVER THE preceding 72 hours somewhere between eight and 10 pounds of moose sausage, moose steak and moose burgers, I am sitting out on the porch in Bonavista watching the light fade. I sip on my Screech and listen to the wind blow through the tall grass that surrounds our tiny house and the pop and crack of the ice in my glass that was last liquid around 11,000 years back.

My cellphone breaks the peace. It's Lloyd on the line: "How you gettin' on over thar this evenin'?" he asks.

"Very well, thanks."

"Good. Say, a group of us boys was thinkin' of comin' by tammara night to play a little music thar. D'y think that'd be alright?"

"I think that would be just fine with us, Lloyd," I say. "Just fine." ❏

James Glave is a former Outside magazine senior editor. His first book, Almost Green: How I Built an Eco-Shed, Ditched My SUV, Alienated the Inlaws, and Changed My Life Forever (Greystone Books, 2008; \$22), is due out in August this year.

the rock-onnoitre experts

CapeRace Cultural Adventures offers two packages, both flat rate and unlimited occupancy: \$2,914 for 10 days; \$3,789 for 13. Circuits begin in St. John's and conclude in Bonavista. □

 caperace.com; ken@caperace.com

 **AMA Travel for flights and accommodations:**
1-888-799-1522; amatravel.ca

AMA MEMBER SERVICES (AUTO) 1/2 H