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Newfoundland's fresh frontier

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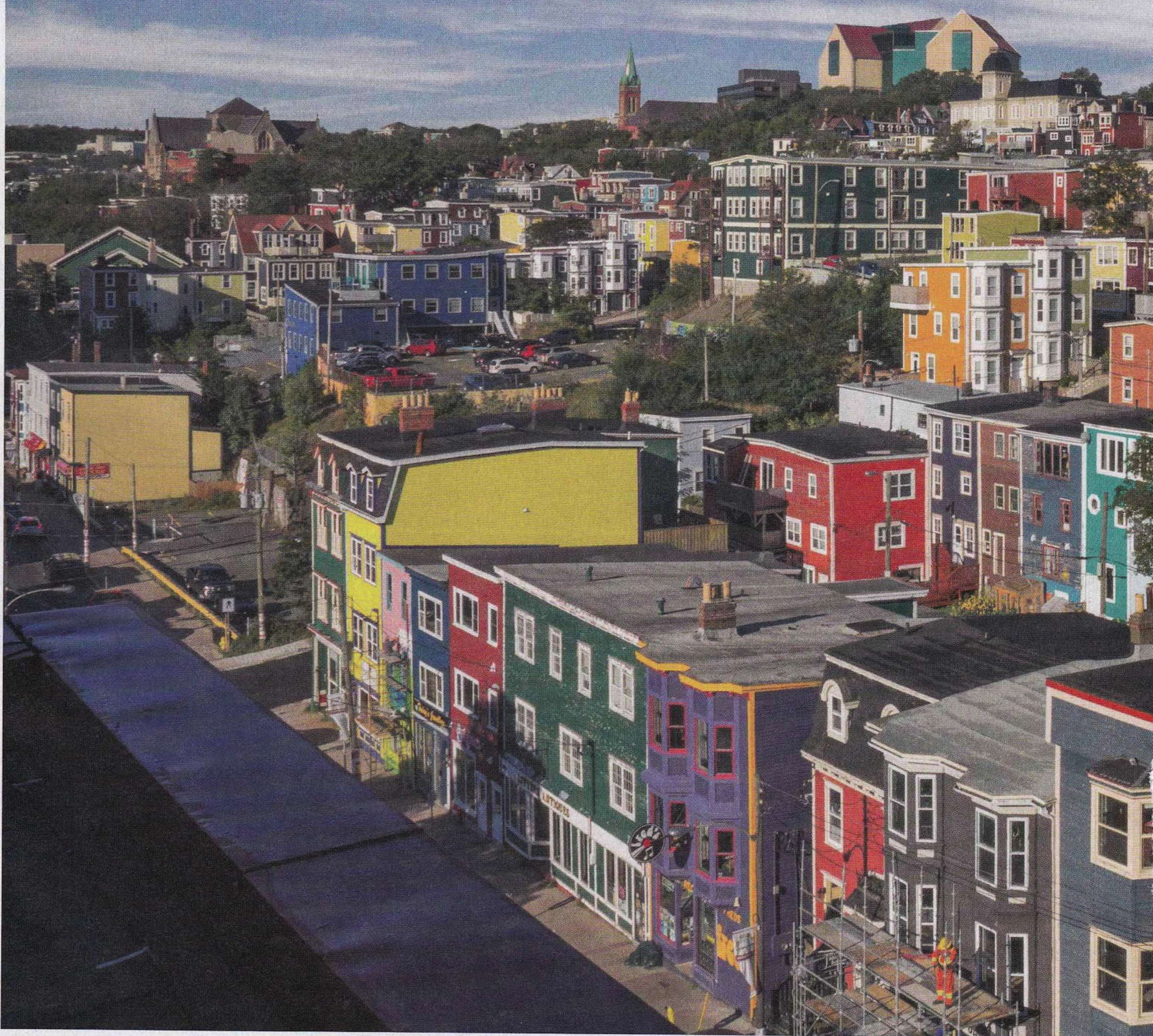
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A REALM OF EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE AND PLACES: TRAVEL. CULTURE. ENVIRONMENT. BEAUTY.

