

By Laura Millar

IT'S just under a six-hour flight to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador in eastern Canada – only half an hour more than to an Egyptian Red Sea resort, and not a huge amount more than to Cyprus or Tenerife.

Which has given me a perhaps slightly mad idea: how about a long weekend across the Atlantic?

Fares on the Canadian low-cost airline WestJet are from a reasonable £319 return – and direct.

You could feasibly depart on a Thursday evening and be there in time for breakfast on Friday, then return overnight on Sunday and be back at your desk on Monday morning. So I decide to give it a go.

The easternmost Canadian region closest to Britain is known as Atlantic Canada. The capital, St John's, is where UK flights arrive, and spending time here is a joy.

Dotted with bright, colourful houses – so, it's said, that fishermen could see their way home in the fog – this is an incredibly photogenic place, with the cliffside neighbourhood of The Battery and around Cape Spear lighthouse especially so.

But I'm on a mission to explore the wilds of Newfoundland and Labrador, known in Canada as 'nature's playground'.

So I head across to Newfoundland's western coast – Newfoundland is an island, while Labrador is part of Canada's mainland.

This involves a one-hour hop from St John's in a small plane – or, should you wish to spend more time enjoying the scenery on a road trip, a six-hour drive.

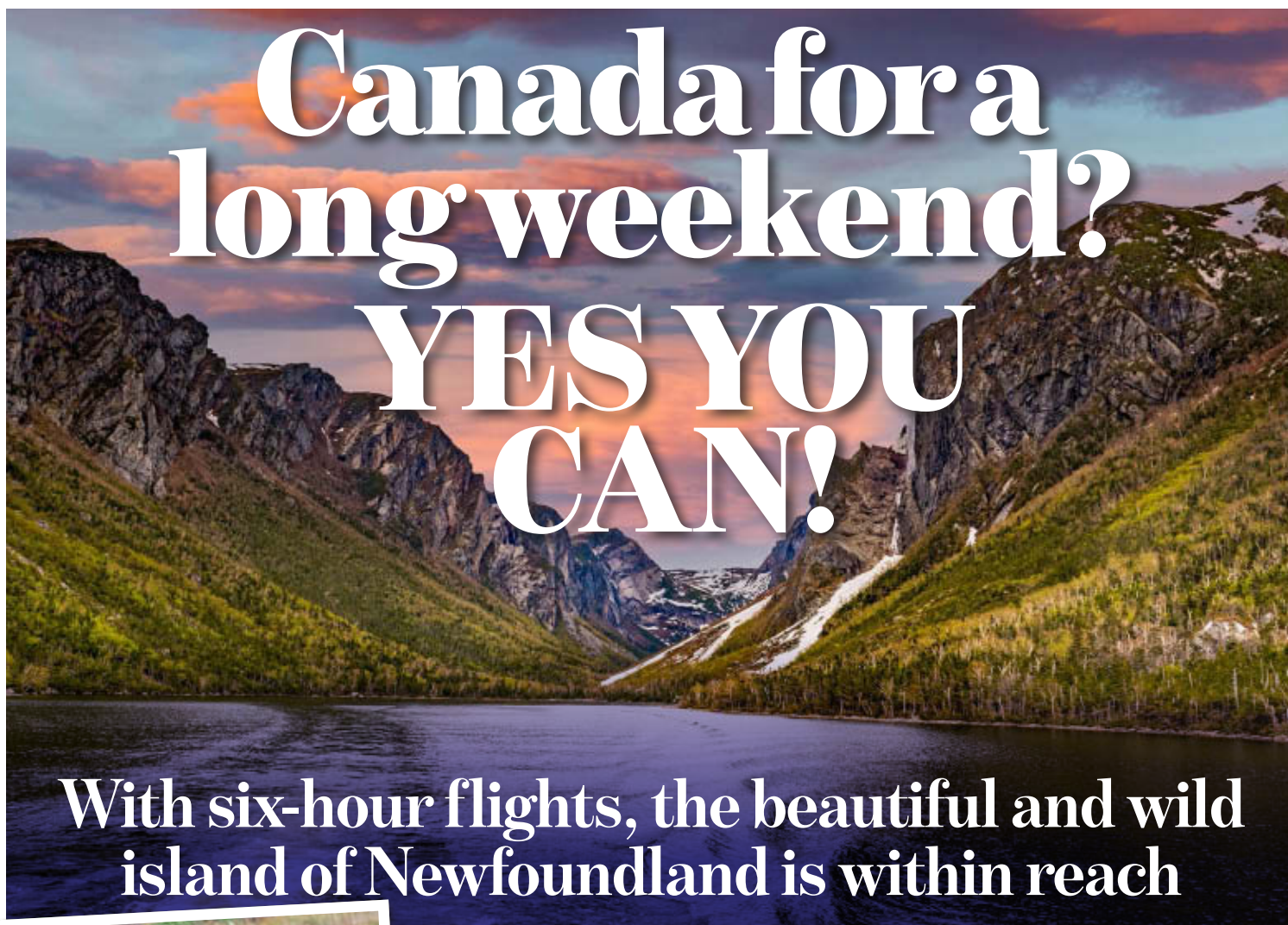
My favourite destination is Gros Morne National Park, bordering the Gulf of St Lawrence and home to some extraordinary landscapes.

