

Newfoundland, Revisited

One man's return to The Rock Text and photographs by Dick Snyder



THOUGH I GREW UP in Newfoundland, I'm careful to point out that I wasn't born there. I would never refer to myself as a Newfoundlander. That would be presumptuous and sufficient grounds for a sock to the jaw in some circumstances – say, after hours at The Ship Pub when the doors are locked, the beer's flowing and the fiddles are cranked.

Nevertheless, when I tell people I grew up in Newfoundland, they will, of course, assume I was born there. They all say the same thing after that: "Oh, I'd love to visit Newfoundland." Yes, I reply with all sincerity, of course you would. It's the best place on earth.

I can say that now with full confidence, after taking my family back "home" for a summer vacation last year. Yet, as a precocious nine-year-old transplanted to St. John's from Montreal in 1975, I felt I'd been sent to a backwater. Dad was an engineer,

and we moved there for his job, to work on a new research facility studying ocean resources. But this was possibly the height of Newfoundland's "have-not" status, the lowest economic ebb for the province in the federation. To me, the place seemed bleak.

It had no NHL hockey team. No smoked meat sandwiches. No subway system. Instead, endless fiddle music, bad television and a radio broadcast dedicated to the minutiae of coastal weather patterns. "For Pouch Cove, fog. For St. John's, rain changing to drizzle overnight. For the rest of the Avalon Peninsula, rain, drizzle and fog. And more fog, possibly heavy, with some extra fog on the side, turning to thick, unbelievably soupy fog by morning."

I remember enduring – no joke – a full 40 days and 40 nights of rain. Biblical, yes. Fun? No. But it does explain how Newfoundlanders have developed such a great sense of humour and fondness for "a wee swally." You need it to survive.

As a surly adolescent, I felt there was nothing to do. Ma, I'm bored of fishing for trout in the stream across the street from our home in the middle of the city. Ma, how come Woolworth's doesn't carry skateboards? Ma, do we really have to spend summer vacation on our sailboat touring unbelievably picturesque fishing villages, seeing whales up close and eating fresh fish, lobster, crab and mussels every night? I happened to be in the best place on earth but didn't know it yet.

As a teenager, I couldn't wait to leave for the big city and plotted my escape to university. My friends and I congregated in Montreal and Toronto, where, years later, I live now, for post-hippie liberal arts indulgences. But all we ever talked about was going back "home" for Christmas, summer break and any other excuse we could come up with. Summers were the best, and then we'd go back to school – and there would be tears.

My family and I spent much of last summer's vacation covering the same

ground I did as a boy. The only disappointment was the weather. It'll be cold and rainy, I said, so bring sweaters and jackets. It rained twice: the day we got there and the day we left. The fog-horn that used to bray across St. John's most nights – I'd lie in my childhood bed and count the 20 seconds between blasts – did not sound even once. I was sad not to hear it again.

The first stop on our tour, straight off the plane, was The Duke of Duckworth, generally regarded as the best fish and chips in St. John's. However, this is a contentious claim – and you could ask six people and get six different answers, detailing the variations in batter, gravy, fries and dressing (literally, Thanksgiving turkey-style dressing) at other locally famous spots like Ches's, Leo's and Scamper's.

The Duke can be romanticized in many ways, not least as the place where I spent many a long evening with my buddies over too many pints of Smithwick's. It was – and still is – a British-style pub where you always run into someone you know. Scenes from the hit TV show *Republic of Doyle* were shot there, but they've since built a replica of the room on a soundstage because regulars got antsy when their pub was closed. The place looks as it did 30 years ago, as does The Ship Pub (formerly The Ship Inn), the city's most mythologized pub, just down the street. It was the hangout of the original CODCO comedy troupe and remains the best place to see authentic traditional and folk music.

St. John's, the capital, is just how I remember, though it has cleaned up a bit. Newfoundland is now quite a formidable "have" province, since 2010 tabling healthy multimillion-dollar budget surpluses. The money that oil and mining has brought in over the last decade or so has paved pristine roads enjoyed by pristine luxury rides.

For our stay in St. John's, we rented a house nestled in the rocky cliffs

along The Narrows, as the entrance-way to the harbour is called for obvious reasons. My high school buddy used to live along there, in a warren of houses lining a thin strip of Battery Road. It was an unfashionable neighbourhood then, but now it's the place to be, perched at the edge of the formidable North Atlantic yet a 10-minute walk to the centre of town.

From the Battery, it's a 90-minute trek (or so) on the famous North Head Trail leading up Signal Hill to Cabot Tower, a monument to explorer John Cabot with a panoramic view of ocean and city. The first wireless trans-Atlantic message was received here by Marconi in 1901. I used to walk our Newfoundland dog here, and she'd cut the quintessential profile of an ocean rescue dog, smiling and panting into the onshore winds as they buffeted the cliffs. The dog took care of herself, but we almost lost one child to the heavy gusts of wind on this particular hike.