TAKING STOCK



MORE THAN TWO DECADES AFTER THE COLLAPSE
OF THE NORTHERN COD INDUSTRY, THE PEOPLE OF
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR NAVIGATE THE
COURSE FORWARD WITH ONE EYE LOOKING AHEAD
AND THE OTHER LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDER.

words by ELSPETH CALLENDER



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

POPULATION

Five per cent of the province's population live in Labrador even though its area is over double that of the island of Newfoundland.

GEOGRAPHY

The province's collective coastline is so extensive that, if straightened out, it could stretch back and forth across greater Canada.

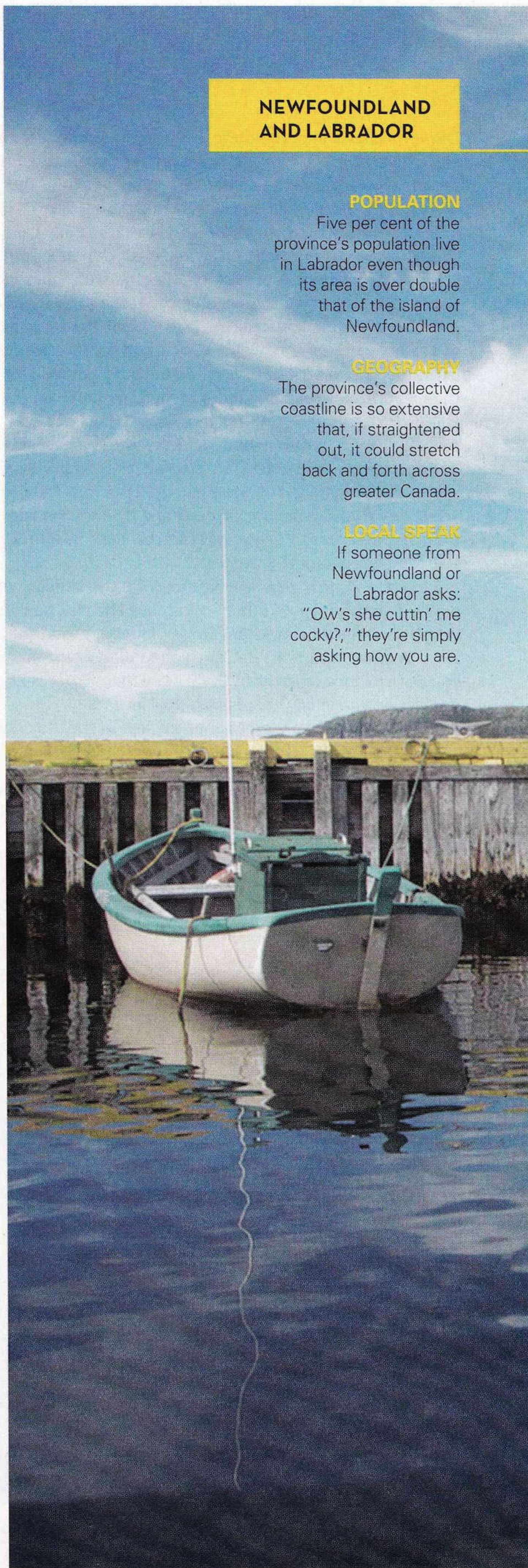
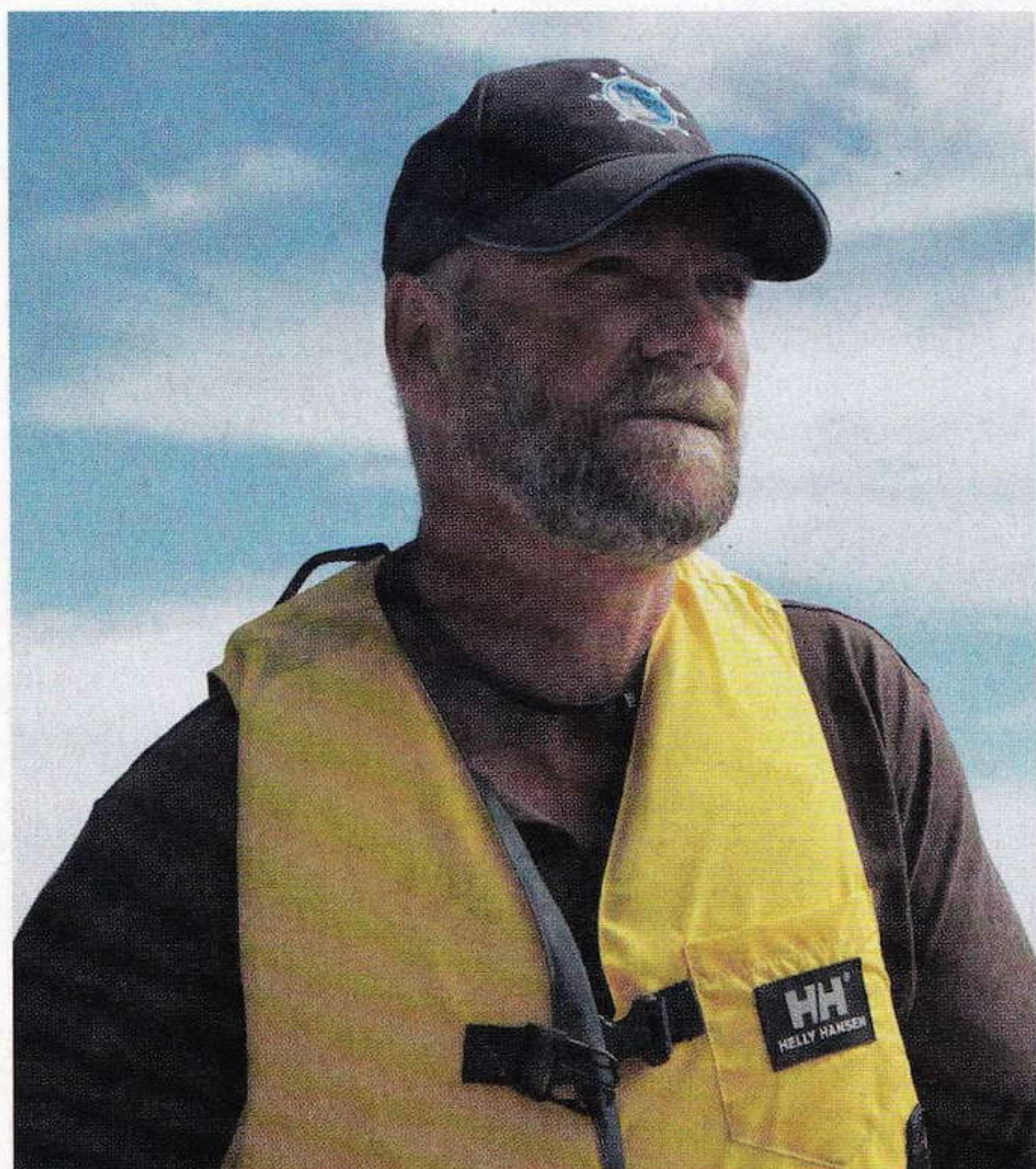
LOCAL SPEAK

If someone from Newfoundland or Labrador asks: "Ow's she cuttin' me cocky?," they're simply asking how you are.

When I first arrive in Newfoundland and Labrador, I have this sense that I'm not really there. I dine on cod in an upmarket Water Street restaurant, post photographs of the charming multi-coloured terraced houses online and drink vodka produced with locally harvested icebergs, but the sense persists. Only when I leave the urban centre of St John's and take to the water with a seafaring bayman and hear stories of this rural fishing province – in the throes of being forced to be otherwise – do I begin to connect with a place still learning to understand those of us from "away".

