



NEWFOUNDLAND - The Southwest Coast

The cool fog that infiltrated our sleeping bags nudged me awake well before I was ready. We should have shelled out the few extra dollars and rented one of the ferry's cabins. My irregular slumber had been punctuated by dreams of another journey, in another era, when I last visited this forgotten coast of isolated outposts and barren bluffs. Back then I shared the deck with assorted barnyard animals; fishing supplies and lumber as I accompanied my uncle on the coastal freighter. This time I was here to explore at another pace, and under my own steam aboard a kayak. I gave one of my expedition partners a shove and pointed through the railing at the bold landscape emerging from the mist: "You can see why this place has been nicknamed 'The Rock.'"

Newfoundland juts into the Atlantic off the northeastern tip of North America, where a distinctive geology, biology and cultural history have molded a unique people, with a strong tie to the sea. This is a land of contrasts, of the humorous and annoying, the harsh and fulfilling, the tragic and promise. Lilting accents, colorful language and unconventional customs have resisted the homogenizing drive of the political correctness movement that is a mere 6 hour ferry ride and half a time zone away. Descriptive communities with labels like Heart's Content, Dildo, Come

by Chance, Blow me Down and Witless Bay, hide along its erratic coastline and continue to be the butt of jokes from the rest of the country. This is also where I spent my formative years and I cherish its innocence and honesty, as well as the splendor of the scenery. It is a welcome breath of fresh air, both figuratively and literally.

The first known European visitors to Newfoundland were the Vikings, who during an earlier period of global warming colonized Iceland and Greenland, and made forays into eastern North America. Remnants of their settlement are found at L'Anse aux Meadows, on the northern tip of the island. They didn't stay long (probably less than a decade), possibly because of conflicts with the indigenous population (both Eskimo and Indian) where their rudimentary weapons technology didn't bestow any particular advantage. It wasn't until 500 years later, and armed with guns, that the Europeans returned in force, and to stay. In 1497, John Cabot (a Venetian under sponsorship of English throne) was the first to report his foray westward and it wasn't long before the fishermen arrived, drawn by tales of massive whales and inexhaustible fish stocks. First the Basque and Portuguese, and then the English and French, descended on the Grand Banks, the most prolific fishing grounds on earth.

Of course, this rugged land was not barren of people. The Beothuks, probably less than a thousand in number when the Europeans arrived, fared even worse than their counterparts on the continent when the Europeans began to settle the "new" land. They did not enter into trading relationships with the colonists, as did other North American tribes, and gradually retreated into Newfoundland's interior, where it was difficult to eke out an existence at the best of times. By the early 1800s they were gone. They left us with little to remember them by, other than the term Red Indian, first used to describe the Beothuks and their copious use of red ochre to cover their bodies and clothing.

For over two centuries Newfoundland fish helped feed the population of Europe, but this was never a prosperous place. And it still isn't. Mining and forestry have opened up some pockets of employment in the interior, and recent offshore oil and gas discoveries have brought some dollars and bustle to a few communities. However, the *raison d'être* for settlement was the fishery and this once bountiful resource has fallen on very tough times. The collapse of the northern cod in the early 1990s has devastated many rural settlements. Boats are tied up, processing plants have been closed and the youth are moving "down the road," as we say here. Where once you caught a cod as big as a small tuna, you can now be fined for merely jigging enough for a family meal.

The island of Newfoundland is a big place, and mostly empty. It is about the size of Pennsylvania (ca. 111,500 sq. km), but with only half a million inhabitants. These are mostly concentrated in and around the capital of St. John's, and a few other major towns. The rest are scattered about the extensive coastline, one that stretches over 17,000 kilometers. Its dense forest cover is interspersed with lakes, rivers and bogs, a scene far removed from the patchwork quilt of fields and farms further south. The short growing season and a sparse, infertile soil preclude widespread farming.

