

ICEBERG ALLEY



NEWFOUNDLAND'S NORTHEAST COAST

I had no idea that my aging joints could assemble themselves so quickly, but after the piercing crack shattered my slumber, and still barely conscious, I bolted from the tent. I was envisioning the entire cliff face collapsing as a familiar and ominous rumbling followed me, and I wore only one thought - get to safety!

Outside all was again strangely quiet. Only the waves, gently washing the shoreline, reminded me that I hadn't been dreaming. A ghostly berg in the distance was still rolling toward its new equilibrium under the star-filled heavens, surrounded by a slowly expanding ice field.

The island of Newfoundland juts into the North Atlantic where, along with mainland Labrador, it forms the easternmost Canadian province. The island itself covers an area the size of New Jersey, although with a tad more shoreline - over 15,000 kilometers (9,300 miles) - and has a diversity of paddling opportunities to match. One of my favorite destinations on the island is its northeast coast, a highly indented shoreline framed by the Great Northern Peninsula on the west and by Fogo Island on the east. It links a collection of bays, inlets (often called arms), headlands and islands that defy measuring and would probably stretch all the way to New England if you could unravel it all.

This is a rugged world, born of two continents obliterating an early ocean and compressing a swath of volcanic islands and fragments of the Earth's crust, into what is now central

Newfoundland. The resultant mixture of colors, textures, and forms will fascinate even the non-geologist. Bedrock is rarely far below the surface and seems to erupt randomly through the thin veneer of bog and acid soil. As with most of Newfoundland, this is not farming country. The harsh climate scarcely knows summer. Forests of stunted conifers cover much of the interior but often leave the coast open, where hiking options will complement your paddling journey. The carnivorous pitcher plant, Newfoundland's provincial flower, shares the moist terrain with sundews and bakeapples (a popular local fruit related to the raspberry) while blueberries, partridgeberries and the ubiquitous mats of crowberry seek out the drier areas. You may spot a moose or caribou, or find one of their antlers. There are also coyotes, relatively recent arrivals from the continent and now established throughout the island, as well as black bears but I have yet to encounter either.



The coastal waters are home to a prolific marine ecosystem ranging from the tiniest plankton to the huge baleen whales. Sea gooseberries and other ctenophores are often so abundant that you can scoop them up with your hand. Peer down along shallow shorelines and you'll see fish darting among the seaweeds. During the late spring and early summer large schools of capelin, a species of smelt, migrate south to Newfoundland where they enter the bays and coves, following the contours of the shore, awaiting nighttime high tide and the opportune time to spawn on the sandy beaches.

The French and the English came to Newfoundland in the 1500s in search of Atlantic cod, a groundfish so prolific that it fed much of Europe for centuries. However, the cod fishery has been closed for 20 years due to overfishing, leaving the livelihood of thousands of rural Newfoundlanders in jeopardy. Despite this, the people remain a determined lot and wholeheartedly welcome strangers into their world of quirky, quilt-like villages.

The freedom to roam and the paddling possibilities are practically endless, whether you prefer daylong outings or opt for an extended journey. I'll focus on contrasts of an exposed peninsula (Baie Verte) and a protected bay (Bay of Exploits) – but these are only the tip of the iceberg.

BAIE VERTE PENINSULA

The Baie Verte Peninsula juts into the Labrador Sea separating White Bay from Notre Dame Bay, well off the more familiar tourist routes for the sea kayaker. France retained fishing rights for the area until 1905 and many of the place names are in French - Baie Verte translates as Green Bay. Fleur de Lys, the northernmost village, takes its name from three hills that, when seen from the ocean, strongly resemble the emblem in France's royal coat of arms. In Fleur de Lys, an abandoned soapstone quarry dates back a thousand years from a time when Dorset paleoeskimos carved out bowls and lamps from the soft soapstone. A museum in the village details this past with a large collection of artifacts. A half-day paddle to the west will take you under some sheer granite cliffs, to the tip at Partridge Point with a view into White Bay, and across to the Great Northern Peninsula where the Dorset hunted on the ice floes. A daylong trip heading east to Coachmans Cove will lead you along glistening grey slates, a bustling seabird colony and a recent archeological excavation of a Dorset site. This is one of the best places from which to view icebergs early in the season.