Nicholas Dawe's generation was born on a changing tide for Canada's most easterly province that is still yet to turn. In 1992, Ottawa imposed a moratorium on Atlantic cod fishing in waters that once supported the world's richest supply. In an accent he admits is better understood in Ireland than St John's, Dawe tells me that early European fishing expeditions caught cod in baskets and their rowboats were often bogged down by schools of fish the size of five-year-olds.

My guide stands rock steady on the zodiac in a decent swell in Conception Bay and, with barely contained glee, pulls up his legal daily quota of five cod in the time it takes me to catch one. We're within sight of Port de Grave where, well before ►



(opening spread): The colourful homes of Downtown St John's; (this page, left to right): Rugged Beauty's Bruce Miller; a dingy moored at New Bonaventure.

Dawe was born and bred there, his forebears registered a land claim dated 1595 – the oldest on record for Newfoundland. This seemingly interminable coastline is also, I'm told, the place of history's most economical conversation – "Arn?" "Narn". Translation: Are there any fish? No, there aren't any fish.

The same government that imposed the indefinite ban permitted international fishing fleets, with increasingly effective technology, to trawl offshore through cod-spawning grounds of abundant areas such as Grand Bank for months at a time over decades. When Atlantic cod finally reached near extinction, an almost 500-year-old industry ceased and more than 30,000 Newfoundlanders were left unemployed.

Dawe essentially grew up in a depression but was role-modelled by a father who'd already overcome seasickness by becoming a carpenter and blacksmith, and a village that successfully switched to lobster and crab. Saltwater in his veins, Dawe guides summer fishing and diving trips with local tour operator Ocean Quest Adventures, near St John's, while also studying Nautical Science.

It's early August and the last cod of the season will be pulled from the water this evening, but the sun has already set on commercial cod fishing in Newfoundland and Labrador. Despite compensations, not everyone could adapt or re-skill and the province drained; by 2002 more than 10 per cent of the population – over 60,000 people – had left.

"It was worse than war without the loss of life," says former

cod-fisherman Bruce Miller. I've driven three hours north to Bonavista Peninsula to be out on the water again.

