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Travel

Exploring Newfoundland pays off in charm, delight

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ST. JOHN'S, Nfld.

Heart's Desire, Heart's Content, Come By Chance, Quidi Vidi Village, such enchanting placenames. Newfoundland has always been that one last place, that mysterious far end of the country, I hadn't seen and always wanted to visit.

And what did I know about it?

Well, last province to join confederation, in 1949, and not convincingly, and still not altogether contentedly. Lots of fog, moose and, at one time, cod.

The other thing I'd heard is that it's wildly expensive to get there -- cheaper to fly to Europe, so they say -- but if you troll the seat sales and watch the Internet, you can go cheaply. We did, for \$538 apiece, round trip, tax included.

After we'd had a day to find our feet in St. John's, eat some cod tongues and hear folk legend Ron Hynes at the Rose and Thistle, we headed north and west on the TCH in our rental car. Don't ask how to get to the No. 1. They'll look at you blankly. It's the TCH: Trans-Canada Highway.

Now the TCH is not exactly scenic. It's a great, smooth swath cut through the rock and timber down the middle of the province. But it gets you where you want to go in a hurry.

Off the TCH, the highways can be a tad windy, in and around inlets, ponds, bays, tickles, bights, and lovely little towns.

The speed limits jump up and down and, particularly on the Northern Peninsula, the highway is beaten to pieces by lumber trucks, rain, and frost. You can feel good and seasick without even going out on the water just by doing five hours on one of these pathways, so stop for lots of pictures and cups of tea.

Twillingate, which is about halfway up the east side of Newfoundland at the end of a series of causeways linking various small islands and crossing Dildo Run, is a scenic place, with a little bay on one side and raw Atlantic Ocean on the other.

Here we took our iceberg tour with the Iceberg Man, **Cecil Stockley**. We weren't really sure what to expect, but we'd seen one iceberg from the highway and were rendered speechless by the sight of it off in the distance, so we thought up close they might be even better.

We were right. In fact, the experience was almost holy, as if we were in the presence of some impossibly greenish-white cathedral plopped down into the water. The icebergs arrive on the Labrador current from Greenland.

A day later we'd driven right across the province to Gros Morne National Park and hiked the Lomond River trail, spotting various birds. The high tablelands of Gros Morne are where the Earth's mantle has broken through the surface -- the only place on the planet where it's happened.

We then drove north to visit L'Anse aux Meadows, scene of a Viking settlement dating back a thousand years. The highway is a true test of one's nerves and stomach, but there are gardens to see growing in the ditch, the only arable land in sight, and a true proliferation of warning signs about moose.

These signs are everywhere on The Rock, but up that peninsula they become more frequent. Driving down from L'Anse aux Meadows at 5:30 a.m. to catch the Labrador ferry at St. Barbe, we counted 52 moose on or near the highway, plus four caribou. Moose collisions are common, and all that meat high up on the hoof makes driving a twitchy experience.

But before leaving L'Anse aux Meadows altogether, I must mention a restaurant called the Norseman. Here, in this very small settlement is a high-end restaurant with an extensive wine list, various delights from the sea and not a deep fryer on the premises.

Our server and co-owner, Gina, told us they've had some trouble getting the locals in because they can't get deep-fried food.

For instance, in Clarenville we stopped in a seafood place for lunch and overheard the server asking each customer about dressing and gravy with their fries. Yes, indeed, they all said. We stopped her and asked what this was.

"You're not from around here, are you?" she asked.

Dressing is the dry stuff you put in a turkey before you add the onion, celery, etc. Fine bread crumbs and lots of sage. So out came these huge plates of fries with dressing on them, then a good drenching of gravy over that. That was my second and last deep-fried meal of the trip.

Apparently the Norseman is one of the two best restaurants in Newfoundland.

Where the other one is, I don't know but I had a piece of halibut -- or 'alibut, as most there call it -- in the Old Loft in Woody Point that made me forget all about other kinds of seafood; and cod cheeks at Barbara and John Mercers' at Upper Island Cove that were incredible.

On our last day in St. John's, I risked the seal flipper pie and it was worth the chance. The whole enterprise smelled a tad briny but the meat itself was tender and tasty, in a beefy sort of way. And the pastry and gravy were exquisite. They know all about deep fryers in there, but you can deke around them.

Back on the road, we visited Ferryland, south of St. John's, and home of the very first English settlement in North America. Wayne Johnston writes about it in his book *Baltimore's Mansion*. There's a great museum there and an archeological dig.

And don't forget a walk through The Battery, the idiosyncratic houses all huddled up the side of Signal Hill in the entranceway to the harbour, the drizzle nudging your coat collar, and the oldest city in North America across the water. The Irish music jigs in your veins, the salt licks your lips and if the weather doesn't lift today, maybe it will tomorrow.

Photo: Saskatoon StarPhoenix, Canwest News Service / Tablelands appear in the distance as you enter Woody Point, Gros Morne National Park.

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