Betts Cove

The eastern side of the peninsula from Nippers Harbour up past La Scie is the most striking, and is rich in the history that has defined the island. It is sheltered for the most part from the prevailing southwesterlies and can be discovered during an extended tour, or during several daylong or overnight outings. My preferred route is counterclockwise, launching at Nippers Harbor, which emerges unexpectedly at the end of a long gravel road onto a tiny village. The name "Nippers" refers to the pesky mosquito, but I have never encountered any early in the season when I'm there.

Several kilometers up the coast, Betts Cove is one of the most intriguing places I have ever visited by kayak. Flanked by cliffs of barren granite several hundred feet high, this narrow wedge of water cuts into an intimidating coastal plateau that otherwise has few landing zones. Betts Cove is now deserted but was once a bustling mining center with a small hospital, a school, and three churches (one for each denomination), and home to over 2,000 people. A steep, narrow, trail winds up the valley where lying beneath the overgrowth, are the stone blocks, platforms and depressions, left by the habitations. The mine site itself is scattered over the plateau in an irregular sequence of tailings, shafts (now flooded with turquoise water), core samples, and rusted boilers. During a few years in the 1870s copper ore was crushed and partially smelted, then transferred via tram railways over the cliffs to boats, and shipped to Swansea in Wales for final smelting. By 1884 the bulk of the ore was gone and with it went most of the people. Today the cove is deserted and none of the buildings remain.

Indian Burying Place

A short distance (5 km) farther up the coast, looming down from the hills, is a clutch of gray, weather-beaten buildings, set behind a waterfront of deteriorating fishing shanties. Indian Burying Place got its name from the remains of a Beothuk grave, found by the first settlers. The site is a mesmerizing glimpse of a past that once was shared by most of rural



Newfoundland. The village was abandoned in the mid 1950s during the resettlement program, and the homesteads are slowly losing the fight with the elements as missing shingles and broken windows invite the weather in. A few houses, though, remain remarkably solid and the traditional linoleum floors and patterned, wallpapered walls typical of the time still remain. A five-kilometer trail makes its way through the woods to a road, but it is rarely used, except by locals to bring the horses down that roam unattended throughout the summer, and sometimes longer. These animals have little fear of paddlers, or our tents, so set up accordingly. I often string up rope around my abode as a deterrent and certainly don't set up on a path, no matter how level it may be. Another trail leads along the shore to Bobbys Cove, a "suburb" of the main village.

Tilt Cove

You can take out (and put in) at Round Harbour, another village with more houses than people, or paddle on to Tilt Cove, its name taken from the Newfoundland term for a fisherman's shanty. Tilt Cove is nestled in a massive cauldron of bedrock half a kilometer in diameter and suggestive of a meteor impact crater. Rust-colored cliffs surround all sides (except the ocean entrance) and the only escape inland is a narrow road that winds up the western wall to connect it to the rest of the world. The place looks as if it could double as a setting for a desert western. Most of the weathered homes are boarded up and the few that remain inhabited are usually empty, with their occupants away at work in nearby La Scie. The circular pond that dominates the center is surrounded by a gravel track resembling a drag strip, and, judging by the tire marks, is used as such by cars and ATVs.

As with Betts Cove, copper was mined here and a small stream emanating from main shaft stains the rock a brilliant rust orange en route to the ocean. This is a contrast with the greenish pond - neither a place to take a dip, and certainly not a drink. A private museum maintained by Don MacLeod, one of the few remaining residents, contains an eclectic collection of minerals, period

tools, postcards, homemade preserves, and knitted items. It is a mini-history of the coast with images of the bustle of the earlier mining communities adorning the walls. If open, it's free, but put a few bucks into the jar for donations – and pick up some of the excellent fruit preserves.

Further along, at Shoe Cove Bight, a broad sand beach fronts the narrow plateau of glacial debris where another outpost once clung. This campsite offers isolation and a commanding view of the coast just traveled. If the capelin are “running” thousands of fish may be spawning on the beach, attracting flocks of voracious gulls and kittiwakes.



