



Words by
LAURA MILLAR

[EXPERIENCES]

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

*When most people think of Canada's great outdoors, they picture the Rockies, or Banff. But nature is rawer, quieter, and much closer in Newfoundland finds **Laura Millar***

510,550

Population of
Newfoundland in
2021

15° C

Average
temperature in
Gros Morne during
September

12 YEARS

Average lifespan
of a moose

SEEING GREEN:
*Two walkers hike
around the verdant
landscapes of Western
Brook Pond Fjord*

THE PRE-DEPARTURE INFO

I'm sent before I set off on my road trip around the western coast of Newfoundland isn't exactly reassuring, considering I'll be landing at tiny Deer Lake airport, after a connecting flight from Montreal, just before midnight. It states: 'If you see a vehicle stopped on or near the highway, the driver may have spotted a moose, so be cautious. Avoid driving at night if possible.' And then, the clincher: 'Moose are extremely difficult to see in the dark.' Oh great. You absolutely do not want to mess with a moose. The average male stands around 1.8 metres tall at the shoulder and can weigh between 360 kg and 725 kg. To make the situation >



BREAK THE ICE: [above] A sizeable iceberg floats over icy waters off the coast of Newfoundland

> even more exciting, Newfoundland has the most concentrated moose population in North America, meaning my chances of running into one are definitely *not* zero. As it turns out, the forty-minute drive to my hotel passes without incident, though my jet-lagged eyes are constantly scouring the thick, dense forest which lines the roads, just

in case one makes an entrance...

But the risk is worth it; nature and wildlife are absolutely the point of a visit to Newfoundland, which, along with Labrador, on the mainland, is Canada's easternmost province. It's also home to some of the most extraordinary landscapes on the planet, and the next morning I set off on a spectacular drive from Deer Lake to Gros Morne National Park, which borders the Gulf of St Lawrence. The largely empty roads wind through endless ranges of pine trees, which

carpet the hills on either side, and pass shimmering, glassy lakes, punctuated by the occasional apple-red or butter-yellow wooden cabin. The park itself encompasses 1,805 km² of blissful wilderness, where soaring **fjords** and moody mountains dominate a diverse landscape

Fjords are long, narrow inlets of the sea, typically with steep cliffs or mountains on either side, formed as a glacier carves through a valley during ice ages

of beaches, bogs, forests, and barren cliffs. Shaped over millions of years by colliding continents and grinding glaciers, Gros Morne's ancient landscape is a Unesco World Heritage Site, and one of its (many) highlights is a scenic boat cruise around Western Brook Pond, a landlocked, glacier-carved freshwater fjord. The dock is reached by a scenic, 45-minute walk on a curving path through boggy marshes and grassland peppered with wildflowers, though not with any visible

THE BOAT TRIP UTTERLY DWARFS EVERYONE ON BOARD AS WE SAIL PAST THESE UNYIELDING SLABS OF STONE

caribou, sadly, which apparently roam here for food between autumn and spring. My guide, Kristy, explains that my fellow passengers today will likely be the biggest concentration of humans I'll see the whole time I'm in Newfoundland. The island spans 108,800 square km², with a population of just 500,000; villages and towns are gloriously spread out, and there's a phenomenal feeling of space. If you want to come somewhere you feel you can truly breathe, this is the place to do it.

Kittiwakes are coastal gulls which nest almost exclusively on narrow cliff ledges in the North Atlantic and unlike many gulls are almost entirely oceanic birds

My breath is rapidly taken away, however, as I catch my first glimpse of the 'pond' – like most things in North America, descriptions can be deceptive. If this is a pond, it's the biggest one I've ever laid my eyes on, with a surface area of around 23 km², which seems to stretch into infinity. Vast sea cliffs rear up above it, scattered with copious birdlife, from grey-winged **kittiwakes** to cormorants, which swoop dramatically around them. These cliffs are, Kristy reliably and Canadian-ly informs me, taller than Toronto's CN Tower, which stands at a measly 553 m compared to the cliffs' titanic reach of 610 m.

The two-hour boat trip has the effect of utterly dwarfing everyone on board as we sail past these unyielding, towering slabs of stone. Occasionally we spot a gushing waterfall tumbling down their obsidian surface, while our captain points out a couple of features which look like human profiles carved into the rock.

