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Travel

Elusive, spectacular icebergs wow tourists to Newfoundland

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TWILLINGATE, Nfld.

TWILLINGATE, Nfld. -- As **Cecil Stockley** guides his small tour boat to the edge of Twillingate's harbour, he points to a small green blip on the radar screen.

The fuzzy, glowing speck doesn't look like much but it could reveal the route to a spectacular find: a massive iceberg that apparently cruised across the mouth of eastern Newfoundland's Notre Dame Bay the night before.

The Iceberg Man -- that's what Stockley calls himself -- isn't sure. It's late in the season and the frozen hulks are scarce. There's a thin veil of fog on the horizon and not much else.

Whether they're as big as a castle or as small as a sofa, all icebergs can be as elusive as ghosts.

Moved by unseen forces -- currents, tides and wind -- they usually drift far offshore, sailing circuitous courses well beyond the sight of most landlubbers.

"You can't trust them," says Stockley, an energetic school teacher who in 1984 became one of the first to lead regular iceberg tours off the northeast coast of Newfoundland.

"I started doing this in a little wooden boat. I've been doing this longer than anyone."

While icebergs are unpredictable, they usually can be counted on to make appearances in the Twillingate area and other coastal communities between May and July.

The reason? Newfoundland sits at the edge of Iceberg Alley, a vast stretch of the North Atlantic that extends from the north coast of Labrador to the Grand Banks east of Newfoundland. This is the route icebergs take after they break off from constantly shifting glaciers on the west coast of Greenland. The 3,000-km voyage from Baffin Bay to eastern Newfoundland can take up to three years.

Of the thousands of fresh-water slabs that float south every year, only a small fraction make it to the Grand Banks. Most are smashed on the rugged coast of Labrador or disintegrate amid a constant assault from the sun and waves. Some have drifted as far south as Bermuda.

This season, Stockley has seen about 40 icebergs, about a half dozen close to shore.

Aboard his stout vessel, the aptly named MV Iceberg Alley, some of the two dozen sightseers gasp when they first glimpse the towering island of ice looming in the mist.

The iceberg is still several kilometres away when a humpback whale the size of two city buses emerges from the steel-grey depths to boldly slap his tail on the surface.

A few minutes later, Stockley steers hard to starboard as the whale surfaces directly in front of the boat, then disappears.

As the fog lifts, the iceberg ahead appears as if it's a glistening tall ship, its ragged sails about 60 metres high and its battered hull twice as wide.

"This is a beautiful iceberg," Stockley says, his salt-and-pepper hair flailing in the wind. "This is just a thing of beauty."

As the boat circles the shimmering mountain, sunlight glints off water streaming down a smooth, green-tinted flank.

For the most part, the iceberg is milky white. The ghostly color stems from the fact it is largely made of layers of compressed snow more than 10,000 years old.

A closer look reveals several veins of deep turquoise. These were created by glacial melt water, trapped and frozen long ago, Stockley explains.

The top half of the iceberg is jagged and rough, like smashed concrete. The surface is glassy smooth, where the salty North Atlantic has licked off the hard edges.

On the aft deck, sightseers gather as Cecil's brother Bert pulls a chunk of ice -- called a bergy bit -- from the choppy water.

As he taps at the edge with a large knife, the ice makes an strange snapping sound as small chunks fall away.

Once everyone gets a piece, Bert explains that the noise is caused by air bubbles trapped inside.

It's the bubbles that give glacial ice an effervescent quality when it's dropped in a glass of water or a mixed drink. Some bars in Manhattan charge top dollar for martinis made with iceberg bits. A bag of iceberg chunks goes for about \$4 in Twillingate.

Bert, 61, says fate will decide if Twillingate gets its share of icebergs -- and tourists -- in any given year.

Looking back, Stockley says the biggest iceberg he ever saw was more than one km long and half a km wide.

The largest iceberg recorded is the subject of some debate. In 1927, mariners reported seeing an iceberg off the waters of Antarctica that measured roughly 170 km by 170 km, but it's unclear how accurate that measurement was.

In 1989, an iceberg code-named B-9 was spotted off the coast of Antarctica. It was measured at 155 km long by 35 km wide, about the size of Prince Edward Island.

The bergs that sail past Newfoundland are never that big. However, what they lack in bulk is more than compensated for in appearance.

BRIEFING:

Cost: Two-hour tour with Twillingate Island Boat Tours Ltd. costs \$30 for adults and \$15 for children.

Schedule: MV Iceberg Alley leaves dock at South Twillingate Island at 9:30 a.m., 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. (Sunset and charter tours available).

Other tours: Several other operators offer iceberg tours in the Twillingate area. Iceberg tours are also offered at coastal communities throughout northern and eastern Newfoundland.

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Photo: Michael MacDonald, CP / Tour boat is dwarfed by massive iceberg off Newfoundland coast. ; Photo: Michael MacDonald, CP / Adam Brutto, 11, of Aurora, Ont., is tickled to lift a piece on an iceberg during a recent trip to Notre Dame Bay, Nfld. ;

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