Cape St. John

From Shoe Cove to La Scie is a 25-kilometer (15 1/2 mile-) stretch of sheer rock faces, sea caves, arches, and shoals. It is not for the inexperienced but is a wonderland for the experienced “rock hopper,” and during calm weather it can be paddled in a day. There is only one good landing spot and I usually take my time, camping midway at Cape Cove. A highlight along the route is the Seal Islands, with plenty of their namesakes and a massive kittiwake colony draped over the sandstone ledges. A few miles to the northeast lies Gull Island, the only island along this coast, and the site of the Queen of Swansea shipwreck in 1867. At La Scie you can camp on the cobble beach among the spires or take a stairway up the cliff to the community campground (where warm showers await) overlooking the harbor entrance. There is a grocery store a short stroll toward the village but I recommend taking a break from campfire cooking and indulge at the Outport Museum and Tea Room.

If time permits, continue past Harbour Round (sometimes confused with Round Harbour, on the other side of Cape John) and into Confusion Bay. A massive sea cave on the western shore is beginning to erode into an arch and the adjacent stream has formed a succession of natural bathtubs with surprisingly temperate water, even in late June. A major forest fire cleared the hills years ago opening the way to a barren top with a spectacular view over the bay. You can then continue for another day and take out at Pacquet or return to Harbour Round.

BAY OF EXPLOITS

The Baie Verte is exposed to the open sea, but the Bay of Exploits lies within the shelter of the mainland. It has the protection of a diverse archipelago and is well suited for both daylong and extended trips. Dozens of islands are interspersed with tickles and bights, arms and runs, and a landing spot is never far away. The highest islands are barely 500 feet but with spectacular views of the entire bay.

For a multiday voyage you can put in at Southwest Bottom, a sandy cove just north of Lewisporte, and follow a circuitous route of 4 to 7 days, encompassing Ochre Pit, Exploits, Black and Sampson Islands. Or, as I prefer, you can meander among these and end up at Twillingate with the prevailing southwesterlies at your back, arranging a return shuttle to Lewisporte. Other put-ins are Valley Pond, Bridgeport or Cottlesville on the eastern side of the bay, all within easy reach of many of the most interesting islands. The outer route from Moreton's Harbour to Valley Pond or the more sheltered passage from Valley Pond to Bridgeport (or Cottlesville) highlights a ragged shoreline with granite headlands and deep cracks and crevices. There is a great campsite at Western Cove, another abandoned settlement, where you will enjoy a view over the western islands. Another exceptional campsite is on the western tip of Matthew Lane Island from which you have a panoramic view of the bay. It would make a good base camp to explore the surrounding islands. Here, during the months of June and July, many icebergs find their way in from the open ocean, and often ground themselves in the shallow coves.

The Islands

Ochre Pit and Pond

Ochre Pit Island derives its name from the iron oxide which, when mixed with seal oil, was used by the Beothuks to cover their bodies and clothing. It was a practice used by many native people worldwide and is what led the first Europeans to call them "Red Indians." Its purpose was probably decorative but possibly also served as an insect repellent. The red ochre is now gone but there remain several intriguing circular pits, about five feet in diameter and two



feet deep, on the cobble beach on the northeast shore. These are thought to be remains of storage sites used by natives to cache their winterkill from scavengers although there is still uncertainty whether they were Dorset paleoeskimos or the ancestors of the Beothuk. Nearby Pond Island has another pit and both islands have great campsites with sweeping views of the inner bay.

Exploits

The Exploits are two large islands at the outer edge of the bay. They were the focus of European settlement in the area and by end of the 19th century wharves crowded the passage that separates the islands. Boat yards, fish processing plants and lobster canneries were interspersed among the homes. There was even a reinforced concrete bridge linking the two shores. Today the bridge is gone as are all the permanent residents. Many of the original homes on Exploits are still well maintained by former residents or their descendents who return for part of the summer. On the east island, midway down the passage, is one of the few good fresh water sources anywhere on the islands, a spring with a plaque that indicates it is even government tested! At the southeast tip of the channel, the villagers had communal plots in Garden Cove and the field is used occasionally as a campsite by paddlers.

The small beach on the northeast side of the passage is a great lunch stop, and an easy hike to the top of the hill affords a splendid vista overlooking the village as well as the rugged coastline of the outer bay. Surrounded by a tidy picket fence, a well-kept graveyard recalls the early history in the inscriptions on the tombstones, including that of John Peyton, one of the original settlers.