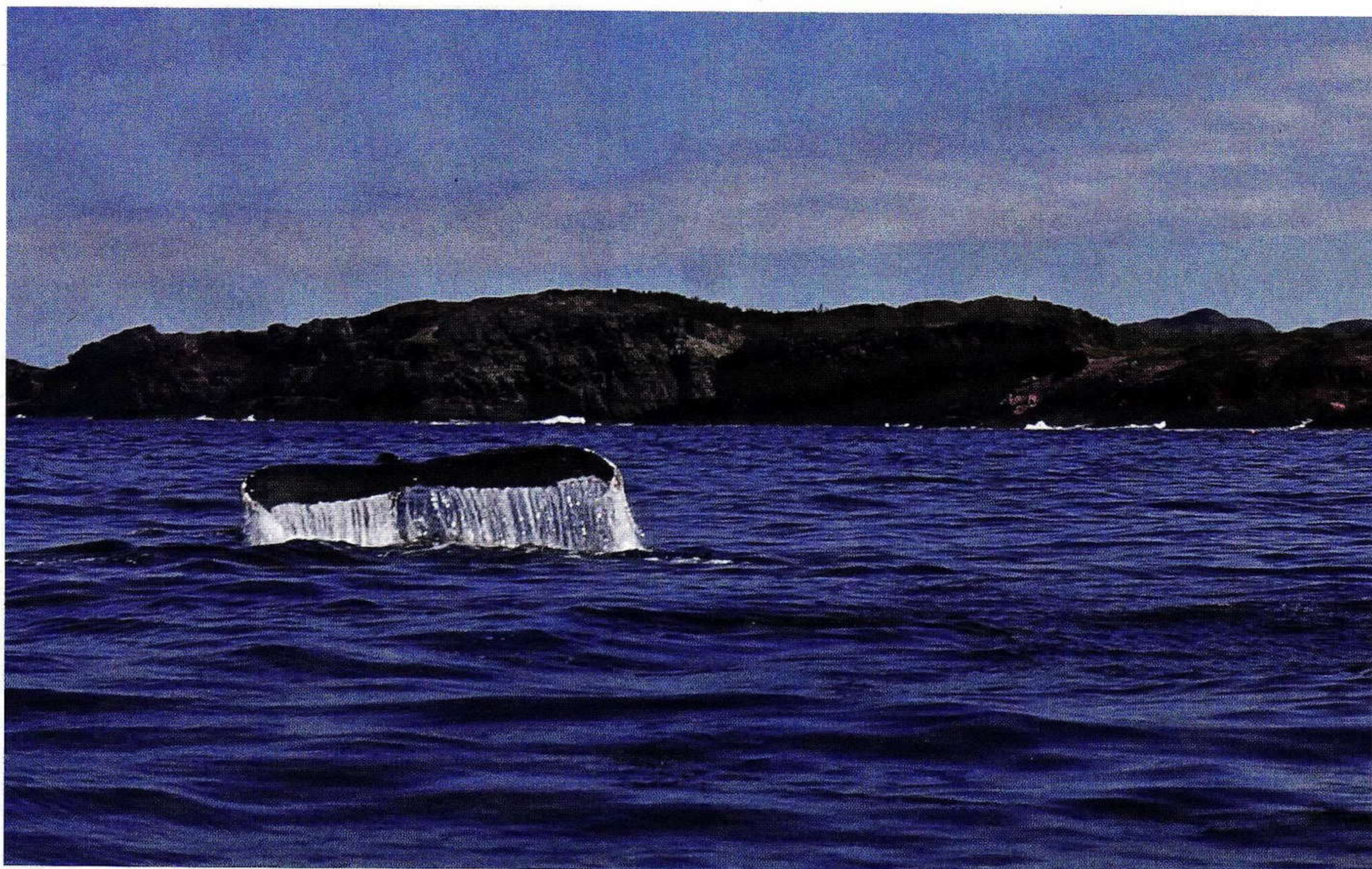
Miller was born in 1959 in the outport of Kerley's Harbour on Trinity Bay, left school early to become a fisherman and felt the full brunt of the moratorium. Now, during the summer months he runs Rugged Beauty Boat Tours from New Bonaventure, introducing CFAs (come from away) to rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

This area is where *The Shipping News* and *The Grand Seduction* were filmed, and the 200-year-old fishing village set created for television mini-series *Random Passage* is a permanent fixture. Miller sings 'Salt Water Joys' as we motor under sea cliffs of 680-million-year-old rock topped with sloughing moss and bald eagles perched in trees so stunted you can read the wild winds and heavy snow in their stocky determined stance.

The fisheries closure is not the first storm this region has weathered. Early settlers, oppressed for centuries by powerful merchants and corrupt governments, dispersed in desperation to tiny coastal communities and independently survived off the wind-swept land and capricious Atlantic Ocean.

When Newfoundland finally entered the Canadian Confederation in 1949 it was, as Miller explains, "the beginning of the end for all of these small communities". Under a scheme called resettlement, the federal government centralised people closer to services. Those whose families had lived in one place

(left to right): a humpback whale does a tail-wave off the coast of Open Hall;
Salad made fresh from the garden at Fisher's Loft; Trinity locals Tineke and Marieke Gow.



for generations had no choice but to uproot and “leave their dead parents in the graveyards”.