The length and diversity of Newfoundland's shores offer something for every sea paddler, regardless of interest or skill level. However, my favorite haunt is the southwest coast, which stretches from Port-aux-Basques to Hermitage, a distance of over 200 miles. This pristine wilderness of exposed coastal cliffs, deep fjords, offshore islands, and even sand beaches rivals

anything on the continent. This is where my uncle skippered the coastal freighter, and where I first encountered outpost life.

When I first drove up, down and around, this land of granite I was struck by its rugged emptiness. The landscape was only a scattering of stunted trees, obscured within sharp crevices and fissures. They call it tuckamore here, and I was reminded of northern Scotland, though in Scotland the dearth of trees was enforced by pasturing sheep. Here it is result of a harsh climate. The winding road east of Port-aux-Basques ends at Rose Blanche, where an irregular tangle of wooden houses hugs the cliffs and narrow patches of pavement, in an apparent revolt against zoning restrictions. Brash house colors focus the eye, challenging the monotony of long winters and foggy springs, and suggesting that paint is one of the few products that is cheaper here than on the mainland. A restored granite lighthouse (the oldest on the east coast, 1873, awaits where the road goes no further. A short path leads from the Hook, Line and Sinker (a traditional Newfoundland home, now a Bed & Breakfast) to Salmon Cove. This is where we launch our kayaks.

Rose Blanche to Burgeo

The Petites

At one time Newfoundland had hundreds of coastal communities where the only link to one another, and the outside world, was by sea. Called "outposts," these settlements formed the backbone of the fishing economy. Many have since been connected by roads. Many others have been abandoned. Most that remain are along the southwest coast and Petites is the first. Within sight of Rose Blanche this group of tiny islets protects a narrow harbor ringed by bedrock. It is like many along this difficult shoreline. Many of the buildings overhang water on stilts, and most are empty. Real estate is a bargain (especially if you prefer privacy). The population has declined to the point where, by the time this article appears, there may be none.

If the weather cooperates, you can head from Rose Blanche over to Petites for a day-long journey. Or, you can continue beyond, where the random patchwork of coves and inlets define a splendid isolation. The islets and islands are often little more than broad expanses of desolate rock but with a stark beauty and offering frequent shelter if the seas are choppy. Numerous shoals (aptly named "sunkers" in local parlance), cling to the shore and are washed by swells built up by a fetch the width of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They require a diligent eye, but provide an entertaining challenge to those (like myself) who enjoying playing a game of cat and mouse in this fascinating boundary where land meets sea. Further inland, a lonely barrenness prevails where grasses, shrubs, balding rock and splashes of water outline the uneven terrain. Traces of forest hide in gullies, somewhat protected from winds that can be intense, even in summer.

The predominate bedrock that follows us up the coast is white, speckled granite, interspersed with sections of shale, sandstone and volcanic ash and lava, all highly resistant to erosion. What little soil accumulated over the millennia was scraped off during the Ice Age. Several impressive fjords cut deep inland, some extending up to 25 km. At the head of these you usually find a

gravel (or sand) beach, washed by the river outflow and a welcome chance to bath and wash in an abundance of fresh water. However, after exploring a few, most of these fjords only garner a gaze into their depths while we cross the entrances. It can be such a long journey in and out, and it sometimes feeling like "retracing tracks" (which I hate), often against a headwind. Fortunately, plenty of smaller streams can be found closer to the open coast.

Finding good landing spots and campsites often requires some insight (and map reading skills), and don't be fooled by sheltering indentations on the map. It only takes a shoreline a few feet high to keep you floating just offshore, wondering where to land, as sun begins to set. At other times, a cabin may be occupying the sole segment of quasi-level ground. So give yourself plenty of time when deciding where to haul out at the end of the day. One of the best sites is just a couple of kilometers beyond Petites, where Seal Island Head is tentatively connected to the mainland. Here a sheltered gravel beach borders a meadow of soft fragrant crowberry with the added bonus of plenty of bleached driftwood for the campfire. Another good site is Indian Harbour just at the of La Poile Bay, and overlooking the bald cliffs of Eastern Point. Be wary of setting up in open country as the wind, when it decides to be, can be overpowering. At least it overpowered my own tent one night, forcing someone else to accept an uninvited guest.

