

BY SANDRA PHINNEY

TRAVEL

# The Greatest Escape

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Referred by some travellers as the last frontier on Earth, Labrador is so vast that the rest of Atlantic Canada, including Newfoundland, could fit inside its borders. This sprawling land is home to the Innu and the Inuit, with roots stretching back so far and so deep, it's difficult to grasp the significance of it all.

Evidence gathered by archaeologists suggests that humans inhabited Labrador over 7,000 ago. Now, with the Trans-Labrador Highway having opened in 2011, this vast expanse of history and intrigue is more accessible than ever, but still well off the beaten path. Soon after the highway was completed, my husband and I decided to make the 1,221-kilometre trek across the province.

Unlike most road trips in Canada, a journey across Labrador requires extra planning and more than a little flexibility. It's not uncommon to see road signs that say: NEXT SERVICE 294 K. CHECK FUEL. Cell phones don't work along the route at all. But you can pick up, and then drop

off, a satellite phone at several places between Wabush and L'Anse au Clair, a free service provided by the government.

Aside from some extraordinary landscapes, the most striking feature of Labrador is the people. The hospitality we experienced went far beyond what you would consider normal practice. For example, when constructing our itinerary, it wasn't possible to find a room in Labrador City or Wabush because of a construction boom at the time.

Prepared for any eventuality, we brought camping gear and were ready to pitch our tent at the Grande Hermine RV Park about 40 kilometres outside of Labrador City. A friend called the campground on our behalf, but the owner said: "No way! There was ice on the lake last night. They stays with us!"

Shortly after we arrived, we were enjoying Cavel Burke's peanut butter cheesecake, while her husband regaled us with his stories of hunting caribou and landing the 20-kg trout mounted on the wall.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (COVER PAGE) Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism; (THIS PAGE) all photos by Sandra Phinney except (centre bottom) Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism (NEXT PAGE) (left to right) Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism, Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism and Sandra Phinney



# Stranded in Rigolet

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Situated along the northern coastline of Labrador, the Nunatsiavut region is home to five communities linking Nain in the north to Rigolet in the south. The region, which means “our beautiful land” in the Inuit language, is accessible only by ship or plane in the summer, dog sled or snowmobile in the winter.

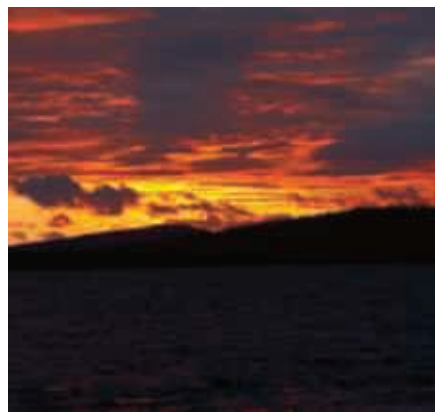
After spending the night in a comfy berth aboard the Northern Ranger out of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, I stepped ashore at Rigolet, the oldest Inuit community in Labrador. Later on that morning, I dropped into the community centre where a group of women showed me how to make beaded jewellery and pleat moccasins. I was hopeless at both tasks, but gained a deep appreciation for the level of artistry involved.

After lunch, I met Martin Shiwak who offered to take me scalloping. We motored for an hour in his small boat then dropped a homemade metal rig that filled with scallops after a short drag. Martin taught me how to sort and shuck the catch, and we ate a few au naturel. I tasted the sea, which was both heady and sensual.

Hiking along the 4.4-kilometre coastal boardwalk that evening, I met some kayakers. They invited me to join them for supper—freshly caught salmon and trout cooked on top of hot flat rocks over a fire next to the shore. As dusk fell and the fish sizzled, a full moon rose over the horizon and a pod of minke whales surfaced in the cove. I had to remind myself to breathe.

The next morning, news spread that the ship had engine troubles and wouldn't return for a couple of days. I was stranded in Rigolet. The room I had rented was booked for someone else who was arriving, but this didn't disturb the owner of the unit for even a moment. “No problem,” she said, “you can have my son's room and he'll go to a friend's.”