“Safe as if you slipped into God’s pocket,” Miller says, as though quoting Irish poetry. Around this protected harbour of Ireland’s Eye on an island of the same name – as achingly beautiful as it sounds – are a few summer cabins and some piles of timber and stone. When Miller holds up the pre-resettlement photograph we gasp to see how many homes once crowded around the busy wharf where hundreds of cod bodies lay out to dry on the wooden flake.

Back then, in this thriving outpost, Miller’s Uncle Joe held the proud title of cod killer, for his extraordinary skills. When Joe left Ireland’s Eye, staring hard at the church with an aching heart, he already knew the cod was depleting and the way of life for rural Newfoundlanders would further change.

“I remember the morning. It was a clear sunny day. The wharf in Trinity East, nobody was on it. It was as if there’d been a nuclear explosion. People were absolutely stunned.” Despite the name, John Fisher is no salty dog but an import from Ontario whose family are an integral part of a community “that was reckoned to be dead by now”. Fisher’s Loft, in Port Rexton, was established in 1997 and is now a 33-room inn across six hillside buildings generally in keeping with the typical saltbox architecture of the province.

Yet Fisher believes “Newfoundland can’t just be looked at in the rear-view mirror” and supports local emerging artists and ►

**When Miller holds up
the pre-resettlement
photograph we gasp to
see how many homes
once crowded around the
busy wharf.**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KATHY KNOWLES



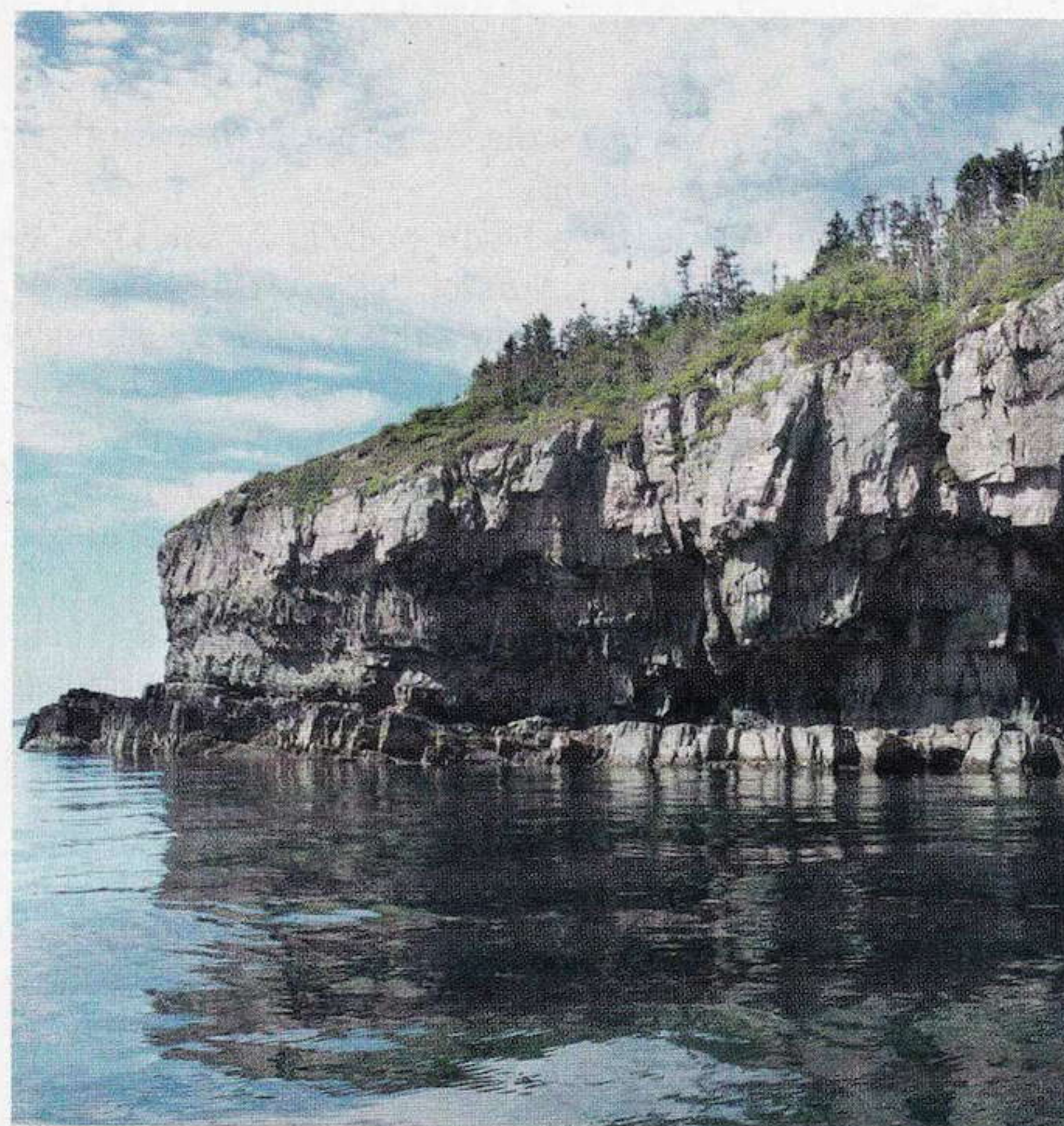
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FISHER'S LOFT

