



NATURAL SELECTIONS

Wild times in Newfoundland

JEREMY BOURKE

According to the Newfoundland Dictionary of English, what I have in my hands today is the remnants of a "growler". Definition: "A piece of floating ice; very unstable." In the hierarchy of such descriptions, growlers sit at the bottom, just below "bergy bits", and there are plenty of both circling their "mother ship". Welcome to Iceberg Alley.

Every spring hundreds of icebergs that have slid off glaciers in Greenland several years earlier arrive off Newfoundland's Atlantic coast. This coast should almost be called Iceberg Graveyard, because here they're in the last throes of life. "In a month this one will have gone," explains Kris Prince, skipper of our inflatable Zodiac, as we approach an iceberg that's toying with the light, constantly changing our perception. On first view it's like the sails of a two-master, one a copy of the other except that the front specimen is a deep, rich blue while the one behind appears almost translucent.

From another angle, it's horseshoe-shaped, brilliant white with a sloping top and several distinct cracks. Further around again and we're peering into an icy canyon, so bright it's almost dazzling. And that is just the 10 per cent that's visible.

Kris rents Sea of Whales cruise company, and his stock in trade is whales; the minke, humpbacks and sperm species that feed around Newfoundland's Bonavista Peninsula. But if the whales are being elusive, like today, then at the right time of year, from late April to June, icebergs are guaranteed. And they're as menacing as they are astoundingly beautiful. This one is sitting in Blackhead Bay, off Cape Bonavista, and on our approach the ocean is surging at one end. A slice has just broken off, and we're lucky not to have been too close. Pieces as big as a bus can be launched into the air by the wave force of a cracking iceberg, Kris says, adding that it "sounds like thunder". Residents reckon the crockery rattles when one blows close to the coast. When smaller bits break up, the escaping air makes a guttural sound, hence the "growler" description.

Even bergy bits and growlers can do the unexpected, but Kris reckons we're OK as he nets a few offcuts to taste. Despite the briny environment, this ice is the purest water imaginable and the oldest, having fallen as rain or snow between 10,000 and 25,000 years ago.

Despite their unpredictability, icebergs are

free to a good home, and snaring one can produce liquid gold. At the Fish Exchange restaurant in the Newfoundland and Labrador capital, St John's, the waiter assures me both the gin and the beer with "iceberg" on the label are the real deal.

The water is taken either from shards collected in the bays or, if they're confident the berg has grounded itself, a boat will use a huge claw on the bow to dig out the ice.

Quidi Vidi Iceberg Beer certainly is refreshing; it needs to be to balance the rather sinewy texture of my fried cod tongue appetiser. It sounds like a dish spoofed up for gullible visitors, such as seal flipper pie. But this is a genuine local favourite, as is char-grilled halibut. Later I walk off the fine meal with some twacking, which the Newfoundland dictionary defines as "window shopping".

As far east as you can be in North America, this rocky shore fooled Anglo-Italian explorer John Cabot who, although credited with naming this "new-found-land" in 1497, believed he'd reached

Asia but didn't stay to take a proper look.

Even though the exact spot of Cabot's landing, anywhere from Labrador to Maine, is disputed, St John's has an impressive stone Cabot Tower to underscore its claim, and it was from here in 1901 that another significant trans-Atlantic crossing was achieved when Marconi received the first radio signal from Europe.

