

The best way to experience Newfoundland is by sea

From viking settlements to majestic fjords, make an ocean voyage around Canada's easternmost province



By [Lydia Schrandt](#)

Editor

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The first thing to expect from expedition travel is to expect the unexpected. (Say that five times fast.)

Before I'd even stepped aboard [Adventure Canada's Ocean Endeavour](#), sitting at anchor in the port of St. John's, my planned circumnavigation of Newfoundland had become, well, *not*. Pack ice paired with persistent southwesterly winds made the Strait of Belle Isle, the waterway separating the Labrador Peninsula from the island of Newfoundland, impassable.



A large iceberg floats amid the pack ice off the coast of Newfoundland — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

And I wouldn't have had it any other way.

I came to Newfoundland without many expectations; I knew it was in Eastern Canada and that it was pronounced "new-fun-land" with an emphasis on the "land." That's about it.

What I found was one of the most genuine places I've ever had the pleasure to visit. There's an authenticity that evades the constraint of words.

You hear it in the folk songs, mostly about fishing and the sea, played on a harmonica at the back of a bar on Water Street. You taste it in the food – dishes made from hard tack and salted cod – born from hardship and beloved from tradition. You see it in the whimsical yard decorations and signs declaring "The Murphys Live Here." And you feel it in the warmth of the people who, if you're not careful, will whisk you away to their home, boil up some lobster and fold you right into the family.



Lobster traps are common lawn decorations throughout the island — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

And there's no better way to see this under-appreciated corner of Canada than by sea.

"The chance to see the province this way is really special," says Adventure Canada CEO Cedar Swan. "It gives you a different appreciation for life in Newfoundland. You see the harshness of it more. People in Newfoundland live and breathe and die by the ocean. It's what sustains them. It's what so much of their history is based around."

Completing the circle: The arrival of the vikings

The first seafarers arrived on the rocky shores of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula in the 11th century – a band of Norse sailors and the first Europeans on the continent, hundreds of years before Christopher Columbus "discovered" America. It was also the site where human migration out of Africa completed its circumnavigation of the globe when the Norse encountered local aboriginal peoples.



At L'Anse aux Meadows, visitors can explore a recreated Norse settlement — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

Today, the UNESCO-listed site known as L'Anse aux Meadows remains the only authenticated viking site in North America.

We arrive to a steady drizzle falling on the network of recreated sod houses, chunks of sea ice with the occasional iceberg – likely birthed from a Greenland glacier – floating in the background. Inside the huts, fires provide a welcome heat as costumed interpreters act out what life was like for these early European settlers in the New World.






A costumed interpreter cooks over an open flame at the L'Anse aux Meadows Norse site — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

Ragnar, a Norse blacksmith, demonstrates how to smelt bog iron into a nail used for ship repair; his real life counterpart likely only lived to the age of 30 or so before the smoke ruined his lungs. Thora sits in the weaving room and knits a wool hat with a single needle and her fingers. She makes it look easy.

Experts aren't sure why the Norse packed up camp and left, but they did so after barely a decade. The next Europeans wouldn't arrive until the closing years of the fifteenth century.

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The Basques of Red Bay

Just across the Strait of Belle Isle from L'Anse aux Meadows on the Labrador mainland sits another UNESCO World Heritage site, the Red Bay Basque Whaling Station. During the 1500s, the waters off the coast of Labrador often teemed with thousands of whalers from the Basque region of Northern Spain and Southern France, who'd make the harrowing month-long trip across the Atlantic to collect oil to light the lamps back home.

The station was used for some 70 years, its history immortalized in the whale bones, roof tiles, burial grounds and cooperage ovens now on display throughout the grounds and interpretive center.

Francois: Life in the fjord



The town of Francois sits at the end of a narrow fjord in Southern Newfoundland — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

Life persists in Newfoundland. Much like it did centuries ago, it still revolves around the sea. Putting a finger on the pulse of the island requires a visit to one of its numerous small towns, some, like Francois, accessible only by boat or helicopter. A

narrow fjord – difficult to navigate into with winds blowing east, perpendicular to its entrance – leads to its deep harbor. Only around 100 people call this colorful town home.

There are no roads, no souvenir shops – just a series of paved paths and winding boardwalks connecting the multi-hued buildings hugging the steep hillside. A short hike up behind the village leads to a cemetery on the shores of a waterfall-fed pond surrounded by even higher mountain peaks.

A steep set of stairs takes me to a lookout with views down into the harbor and the fjord beyond. For the kids of Francois, all 11 of them, this is their backyard, and on a sunny summer day like this, I can see the appeal.



The Francois cemetery sits on the shores of a tranquil pond — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

But it's not always so easy. There's no cell phone service, no doctors and no nurses. A medical emergency means flying in first responders from the nearest hospital by helicopter; there's a landing pad behind the school. And while the clear, summer days can be hard to beat, the winters here are harsh.