Grand Bruit

The southwest coast is cluttered with Anglicized designations, that often bare little resemblance to the original meaning. In the case of Grand Bruit, pronounced "brit," it has nothing to do with British but is a relic from an era when the French had fishing rights along this coast. It translates as "big noise," a reference to its rumbling waterfall. Grand Bruit is a three-day paddle from Petites, although still has many of the amenities of more accessible communities, such as running water (from the pond out back), sewage disposal (right into the harbor), electricity, phone service, a post office and two general stores. There is even an elementary school with a laudable student-to-teacher ratio of seven to one (most of the seven belonging to the lone teacher). The year-round population is 40 or so (and dwindling), although the numbers are augmented in the summertime by returning relatives, the occasional tourist, and the rare kayaker. The residents take great pride in maintaining their candy-colored buildings and meandering walkways.

If you don't have the time, inclination, or skill, to paddle as far as Grand Bruit you can also load your kayak on the coastal boat at Rose Blanche. The journey takes only a couple of hours and, when you arrive, you can either camp on the "outskirts" or you can treat yourself to a housekeeping room in a modern two unit "motel. There is plenty to explore nearby, including the small islands off the harbour entrance and Barasway Island to the west (where we spotted a caribou swimming to the mainland). A special place, though, is Cinq Cerf (translated as Five Deer) Bay, about 7 kilometers to the east, where a river of the same name has formed a large estuary with several sand beaches. Small islands add shelter, to create an almost lush, lagoon-like, environment unusual for this coast, and a welcome contrast.

The Southwest Coast of Newfoundland is as much a place for hiking as for sea kayaking and Grand Bruit is a departure point for one of the best. Although the "Highlands" rise a mere 1,000 feet, this is from sea level, and the top affords a grand panorama of both the ragged coastline and the undulating granite knolls, which ramble on for as far as the eye can see into the interior. On

the way up you can meander almost any which way without being stopped by forest or sliced up by brambles. The open terrain encourages breezes, cooling the skin and dampening down the insects, while the shallow ponds provide a refreshing dip.

The vegetation is alternately baked by the sun, draped with fog, and lashed by winds. It is a hardy lot. Particularly abundant, are the ubiquitous, and intriguing, carnivorous plants which use various mechanisms to extract nitrogen from insects. This essential element is in short supply in the acidic soil. The most prominent is the pitcher plant (also Newfoundland's provincial flower) with its basal whorl of vase-shaped leaves which drown the unfortunate bugs in a pond of digestive enzymes.



Once you leave Grand Bruit and Cinq Cerf Bay, the topography flattens considerably, and is more open and exposed. Most other early settlements along this stretch of coast have been abandoned (although La Poile is still inhabited), due either to a gradual dying or as a coerced exodus during the provincial governments' resettlement program of the 1950s. A few cabins remain, as in Westport, or maybe only stone foundations, or gravestones. And not only have the people moved on but also, it seems, has much of the marine life. Staggering quantities of sea birds, marine mammals and fish greeted the first Europeans with an almost inexhaustible source of food, feathers, skins and oil - or so they thought. Constant exploitation and a warming climate (there used to be polar bears and walrus here) have changed that. The seals and large sea bird colonies are now uncommon (except for Seal Rocks, half way between Grand Bruit and Burgeo, where I have always spotted them), and whales are rare. The collapse of the fishery has affected the entire food chain.

NOTE: In 2012 the tiny community of Grand Bruit was no longer to be found on the Newfoundland tourist maps. The few remaining residents voted to accept the government's offer to relocate and, although there are still a few summer residents, they make their way to the village on their own. The ferry service has been discontinued and power has been cut. While it was once possible to travel the entire coastline by timing the various ferries now there is no connection between La Poile and Burgeo.