Black

Black Islands are named for the dark volcanic cliffs that guard the eastern entrance of the Bay of Exploits. Much of the stone is pillow lava, which formed when the molten crust erupted under water, and rapidly cooled into massive globular structures. It is present in several other islands in the bay, including the southern coast of Exploits. The ocean side of Black is the most spectacular although there is usually a reflecting swell even in the absence of any wind. Keep your distance and you should have no problem. The only landing spot is at Kiar Cove, which was also an early settlement. Little remains, only some rotting boards and a storage shelter framed by wood and covered by sod. A trail crosses the island to link it with a few summer cottages, at Black Island Tickle.



Twillingate

The village of Twillingate lies on the last of a series of islands, east of the Bay of Exploits. Connected to the mainland by several causeways and bridges, it was the center for a large northern cod fishery before the industry collapsed in the late 1980s. It remains a busy regional center with a prosperous shrimp and crab fishery and a growing tourism industry. It is also a great base for sea kayaking.

The local topography is the characteristic sparsely clad bedrock hills of the region, and the indented shoreline alternates cliff and spire with a few pocket beaches. Several secondary roads



to the coast provide numerous launch possibilities. One option is to depart at the Twillingate Bridge and circumnavigate North Twillingate Island, maneuvering through the outer rock gardens and under the light station at the tip. There is a camping park at Crow Head as well as a motel and numerous B&Bs. Near the bridge there are several services, including a grocery store, pharmacy, bank and the Newfie Fog Café, where you can get an eclectic combo of pizza and espresso, a rare find in this remote corner of the province.

Another day trip takes you around Burnt Island, named for a fire that removed all traces of forest many decades ago. Its unobstructed vistas present a great hiking counterpoint to a paddling trip and, if you want to camp overnight, there is an idyllic spot tucked away into the eastern tip, overlooking a maze of tiny islets. If time allows, continue around the sheer bluff at French Head and on to Little Harbour, or you can circumnavigate the entire South Twillingate Island in a two- to three-day paddle.



LITTLE BAY ISLANDS, FOGO, AND THE GREAT NORTHERN PENINSULA

Additional paddling routes along the northeast coast of Newfoundland include Little Bay Islands and Long Island. Both have small outpost communities and can be reached by a short ferry ride. Long Island has a mini-archipelago strung out from its northern tip. To the east of Twillingate, Fogo Island is also a ferry ride or paddle away but is large enough to occupy the entire Bay of Exploits, and its villages of traditional Newfoundland architecture, especially the historic Tilting, are a delight. There are also many launching spots from which to explore the coastline and adjacent islets.

To the west, the Great Northern Peninsula is an ancient extension of the Appalachian Mountains. There you will find thousand-foot cliffs, deep fjords, abandoned whaling stations, and the only Viking settlement in North America.

The sea kayaking options along Newfoundland's northern shoreline are much more numerous than this brief article has lines to describe and I have never tired of paddling this remote part of Canada. Hidden gems and fresh perspectives always await me, even after many years of exploring this fascinating outer fringe of the continent.

By Scott Cunningham
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SIDEBARS

ICEBERGS

They begin as snow falling over the interior of Greenland and after thousands of years of accumulation and compaction are born as massive chunks, calving into the fjords and drifting into Baffin Bay. Their 2-4 year journey takes them through the Davis Strait, past Labrador, and along the northern coast of Newfoundland, the famous Iceberg Alley, and eventually into the Gulf Stream and oblivion. In 1912, the most renowned iceberg of all time, made it well past the



southeast tip of Newfoundland, colliding with the largest ship of the time – the unsinkable Titanic.

Although even impressive from afar, when seen through photos and our imagination, nothing compares with viewing icebergs in real life. The dazzling white form, a result of the compressed air bubbles scattering the sunlight, is the dominant image but shades of blue and turquoise insert themselves

into the meltwater that has been trapped and frozen in ice fractures. Dark rock fragments, incorporated as they scoured the land in another life as a glacier, form contrasting bands. The surface is seldom completely smooth but often textured, resembling bleached alligator skin, or angular as in a piece of cubic art.

As if alive, these monoliths constantly rock back and forth, with seawater sloshing against, and smoothing, the irregular surface. Meltwater flows over the exterior ending in tiny waterfalls and, of course, they can unexpectedly tilt and roll as their centre of gravity shifts (especially the 90 percent that is hidden under the ocean surface) throwing off a mini tsunami. Sometimes they will shatter into several fragments often preceded by a sharp crack, as the one that had me scurrying from my tent.