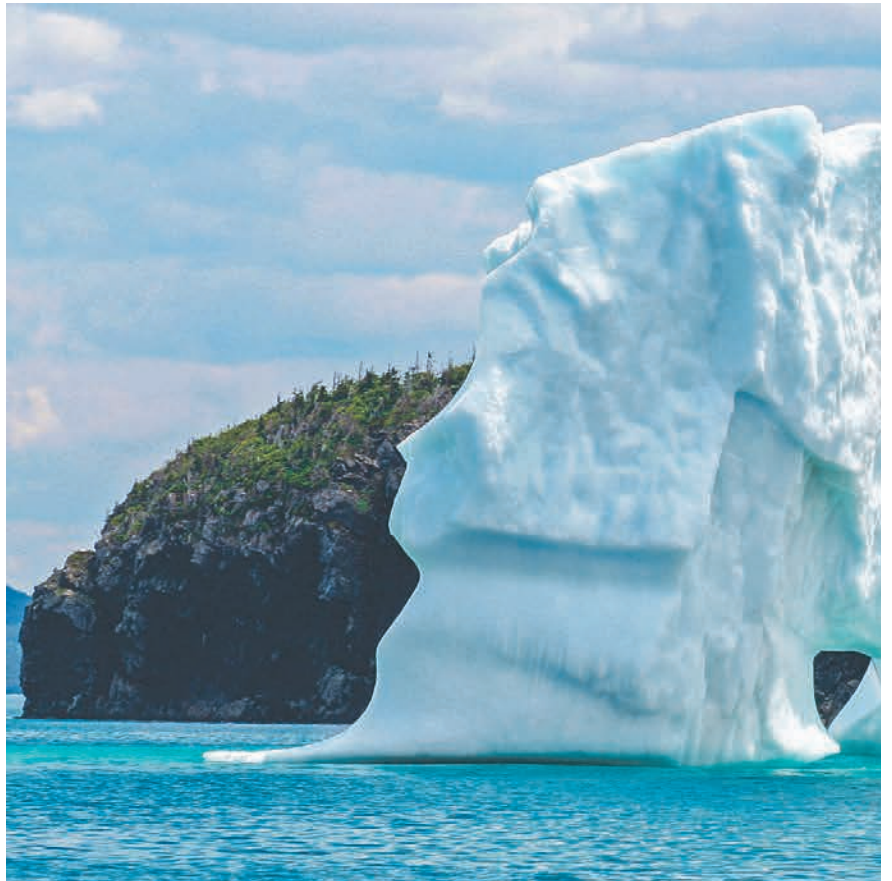
While the Atlantic beyond can often be knotty (Newfoundlandese for "rough weather"), St John's is a rainbow, where a row of timber terraces can present individual facades in purple, apricot, burgundy, butter, teal and pistachio. These are called jellybean houses. My accommodation is in a sturdier waterfront warehouse converted into the maze-like Murray Premises Hotel, where my guestroom is an expansive haven, with a fake fire set in front of a comfy lounge chair and welcoming chocolate.

I intend to start my iceberg quest in St John's because Cape Spear, 15km south, is one of the best land-based viewing spots in the province. According to icebergfinder.com, with its clickable map and photos, there are some splendid examples awaiting me. But a diaphanous iceberg has no chance against the fog that has enveloped the peninsula, so I pin my hopes on better luck with Captain Kris on the Bonavista and set the sat-nav for Trinity.

If you wanted a template for Toy Town, Trinity is it. Dotted across a peninsula that jets into a natural harbour, no two of its cute



JEREMY BOURKE



picket-fenced cottages are the same colour. Everything used to be white, but the professionals from St John's seeking a weekender haven discovered it 20 years ago and brought the capital's jellybean palette with them.

The most prominent building is St Paul's Anglican Church, said to be the largest wooden church in North America, while down by the harbour, historic Lester Garland House was the first brick building in Newfoundland. Closed for 40 years, the blacksmith's forge is hot again, producing everything from letter openers to anchors.

Meanwhile, traffic on Iceberg Alley is humming, and a drive to the top of Bonavista Peninsula provides a postscript to the morning's successful cruise. Heading through Elliston on the way to a nearby puffin-viewing site, a bergy bit sits in the bay. Later, as the road descends to Bonavista town, there's another just off the beach, the size of a cruise ship.

IN THE KNOW

Newfoundland's main airport is St John's but there are also direct flights from the likes of Toronto to Deer Lake on the opposite side of the island. Car ferries connect Newfoundland with mainland ports in summer.

icebergfinder.com
newfoundlandlabrador.com
pc.gc.ca
explorecanada.com.au

The evening meal is a boil-up courtesy of Bonnie Stagg, whose Bonavista Adventure Tours offers an experience to visitors that's just normal for locals. "In summer it's too hot to cook inside, so we come to the beach." Over firewood burning on the shore, Bonnie boils delectable snow crab and lobster and roasts capelin. Similar to a large sardine, capelin is beloved of both whales and Newfoundlanders, who scoop them up on the beach.

In contrast to this icy east coast, the west side of Newfoundland merely chills out. A few small communities cling to its inlets, and within its World Heritage-listed Gros Morne National Park lies a rare landscape. The layer of earth we live on is the crust, thin but solid. Below it is the mantle, a constantly moving layer of slushy rock. And in only three places does this slush, now solidified, show its face: Oman, Papua New Guinea and Gros Morne, Newfoundland.

The exposed section here is called the Tablelands, and while the texture is stony but spongy, the striking feature is its burnt orange colour. According to Parks Canada guide Chris, who leads tours into this stark wilderness, the peridotite rock is toxic so nothing substantial grows. But peridotite produces methane, just like on Mars, and research scientists love this place. As do caribou. Normally camouflaged according to the season (white in winter, brown in summer) on this late-spring morning a still-white herd trundles through the gully below us.

Gros Morne's other standout is Western Brook, a half-hour drive then a 45-minute walk north of Rocky Harbour. On a two-hour cruise into this landlocked fjord, the sen-