The park comprises 697 square miles of blissful wilderness: fjords, mountains, beaches, bogs, forests and barren cliffs. Shaped over millions of years by colliding continents and grinding glaciers, Gros Morne is a Unesco World Heritage Site, and the one-hour drive from Deer Lake airport is spectacular.

LARGELY empty roads wind through ranges of pine trees and rolling hills. You pass shimmering lakes and isolated apple-red and butter-yellow wooden cabins, with the high peak of Gros Morne Mountain rising in the distance – though I won't be trekking to the top. My goal today is a boat cruise around Western Brook Pond, a landlocked, glacier-carved fjord.

The dock is reached by a scenic walk on a meandering path through boggy marshes and grassland peppered with wildflowers. Sadly, no caribou, though – the large, striking wild deer must be hiding in the forest.

At the dock I meet Kristy, a local guide, who explains that my fellow passengers will likely be the biggest concentration of humans I'll see in Newfoundland. The island spans 42,000 square miles (a similar



MAJESTIC: Caribou in Gros Morne National Park and, above, the park's fjord

size to Bulgaria), with a population of 500,000. Villages and towns are spread out and there's a great sense of space where I feel I can truly breathe.

Western Brook Pond is staggering. Like most things in North America, descriptions can be deceptive – with a surface area of around nine miles, if this is their idea of a pond then I can't imagine how big their lakes must be.

Sea cliffs frame the landscape, scattered with birdlife from kittiwakes to cormorants. Kristy says these cliffs are taller than Toronto's CN Tower, used for telecommunications, which stands at 1,815ft compared to the cliffs' 2,000ft.

During the two-hour boat trip, we see gushing waterfalls, and our captain points out rock faces that resemble human profiles. It's utterly magnificent.

Afterwards I head to another astonishing natural feature known as the Tablelands. This is land formed by the clashing of two tectonic plates half-a-billion years ago. One plate pushed beneath another and exposed the earth's mantle to the surface. The resulting terrain is rust-red and alien.

'Because it's so similar to that of Mars, Nasa scientists actually come here to do research,' says park ranger Jay, who's taking me on a hike.

'Usually – and thankfully – the mantle stays firmly underneath the earth's crust.' As a fierce wind whips through the beau-

tiful valley, it's not a stretch to imagine the dinosaurs that once roamed these parts.

This easternmost part of Canada is just

six hours from the UK, but a whole world away... I couldn't recommend a long weekend here more.

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London-St John's return flights from £319 (westjet.com); doubles at Shallow Bay Motel in Cow Head, northwest Newfoundland, from £87 (shallowbaymotel.com). More info: newfoundlandlabrador.com.

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