It's this kind of isolation that prompted the government of Newfoundland to initiate a resettlement program between 1954 and 1975. During that time, nearly 300 communities were abandoned and 30,000 people relocated; Francois was one of the few towns to survive the program. The town reconsidered resettling in 2013 but voted against it. It's unclear how long this way of life can go on, but for now, it persists.

Brake's Cove & Cox's Cove: A story of resettlement

Others haven't been so lucky. Another small town called Cox's Cove on the western coast of Newfoundland, an unplanned stop after we'd been rerouted from the ice, was where many of the families from nearby Brake's Cove were resettled in 1966.



The dozen families living in Brake's Cove were resettled in 1966 — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

Joan Oxford, one of Cox's Cove's 600-some residents, takes some of us on a tour of her old home in Brake's Cove. All that remains are a few summer cabins and a small cemetery hidden in the woods atop a hill behind town. "It was a very emotional time," Joan explains, as we reach the shaded headstones. Some of the remains were moved along with their families during the resettlement, others have been left behind and will one day likely be lost in time and forgotten.



The Brake's Cove cemetery sits atop a hill behind the former town — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

The scene back in Cox's Cove that afternoon is anything but somber. A cruise ship's in the harbor and the locals are throwing a party. As I enter the community center, I see a table lined with tin foil-covered plates, index cards leaning against them with descriptions of the traditional foods written in a variety of hands. Boiled moose meat, bakeapple jam, cod fishcakes and toutons, bits of dough fried in pork fat and served with a drizzle of molasses.



Cod features heavily in the cuisine of Newfoundland — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

After we eat, instruments materialize and the dancing begins. It doesn't matter who's a local and who's a passenger. Today, we're all part of the community.

A few of us step outside for a breath of fresh air. Connie, one of the locals from inside, follows us out and offers to give us a ride to a nearby waterfall in her uncle's truck. We enthusiastically take her up on the offer and pile into the back; the keys were left in the ignition.



Nearby waterfalls are a popular summer swimming spot for Cox's Cove residents — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

As I reenter the hall after our short impromptu excursion chasing waterfalls, Joan gets up on stage and takes the mic to sing a slow, mournful ballad she wrote about her experience as a child, uprooted from home without any say in the matter. Her voice pierces the hall, singing, "I'm a resettled body with an unsettled mind." Even decades later, the legacy of resettlement lives on.

Gros Morne National Park: Mother Earth tells her story

Newfoundland's human history isn't its only notable feature. Not by a long shot. Many visitors to the island, myself included, have Gros Morne National Park at the top of their sightseeing wish list, and for very good reason. Where Red Bay and L'Anse aux Meadows tell the human side of the Newfoundland story, Gros Morne tells a longer geological story about the entire planet.



Within Gros Morne National Park, the Earth's mantle is exposed in an area known as the Tablelands — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

I follow a Parks Canada ranger onto a rocky path toward giant orange outcrops jutting toward a blue sky – a far cry from the forested banks of the fjord where we'd anchored earlier in the day. These are the Tablelands, an exposed portion of the Earth's mantle dating back to a continental collision half a billion years ago and the geological formation that proved the theory of plate tectonics.

More recent glacial activity has formed deep fjords, glacial valleys, alpine plateaus, lakes and waterfalls (including the highest in eastern North America). Sea caves, sea stacks and sandy beaches dot the shores of this massive national park. The quiet streets of Woody Point, gateway to the national park, are lined with art galleries, inns and restaurants serving local specialties, like moose meat pie or pan-fried cod.

Cape St. Mary's: Newfoundland's day in the sun

Another unplanned port of call on our semi-circumnavigation was a stellar surprise at Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve. As I strolled along the sea cliffs through the low-growing shrubs past lichen-covered boulders, it quickly became clear why this was such a special place. From the turquoise water rose a behemoth sea stack that looked white from a distance.

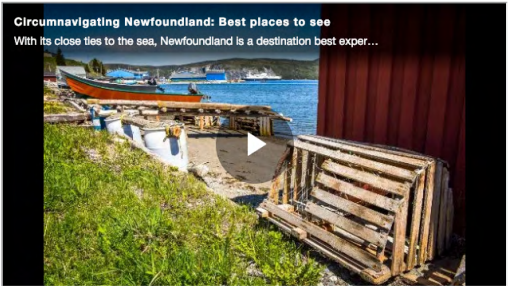
As we drew closer, my eyes began to make out that the white color covering the rock was actually 10,000 nesting pairs of Northern Gannets, a relative of the iconic Galapagos booby.



Cape St. Mary's is home to a large colony of Northern Gannets — [Photo courtesy of Lydia Schrandt](#)

The sky above the rookery was teeming with life – gannets, gulls, razorbills and kittiwakes diving into the water for food or jostling for nesting space on the cliffs. Cape St. Mary's is the most accessible sea bird rookery in North America, where on a sunny day, you could sit for hours observing the birds.

I'd heard of the Galapagos. How had I never heard of this place? This place, like the rest of Newfoundland as I'd discovered on this great coastal journey, exists in all its authentic, unsung beauty, content to simply be.



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