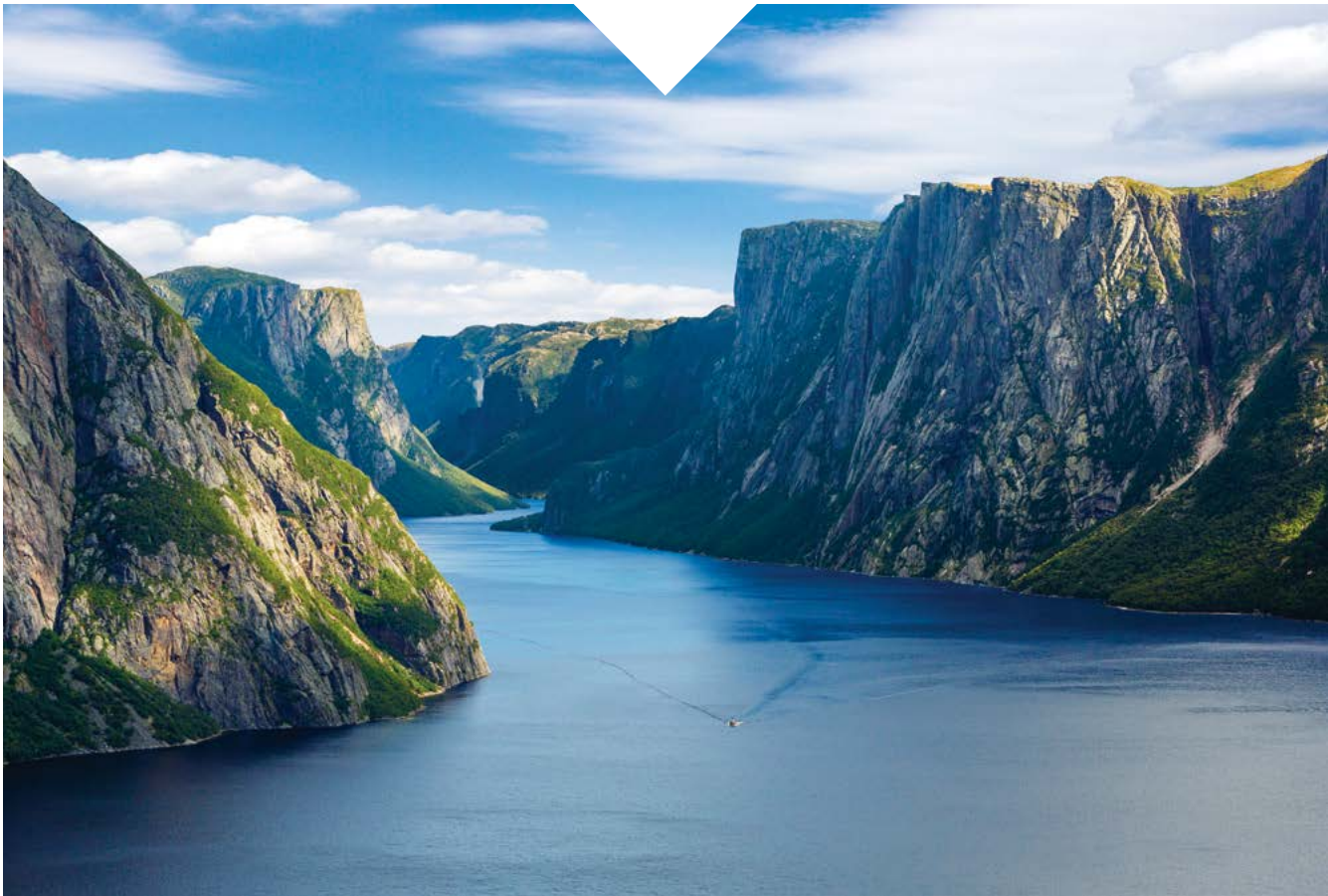
Traditionally, most visitors to Newfoundland spend time on its eastern coast, exploring the historic city of St John's, visiting communities such as Fogo Island, and spotting icebergs off the Bonavista peninsula. Sticking far out into the Atlantic Ocean, its location is also the main reason 38 planes, carrying around

7,000 passengers, were able to safely land in Gander International Airport following the attacks of September 11 after the US shut down its airspace – the events were even turned into a charming little musical called *Come From Away*. But on the western side, the astonishing landscapes just keep coming – afterwards, I head to the Tablelands, an expanse of land which was formed by the clashing of two tectonic plates half a billion years ago. One plate pushed up under another, exposing the Earth's mantle to the surface, in the process building the Appalachian Mountain chain and assembling a supercontinent called Pangaea.

The resulting terrain is rust-red and alien; "because it's so similar to that of Mars, NASA scientists actually come here to do >



WINGSTOP: [above] Three puffins; [below] colourful punts are moored by the water's edge



FJORD FIESTA: [above] A boat is dwarfed in scale as it sails through the Western Brook Pond Fjord

> research,” explains park ranger Jay, who’s taking me on a hike along the Tablelands trail. “Usually – and thankfully – the mantle stays firmly underneath the earth’s crust,” she says. There are very few places in the world where this has happened; aside from here, you can walk on the earth’s mantle in the Hajar Mountains of Northern Oman, the Troodos Mountains of Cyprus, and Maquarie Island in Tasmania. Despite the harsh, unforgiving, rocky look of the Tablelands, some hardy, scrubby plants do flourish, as Jay points out. She also picks up a small slab

of rock to show me, etched with a pattern resembling snakes’ scales, which is aptly called serpentinite. The day is eerily silent, broken only by a fierce wind which whips through the valley; it’s not hard to imagine, in all its bleak beauty, that dinosaurs once roamed this landscape.