This is how they do things in Labrador, a place where being stranded is no hardship at all. ✦



Before leaving the next morning, Cavel made a typical Newfoundland breakfast: bacon, sausage, bologna, beans, eggs, fruit and toutons. Toutons are made from fresh bread dough that's formed into patties, fried until golden brown and served with molasses. No doubt my cholesterol count shot over the moon, but I had seconds, as my husband, Barrie, said, “Just to be polite.”

Next stop: Churchill Falls. Although this company town would never win an award for its natural beauty or design features, it does lay claim to a massive hydroelectric generating station. The powerhouse is carved out of granite, some 400 metres underground, and houses massive penstocks and turbines. It resembles what I imagine a space station would look like—only bigger.

We rushed through the town as we had a 281-kilometre drive on to Happy Valley-Goose Bay and wanted to get there before dark. Even though we knew that our destination was the hub of Labrador, arriving there to see so many homes,









stores, churches and people was still startling—especially after not seeing a single sign of life for hours.

We enjoyed spending time in North West River, a small community close by. The original Hudson Bay Company store, built in 1923, now houses the Labrador Heritage Museum. A stone's throw away is the Labrador Interpretation Centre, with a lovely display of traditional crafts and a fascinating exhibit entitled “The Past is Where We Come From,” with several interactive stations where you can hear stories presented in Inuktitut, Innu-aimun and English. I was especially drawn to a display called the “shaking tent”— a place where people met with spirit healers to receive advice.

Eventually, facing another arduous 367-kilometre drive to Cartwright, we bid goodbye to North West River. And, yes, we had a full tank of gas and extra food... just in case.

The jewel of Cartwright is the Wonderstrands, an impressive 54-kilometre long beach that juts out from the mainland. After donning floatation gear consisting of pants and jackets provided by our guides Peyton and George Barrett, we motored to the Wonderstrands in a skiff for a hike. The Mealy Mountains provided the backdrop, while the sounds of the ocean, the wind and the birds chimed in with the soundtrack. It was all rather surrealistic.

Our next stop was Pigeon Cove, where we visited some shanties, then perched on a big rock to enjoy Peyton's moose stew. “Have you ever had flummies?” she asked. Grinning, she produced a container full of the baked goods, a cross between flat white rolls and biscuits that are fried in margarine and topped with brown sugar sauce. After a strong, black cup of tea, Barrie and I waddled back to the boat, fearful that our

weight gain might affect its seaworthiness.

Our last planned stopover in Labrador was in Battle Harbour, a small island off the coast. This is where the Canadian Marconi Company set up the first wireless station in Labrador, which explorer Robert Peary later used, in 1909, to announce his breakthrough to the North Pole.

In 1977, the island was designated a National Historic District by Parks Canada. In fact, it's the only national historic site in Canada where travellers can hunker down for the night. There are no cars on the island and you can walk its circumference in less than two hours.

We spent our time there studying the icebergs that floated past and eating traditional Newfoundland dishes like fish and brewis. At night, Barrie and I played a trivia game called “Newfoundlandia.” (Sample question: If something is “scow-ways,” is it high, low, damaged or slanted?)

Battle Harbour proved to be so enchanting, I made a return trip—twice. On one of those trips, I got a lift in a skiff across the tickle, a narrow body of water, to nearby Caribou Island. The skipper dropped me off in Matthews Cove with a walkie-talkie and said, “Call me when you get to the other side and I'll fetch you back!”

Caribou Island has footpaths that crisscross the island and the place is loaded with peaks and valleys, replete with grasses, flowers, mosses, soft crowberry and tuckamore, a short, dense windblown bush. One place in particular, Trap Cove, caught my breath. Remnants of homes and outbuildings tell tales of lives lived here, and as I sat on the hillside taking it all in, I swear I could hear voices on the wind. ✦