Their sizes and shapes are infinite, some so enormous that they block the entrances to bays and harbours (as one did for several days during my youth in St. John's). Others become tiny fragments filling the air with escaping gas from trapped bubbles, like we are in an ocean of fizzys. These we collect to cool the beer, add to our orange juice (or Scotch), or simply to replenish our dwindling fresh water stores.

Many are rectangular blocks but most are more creative – mythical cathedrals of towering spires, arches, caves, giant mushrooms, and other descriptions limited only by our imagination.



Icebergs should be treated with the respect that a multi-million ton rolling ice cube deserves. And, as much as you might want to dock and climb aboard a ledge on the big one for that photo op, don't. It might indeed be the shot of a lifetime. You might also want to avoid sprinting among the spires, or through the arches. With time and experience you may learn to interpret their “moods” but a novice should always maintain a healthy distance (which should be at least as far away as it is high). I've seen them split and roll in an unpredictable manner, with little or no warning, and even the resulting wave can be substantial.

THE BEOTHUKS

Around 500-800 AD the ancestors of the Beothuk arrived from Labrador, probably following a regional warming trend and spread around the island. They overlapped for a while with the Dorset Eskimos who, being stressed by the reduced sea ice upon which their hunting techniques depended, probably migrated further north. After the European fishermen arrived they were gradually displaced from many of the coastal areas upon which they depended for sustenance and by the middle of the 1700's were restricted to the islands of the Bay of Exploits. Here they

continued to fish salmon and harvest birds and their eggs in the summer. During the winter they took shelter in the interior, where they would hunt caribou. There were never many natives (some estimates put their initial numbers at well under a thousand) and the relentless expansion of the Europeans with the inevitable one-sided conflicts for the same resource took its toll. By the end of the 18th century there were probably only a few dozen individuals left. Michael Crummy has poignantly described their plight in the “River Thieves”.

In the spring of 1823, three native women were captured and taken to Exploits Island. Two died of tuberculosis shortly after and the other, Shanawdidit, remained in John Peyton’s household on the island, for several years, acting as a servant. In 1928 she was taken to St. John’s and placed under the care of the Beothuk Society where through her conversations and her sketches we have the few direct insights of life among the Beothuks. Unfortunately, within a year, she too succumbed to tuberculosis taking the memory of her culture with her.

CAPELIN



Capelin are small (6-8 inches) fish related to smelt and are an important link in the marine food chain in the northern waters. They are a substantial part of the diet of codfish, seabirds, seals and even the whales. During the late spring and early summer large schools migrate south to Newfoundland where they enter the bays and coves, following the contours of the shore, waiting the opportune time to spawn on sandy beaches. This is usually with the nighttime high tide. They wash in with the waves and flounder on shore laying their eggs, never to return to the ocean for the most part.

This entire spectacle is accompanied by a rush of gulls and kittiwakes that take advantage of the situation for an easy meal. If you are lucky, as I have been, you will witness a group of seals or whales “herding” the fish into the cove, and then feasting on a meal. Capelin are fished commercially, either for bait (crab and lobster) or for the roe (eggs) for which there is a big demand in the Far East. But they are also very tasty fried up whole in a little butter.

ABANDONED SETTLEMENTS

Fishermen settled almost anywhere a boat could be landed and a dwelling constructed and by the 1900’s over 500 of these outposts clung to Newfoundland’s remote shores. Betts Cove was one well prior to the mining boom. Outport existence was isolated and often harsh, although usually better than the life they left behind in Europe, and even in the early years many left for more opportunity elsewhere. However, after Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 expectations rose for a better life and it was difficult and increasing expensive to provide services to these dispersed communities, most of which were only accessible by sea. During the late 1950’s a government resettlement program convinced, bribed, and coerced most to move to other towns and villages with greater access to these services.



In some cases their homes were towed on improvised rafts to the new communities, others were dismantled for the wood, but usually they were just left to be undone by nature. The outposts gradually disappeared from view, and from the maps, until eventually only the most resistant remnants remained – grave markers, root cellars, and the memories of the people who once shared these rock outcrops. Some outposts still resist the inevitable a while longer as is the case of Indian Burying Place, the most dramatic in Newfoundland.

Articles and photos: Scott Cunningham
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