Burgeo to Francois

Burgeo

It is not known when Burgeo was first "discovered" by Europeans. However, we do know that Juan Fugandez (a Portuguese explorer) sailed by 1520 and named this compact group of islands Iles Dos Onze Mill Vierges in an apparent fit of exaggeration. For some reason, Juan decided to commemorate St. Ursula of Cologne, and his bizarre 14th-century crusade to liberate the holy land from the "pagans." Most of the 11,000 virgins didn't get very far, as was the case with his name for this part of the New World. It eventually somehow evolved and shortened to Burgeo now the largest community on this coast (around two thousand) and the only one east of Rose Blanche connected by road. The present day town encompasses both the islands and the adjoining the mainland. Farley Mowatt (author of *Never Cry Wolf*) lived and worked here for several years until he decided that it was becoming too busy and upped and left (having offended many of the locals in the process). His poignant tale of a stranded whale (*A Whale for the Killing*) was based on events nearby.

Burgeo can be the end, beginning or even mid-point of an extended journey up the coastline, or it can be a destination in itself. The surrounding islands rise up like the karst topography of Thailand (although of a totally different geological origin, and with fewer trees). To the west are unexpected, and extensive, white sand beaches, where one spit (several kilometers long), shelters a shallow lagoon alive with shorebirds. To the east the, ominously named, Blow Me Down cliffs flank Bay du Loup. There



is also the option of taking a ferry to Ramea, another outpost and group of islands, several miles offshore. Burgeo has a provincial park (with camping, and washroom facilities), as well as a modern motel and the Burgeo Haven—a great Bed & Breakfast—all of which allow you to savor this fragment of coast in pampered isolation.

Much of Burgeo is rimmed by boulders and cliffs and where the water is accessible you might be discouraged by the effluent (especially at low water). One of the best launch points is the concrete slipway on Furbers Harbour road. Another is at the provincial campground, although when our group arrived we had to contend with a dumping surf on the exposed beach.

Fox Island

East of Burgeo, several islands and coves provide the paddler shelter. A cobble beach on the northeast tip Red Island (named from its bright rock) is a good site. However, it is Fox Island, a full day's journey from Burgeo (a route which includes a stunning shoreline of pinnacles, sea caves and a waterfalls) that is my preferred destination. This is a superb refuge. It offers up a sandy bar sandwiched between the island and mainland cliffs. In its heyday, this was home to over 35 families, with their houses, church and tiny school staggered along, and often bolted to, the steep hillside. Today all the original buildings are gone, many floated up the coast to Burgeo or Ramea, others were just left to rot. Only some rock foundations, and a couple of cabins, remain.

As in most abandoned outposts the graveyards are left to interpret the past. They tell of mothers dying in childbirth, children falling to youthful diseases, and fishermen lost on an unforgiving ocean (fishing remains the most dangerous occupation in the country). Claude Young left the island in the 1950s, when only 16, but returns each summer to his cabin. He has taken us squid jigging, shared his bountiful stores of rum, and described life here before the resettlement. He also showed us the gravestones for Thomas Young and Abraham Vardy and told their story: of the stalled motor, the drift onto the surf of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and the coffins carried up the winding path to their resting place on top of Fox Island. His was a maritime tale that has been repeated over the generations. Only the names are changed.



East of Fox Harbour Island, the coastline changes. Gone are the patches of low relief, hints of a sand beach, and most of the islands. In their place is a formidable escarpment, where towering walls of gneiss and shist (at times over 1000 feet) plummet directly into the depths. This is a stretch for calm weather paddling only and experience is essential. There is little chance for sanctuary along the 35-kilometer stretch to the headland of La Hune. The only exception is Grey River where a spectacular, branched and canyoned, waterway extends far inland. A lilliputian outpost, where claustrophobes would definitely feel ill at ease, hides in a notch inside the entrance. You can also reach Grey River by the ferry, and then explore into the furthest reaches, even though the waters may be in turmoil outside the gates. Campsites are a rare commodity and for a good one you'll need to kayak to the end of the fjord.