The next morning dawns misty and atmospheric, and feels suitable for a day I’m going to spend immersing myself into the life led by some of the first settlers of Newfoundland. Over 5,000 years ago, people

There are over 30,000 registered **Mi’kmaq** people in Canada today – known for advocating for land rights, fisheries rights, and cultural preservation

called the **Mi’kmaq** [pronounced ‘mig-mah’] originated from their homeland of Mi’kma’ki, a region encompassing Canada’s Atlantic provinces and parts of the northeastern United States. As hunter-gatherers, they were adept at living off the land and the sea. At Gros Morne Adventures, based in the beautiful bay at Norris Point, I have the chance to experience some authentic indigenous activities. This family-run outfit has roots deep in this land: one of its guides, Keith Payne (father of owner Kristen Hicky), is descended from the Mi’kmaq himself, a discovery he only made going into his forties. “A few decades ago, people were ashamed of having indigenous ancestry,” he tells me. “But now, in this province, we are recognised by the federal government, and we are proud of our heritage.”

Keith then asks me, and the rest of the group, who are participating in today’s experience, to imagine we just got here, five thousand years ago. What would we need to survive? How would we try and get it? Attached to a small pier in the bay is a >

DESPITE THE HARSH, UNFORGIVING, ROCKY LOOK OF THE TABLELANDS, SOME HARDY, SCRUBBY PLANTS DO FLOURISH

> 10-person canoe with curved ends, similar to the ones the First People would have constructed out of panels of birch bark sewn together (mercifully, this one is made out of more modern fibreglass). The plan is for all of us to row it across to the other side of the bay, exploring the landscape there, and seeing what might be of use to a community of people who had just arrived in the territory. After an amusing lesson on dry land on how to use the paddles (let's just say some people are quite...vigorous when they practice their hip swings), we all

step gingerly into the canoe.

Caribou are large, migratory members of the deer family known as reindeer in Europe and Asia, found in Arctic, and boreal regions of North America, Europe, and Siberia

At first, we paddle comically out of sync, but then we find our rhythm, and the experience swiftly becomes magical.

We glide smoothly along the still, steel-

coloured waters, the only sound being the steady pull of the oars and the odd gull honking above. It's incredibly peaceful, the mist photogenically wreathing the hills and headland which surround us.

As we paddle, Keith shares stories of how the Mi'kmaq hunted **caribou**, carved canoes, followed the seasons, and found meaning in every plant and stone, while I fear my own attempt at survival in these former times may not be as successful. After we pull back up onto the shore, Keith demonstrates, with the aid of a lump of steel, a slice of flint and



IT'S INCREDIBLY PEACEFUL, THE MIST PHOTOGENICALLY WREATHING THE HILLS AND HEADLAND WHICH SURROUND US

a small piece of cloth, how they would have made their own fire. "The Mi'kmaq used iron pyrites, also known as Fool's Gold, to strike their flint against, rather than steel," he explains, adding that this was commonly found within rocks on the shoreline. And within a few moments, after repeatedly briskly clanging the steel down the side of the flint, he has made a few sparks which catch quickly onto the cloth and turn into warm, glowing embers. He then transfers this to a bowl of kindling from where it ignites into a rather impressive cluster of flames. Then it's my turn.

Let's just say that five thousand years ago, I would have been very cold and gone very hungry. The only thing on my body to get slightly warm is my wrist, from the dozens of repeated attempts at striking the flint. Just as well someone else is cooking my lunch.

A fifteen-minute drive away, in the evocatively named village of Rocky Harbour, is the Mi'kmaq-owned and run Buoy and Arrow restaurant. On the menu is their signature lobster roll, which I absolutely must order, as it will have been plucked fresh from the waters of the St Lawrence Gulf

earlier today. But when the waitress tells me what's on special, it feels like fate, of a sort: moose stew. And boy is it delicious, with a gamey, earthy flavour, long-braised and falling apart on the fork. To be honest, if this is the closest I'm going to get to one of these mighty animals, then it's not a bad way to do it. And, like everything else I've experienced while here, it's a pretty good taste of Newfoundland. ♦



CHAIN REACTION: [above] Cycling in the rust-coloured landscape of the Tablelands, Newfoundland

DO IT YOURSELF

Return flights from London Heathrow to Deer Lake, Newfoundland and Labrador (via Halifax, Nova Scotia) from £587 per person; aircanada.com. Rooms at Sugar Hill Inn, Norris Point, from around £134 per night; sugarhillinn.ca, and at Shallow Bay Motel, Cow Head, from around £87 per night; shallowbaymotel.com. For more info, visit newfoundlandlabrador.com and atlanticcanadaholiday.co.uk