We walked a lot in St. John's. It's just what you do, up and down 45-degree grades, my favourite being the tiniest of streets called Hill O'Chips. Duckworth and Water Streets are the main drags – quaint crafts shops mix with a new wave of global cuisine diners and eateries. Rocket Bakery & Fresh Food, opened four years ago by two Toronto ex-pats along with a local entrepreneur, positively hops with impromptu folk music jam sessions and customers clamouring for sensational home-made food. We had no such thing back when I was a lad.

It's always been all about the fish in Newfoundland. And by fish, they mean cod. We learned that fast when we moved there, a family of CFAs, or Come From Aways, barely accustomed to eating fresh

fish. We'd go to the wharf at Quidi Vidi, a tiny fishing village a few minutes from our house, and buy fresh cod and lobsters from the fishermen.

Quidi Vidi is now a hopping little hamlet. There's a brewery that throws raucous "kitchen" parties with a folk band that gets louder and better with every pint. The food comes from next door's Mallard Cottage, run by one of a new wave of worldly chefs set on celebrating and evolving local cuisine. Here we met up with Capt. Frank Janes, a retired trucker with a salty tongue who took us for a spin in his fishing boat. The kids jigged for cod – we were lucky to time our visit during a short period in summer when fishing restrictions are dropped. Capt. Janes swore about the fishing moratorium and the government, and we rolled around in the ocean swell for a glorious afternoon. Back on shore, Capt. Janes did the filleting, with a couple more beers at hand, and we took our fish home for a fry.

The ocean represents a mythical yet very physical presence in St. John's and, indeed, every community on the island, given that the vast majority of villages, towns and cities hug the rugged coastline. My dad bought a big wooden sailboat when I was 11, and we set out to explore the island's rugged beauty. Summer vacations meant sailing around, somewhat aimlessly, popping in at fishing ►



The author's children, Stella and Harry, at Fort Point, Trinity Harbour. Opposite: The author's wife, Trish Kaliciak, at Cape Bonavista Lighthouse on the tip of the Bonavista Peninsula

villages, some abandoned during the resettlement program intended to incentivize citizens of poorer communities to migrate to the larger towns. We have a photograph of one such village hanging on my wall at home in Toronto, a crumbling church sinking into an overgrown field.

OUR SAILING TOURS were epic adventures, apart from the near-death experiences. We hit more than one rock on more than one occasion, lost the engine in thick fog and ran out of food as an ocean storm forced us ashore. With the larder empty, my dad asked some fishermen docked alongside us if he could buy some crab. No, they said. But they gave us all we could eat for free. They were licensed for fish and couldn't accept cash for crab.

Most summers, we'd sail to Trinity, an old fishing and whaling settlement about a three-hour drive from St. John's. We have an etching of the village by the French artist Jean Claude Roy hanging in our living room, and I was excited to show the kids the real thing. The tiny town has achieved some fame as the set for Hollywood movie *The Shipping News* with Kevin Spacey and Julianne Moore. I spent a few weeks there as a 16-year-old, deck-handing and living on our sailboat, running tourists out to see the whales. This was back before the term "eco-tourism."

Trinity, which was added to the Canadian Register of Historic Places in 2008, has a progressive mayor who sees the potential in historical tourism. There's summer theatre, a few snack shops and tea rooms and some wonderfully curated museums. The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland designated several buildings in Trinity as historic sites between 1978 and 1983, which attracted money needed to preserve and restore the attractions,

and yet it's still a sleepy little village even when all the rooms in town are booked up. Tineke Gow runs the Artisan Inn here, and she manages a half-dozen quaint cottages and properties, each brimming with character and featuring spectacular views.

I'm biased, of course. Our time in Trinity created a whole raft of new memories, watching my kids do the same things I used to do. Like combing the beach outside our cottage for crab heads, dried-up starfish, mussel shells and other sea detritus that now occupy a shoe box in my daughter's bedroom. We spent a day on the water with the folks from Sea of Whales Adventures, getting up close with humpbacks and dolphins in a spiffed-up pontoon boat that put us on the surface of the water next to 10-metre beasts. The kids beamed, and the whales waved their massive dorsals, and we went home tired, wet and happy.

If anything's changed in Newfoundland over the past decade or two, it's the sophistication of its restaurants and hotels, its eateries and inns. I chalk it up to the young guns who've travelled the world to learn and then returned to amp things up. (Back in my day, no one ever returned.) Nowhere is this more apparent than in Upper Amherst Cove, a town with pretty much nothing to offer visitors except one of the province's best restaurants, Bonavista Social Club, open spring through fall. Katie Hayes is the force here, and she wields a mean brick oven imported from France. Her woodworking dad built the place, and her husband, Shane, works the floor. It's here that I had the best fresh-from-the-garden salad of my life, a top-notch pizza and a terrific moose burger, the animal hunted the previous fall by her brother.