OTHER CANADIAN DESTINATIONS THAT HAVE REINVENTED THEMSELVES

Chemainus, British Columbia is The Little Town that Did. When the forest industry fell into decline during the 1980s, this Vancouver Island logging town got creative and commissioned artists to paint outdoor murals depicting the town's historic past. All 39 artworks can be toured by foot, tram or horse-drawn carriage.

Dawson City, Yukon Territory sprung up with the Klondike gold rush and by 1898 this remote riverside settlement was the territory's capital of 30,000. Although stripped now of its capital status, the 1300 permanent residents don't believe all good things should come to an end and maintain the era's infrastructure and lively spirit.

Saint-Tite in Québec was a run-of-the-mill forestry and agriculture town that got heavily into leather in the 1960s and created a rodeo to promote the new industry. Now this small city hosts Festival Western de Saint-Tite for 10 days every September, attracting over half a million visitors. It has remodelled its main street for a more Western Frontier look.



“Tourism didn’t replace the cod fishing by any means, but it keeps more of us here.”

innovative food. He also considers the availability of decent coffee a human rights issue. The restaurant at Fisher's Loft is a four-course dinner prepared and served by women who know exactly what I mean when I turn up hungry and say “I’m gutfounded.”

The nearby former boatbuilding town of Trinity – a bouquet of restored historic structures – is now quite the tourism hub. There’s a working forge, daily walking tours, whale and iceberg watching, and an active theatre company. Much of the accommodation is owned or managed by Netherlands-born Tineke Gow of Artisan Inn. She and her daughter Marieke offer people “the chance of living in history for the night”.

After a coastal sunrise hike on Skerwink Trail at Port Rexton the next day, I’m back on the water again with Sea of Whales Adventures. As humpbacks and puffins pass the zodiac, owner Kris Prince tells me his grandmother suggested eco-tourism after the fisheries closed when he was a teenager. “She knew it was a way for us to stay on the water and be happy.”

Marieke Gow, who pines for the sound of Trinity’s foghorn when she’s travelling, and plays a mean fiddle at impromptu kitchen parties as well as any tenth-generation local, says she’s “never met a Newfoundlander who didn’t wish they were home”. And people, it seems, are gradually returning.

“Tourism didn’t replace the cod fishing by any means but it keeps more of us here,” Miller says over tea and biscuits at his cabin at the end of the tour. “So, god love you for coming.” □

PHOTOGRAPHY THIS PAGE BY ELSPETH CALLENDER

(left to right): Random Passage site on Trinity Bay; the rugged cliffs of Trinity Bay.