Cape La Hune

I tried to paddle to Cape La Hune three times, but poor weather or an inexperienced group held me back in Grey River. Only a couple of years ago did the conditions let me pass, and what I discovered exceeded the lofty expectations of my imagination, as seldom in the past. Cape La Hune's massive extrusions erupt from Gulf onto a bleak moonscape, where the fjords cut into a plateau interrupted by even less vegetation than earlier on the coast. At



the water's edge, obscure remnants of the former community hide among the grasses and gravel of the crescent barrier that separates the promontory. This is an easy landing, with lots of level ground for tents, and one of the best camp settings I have ever encountered. The hike up to the Highland of La Hune easily surpasses the more accessible and better known Gros Morne. (the National Park on Newfoundland's west coast). You don't have to scramble over loose skree, but have a walkway of solid granite where superb views evolve with each succeeding step.

Occasionally a solitary moose, or a small group of caribou will show themselves, or arctic hare and ptarmigan scatter from their hideouts. From the summit, the islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon float off in the distance like some desert mirage, as does Brunett Island, where a lone buffalo survived for years after a bizarre, and ultimately vain, attempt to introduce a herd. The Penguin Islands are also deserted, although once home to a huge colony of Great Auk. These large flightless birds were called penguins (by the Portuguese) long before the unrelated birds in the southern hemisphere, but they have long since been hunted to extinction and, today, only the name remains.

Beyond La Hune, indentations in the escarpment open up more shelter, although particular attention should be paid to rounding Aviron Point, where you can encounter choppy seas when a swell is running. The locals talk of lost whaling stations, mythical waterfalls and the best climbing walls in eastern North America. Perhaps they are right. However, for now, poor weather ends our journey in Francois (pronounced "Fransway"), an outpost imbued with a rare vitality. The waterfront here is busy, and not only is there an elementary school but Francois has the only high school of any outpost. It keeps the kids at home and makes for a healthy mix of generations. Perhaps the worst of the economic downturn is over.

The heavy rains that drenched Francois were accompanied by strong southeasterlies, and kept us off the water. When not huddled in the tents, we were consuming junk food and local lore at the "corner" store (a highlight of any trip), and playing badminton in the school gym. Oh yes, and we were also able to use the school internet hook-up. It was surrealistic in a way, for Francois is the furthest from a highway of any place in Newfoundland (or all Atlantic Canada, for that matter). Eventually, northerly winds blew in clear skies and we hiked up to the rim of the natural amphitheater overlooking the village. From there were treated to a final dramatic view of the

coast.

It has been many years since I first steamed along here on the freighter. Everything was new back then, and much bigger than life, as it can only be in the innocence of childhood. I remember it almost as a fairy tale. I've since returned many times and much is now familiar, but I always discover secret gems previously passed by unnoticed. Perhaps, a hidden sea cave or arch, an idyllic campsite, or some forgotten history. Or, as on this trip, Cape La Hune and an entire new realm.

As I stood on the ridge, my imagination followed my gaze and I couldn't help anticipating what would be around the next headland, or in that distant bay. I guess that I was already planning another voyage into this magical destination of unending unknowns. But, for now, my time was up. We headed back down to the village to where the coastal boat was waiting and, after securing the kayaks to the deck, and stowing our memories, we began the journey back home.

Trip Planner

Paddling conditions on the southwest coast are among the best in Newfoundland. While the northern part of the province is washed by the frigid Labrador current, and populated by icebergs early in the year, the water temperature in the southwest can rival that found much further south. Encouraged by the prevailing winds, the temperate waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (often exceeding 65³/₄F) will often wrap around these shores. But other times, it can drop to the 40s, especially after a storm has churned up the Atlantic. I've donned as little as shorts and a t-shirt and as much as a dry suit, both during the same trip. Air temperatures can also be unusually high for the latitude during the height of the season and when high pressure systems dally over the region, you can enjoy tranquil seas and unlimited visibility. However when temperate, moist winds meet cold water you may have to deal with sea fog, and impenetrable banks can cling to the shoreline for days. Precipitation is similar to what you will get elsewhere in the northeast (in Maine, for example) and will vary from year to year, although rarely approaching the persistent deluges of the Pacific Northwest.