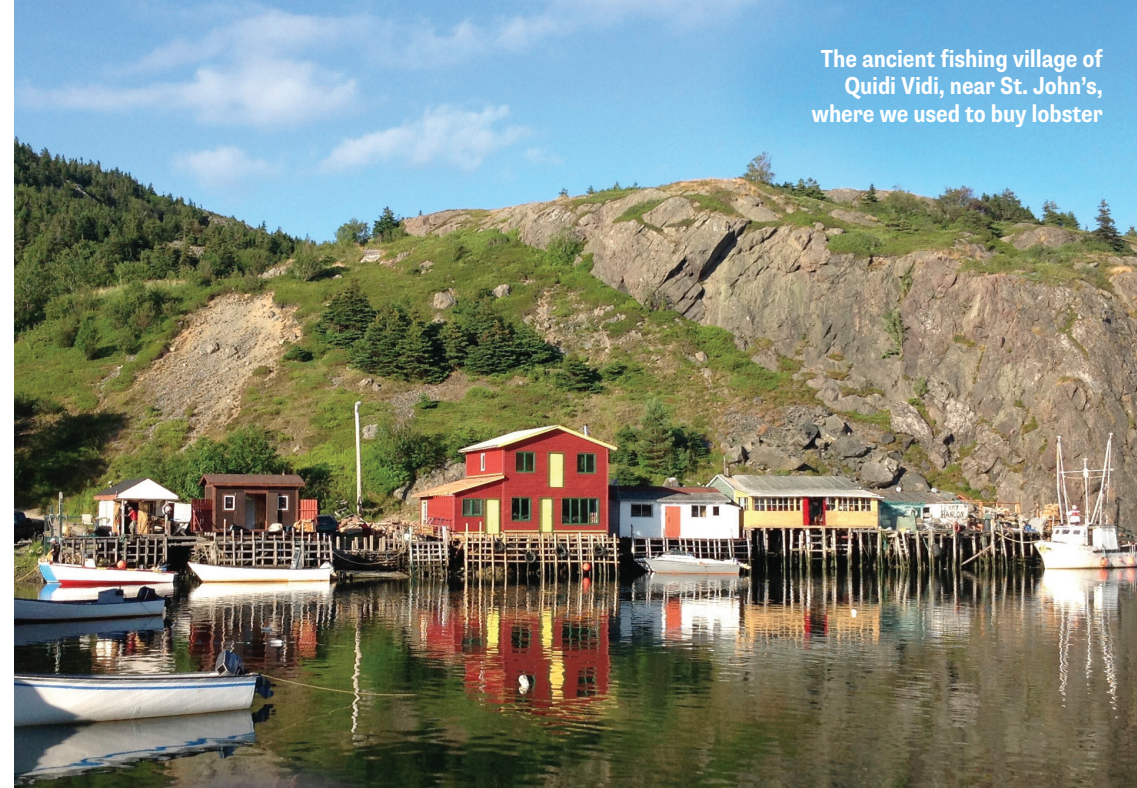
We toured the tiny village of Elliston, the "root cellar capital of the world," which I'd never visited be-

fore. We went for the puffins. There's a massive rock where a colony resides, and you can walk to the edge and observe the birds over a 25-metre crevice. Incredibly, the birds started to land around us. Some of them walked up within an arm's reach of our kids, which set tourists' cameras clicking and elicited some odd comments. "Your kids are too close to the birds," we were told. "The birds keep chasing them," I answered. It was magical to see so many puffins up close. They aren't so elegant in flight, kind of like an eggplant with wings. But up close, they are regal and cute as hell.

Some of our favourite moments weren't even planned. Pretty much all you need to do to have a good time in Newfoundland is stop the car and walk a beach, woods or town. We discovered Salmon Cove, a grey-sand beach with a warm-water stream, and the kids splashed for hours. We wandered the town of Brigus, where explorer Capt. Bob Bartlett lived, and made a mini-aquarium of tiny starfish, sea urchins and snails. We had lunch in the town of Dildo, mostly for the photo ops, and then stumbled into a dockside community festival.

It may be a cliché, but what sticks with me the most is the legendary hospitality of the Newfoundlanders. When our plans changed suddenly and we were stranded with no place to stay, we rang Tineke Gow in Trinity. In minutes, she located a house on the water and got us set up right. Stress be gone, we drank a glass of wine and watched the boats roll in at dusk. I thanked her profusely. "It's what we do," she said with a shrug.

Well, it's no cliché. Newfoundlanders really are as warm and caring and proud as everyone says. They have much to be proud about, too. I live in Toronto now but I always think of Newfoundland as home. And I think of Newfoundland always. That's the way it is for a lot of us ex-pats. Always leaving, always coming back. ☐



The ancient fishing village of Quidi Vidi, near St. John's, where we used to buy lobster



The regal puffins of Elliston



The historic fishing town of Brigus, home of explorer Capt. Bob Bartlett



The harbour at Dildo, also famous for its fish



A pair of traditional "ugly sticks," mandatory for kitchen parties



A colourful shed in Quidi Vidi