The prevailing winds are usually from the southwest, and thus onshore for this part of Newfoundland. Carried over the long fetch they create a persistent swell resulting in reflecting waves and surf which can add an additional challenge, but there are plenty of fjords and island groups to explore if the outer waters become too rough. Later in the season (from mid August on) they are more west/northwest, creating a wind shadow along the open coast, though the weather is also more unsettled. The tides are semi-diurnal and the range modest (usually 2-4 feet), not a major factor in deciding when and where to launch or land. The currents are also negligible (usually less than 1 knot) although you should always be diligent when rounding the more pronounced headlands, particularly with any wind.

You can land and camp pretty much when and where you please and the best coastal camping I

have found, bar none, has been along these shores. Most of the land is public and, where it isn't, you won't find any "no trespassing" signs. Newfoundlanders will be friendly and helpful (even entertaining). If you get stranded and need a way out, you will be surprised how many kayaks you can load on a small fishing vessel. VHF and cell-phone coverage is a bonus. If you stay long enough you will encounter moose and caribou, but I have yet to see any bears. I don't need to undertake any elaborate precautions with my grub, as is the case out west. The biggest threat comes from the mosquitoes (the black flies are gone by early summer) which can be a little annoying on a warm windless day. Since this is not often the case along the coast, it's never got to the point where I needed a bug shirt (although I bring one along).

WHEN TO GO

From mid-July until mid-August, the weather is the most stable. Air temperature usually varies from 65³/₄-75³/₄F; water temperature from 55³/₄-65³/₄F (but sometimes lower). Bring extra food and budget for storm days.

HOW TO GET THERE

By Car/Ferry

Boston to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, is 18-19 hours (excluding stops). The ferry to Port aux Basques is 5-6 hours (with two or three crossings each day). From there, it's a 30-minute drive to Rose Blanche or a 4-hour drive to Burgeo.

Marine Atlantic (Ferry): 800-341-7981; www.marine-atlantic.ca

Coastal Ferry: Francois to Grey River to Burgeo; La Poile to Grand Bruit to Rose Blanche
www.gov.nf.ca/ferryservices

By Air

The closest airport is Deer Lake (a 3.5-hour drive from either Port aux Basques or Burgeo). St. John's, the capital, is about 10 hours from Port-aux-Basques. Public transport is minimal.

MAPS AND CHARTS (topographical maps are the most useful)

Charts: Cape Ray to La Poile Bay (75,000; #4635)

La Poile Bay to Ramea Islands (75,000; #4634)

Ramea Islands to Bonne Bay (75,000; #4633)

The Burgeo and Ramea Islands (24,000/37,000; #4637)

Maps: Port aux Basques - Burgeo (50,000; #11-O/9/10/11, 11-P/12)

Rameo [RAMEA?] - Francois (50,000; #11-P/10/11)

COMMUNICATION
A tower on Ramea provides VHF and cell-phone (offered by the alliance of Bell Canada companies) coverage to most of the coast.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Tourism Newfoundland and Labrador: 800-563-NFLD; www.gov.nf.ca
(road maps, accommodations, etc.)

BACKGROUND READING

Much has been written about Newfoundland. The following will give you a feel of the place: *The Shipping News* (E. Annie Proulx). This novel captures the mood of the Newfoundland people. It has recently been made into a movie starring Kevin Spacey.

Random Passage (Bernice Morgan). Describes the realities and hardships of early settlement. *As Near to Heaven by Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Kevin Major). Very readable history of the province

Note: The province is officially known as Newfoundland and Labrador. Labradorians (about 30,000 residents) traditionally get in a snit about being ignored by the more populous island. Labrador is also a superb sea-kayaking destination, but that's another story.

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