

NEWFOUNDLAND – As Seen Through the Eyes of a Land-Locked Sailor

I hitched our truck to our 23-foot travel trailer the morning of 14 May and Barbara and I embarked on a journey we have been anticipating since 2010. Our destination was Canada's province of Newfoundland, the easternmost part of North America, reachable only by plane, boat, or a powerful breast stroke. I booked passage on a large ferry from North Sydney, Nova Scotia to Port Aux Basque, Newfoundland, a six-hour, hundred mile voyage across the Cabot Strait, which separates Newfoundland from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Our departure from Nova Scotia was 19 May with a scheduled return of 28 May, giving us 8 full days to investigate this island province.

We chose the great circle route to reach Nova Scotia, up to Sault Ste. Marie, through Ontario around the north side of Lake Huron, into Quebec and across the Saint Lawrence River in Montreal, and then into Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine before re-entering Canada in New Brunswick. Our ferry connection was pretty much straight east of where we exited Maine at Houlton. Our first night out was spent on American soil, about 3 miles south of Canada and the next day of travel put us on the west bank of the Ottawa River for an overnight stay. As I looked out over that fairly large and fast flowing waterway my thoughts were drawn to the countless thousands of trappers and voyageurs who had paddled their birch bark canoes over that route, fur laden canoes headed for the trading post at the confluence of the Ottawa and St. Lawrence Rivers, others loaded with trade goods making their way upstream. Across the river lay the province of Quebec which we would visit briefly on the morrow.

Plans for our three-week odyssey included a travelling breakfast consisting of moose jerky, granola bars and dried apricots, all washed down with black coffee. Shortly after leaving our camp on the bank of the Ottawa we entered a town with a Tim Horton's and that kind of signaled the end of the jerky/granola/dried apricots regimen as breakfast food. A Danish cherry filled or a glazed cinnamon roll made a nice substitute and my coffee was augmented by hot French Vanilla. Barbara subsists nicely on hot chocolate. The night we spent in Vermont afforded no Tim Horton's fare for morning starters, but that was only one night. For those less fortunate souls who do not frequent Tim Horton's, those establishments abound wherever they say "eh" a lot. They feature really good pastries of all manner and description and probably the best coffee to be found in Canada, outside a hunting camp. Something like 95 percent of the Canadian work force frequent them of a morning with sit-down patrons inside and a wrap-around drive up line outside. One is likely to find RCMP, firemen, provincial police, and regular everyday work folks like us being served at a Tim Horton's. Between Tim Horton's and the lobsters, our plans for shedding a few pounds while travelling were scrapped early on.

The timing for this particular trip was planned around events not in our control – Lobster catching season, the iceberg migration from Labrador and Greenland, and nesting time of Atlantic Puffins and Black Guillemots. The puffins and guillemots spend most of their adult lives far out at sea, making them observable to landlubbers only when they come ashore to raise their young. That is a relatively brief part of a year, starting after mid-May and ending too soon thereafter. Getting to Newfoundland prior to mid-May would have found most RV parks closed for winter. Some were still closed when we were there, but we found space where we needed to.

Port Aux Basque is in the Southwest corner of the island and the "West Coast" extends northward from there about 750 kilometers, or, if you think in miles like I do, about 465 miles. The upper half of the west coast is a peninsula and we were the first customer of the year at an RV park about 100 miles from the end. The very tip is the site of a re-created Norse or Viking

village, since the first European settlers to come to the “New World” were the Vikings, a little more than 1,000 years ago. For reasons that are not clear to me, and maybe to no one else either, the Vikings left after a couple hundred years, never to return.

As soon as one disembarks the ferry and enters the open road he is confronted with numerous signs warning of the hazards of moose on the highway. Those signs are not to be regarded lightly. One such proclaims five human mortalities thus far in 2013 as a result of moose/vehicle collisions. The ferry moored at around 1830 and by 1845 we had seen our first moose on the road. It crossed the highway ahead of us and I easily averted disaster by moderate breaking. When the moose reached the sanctuary of the trees on the right hand side, it decided it did not really want to be on that side of the road after all, and it did an about face and marched right back across in front of us again. We were stopped by then and remained stationary until the beast was no longer in sight. It should be pointed out that it was a female moose. It was good to have that encounter early on because it created awareness and a valuable caution concerning moose behavior. We stayed overnight about 40 miles north of Port Aux Basque and left early the next morning on our quest for icebergs. For the time of our visit, the north tip of the peninsula was generally regarded as the most likely place to find an iceberg close enough to view. The body of water to our left was the Gulf of St. Lawrence; the highway parallels the coast but is not near it for the first 150 miles. Then one passes into and through Gros Morne National Park. While “gros morne” translates to “large bluff,” the major attraction is a deep fiord, reachable only by leg-o-mobile, so we saw what we could by driving through and continued on our way. Then the highway edged nearer the rocky coast and it was one grand view after the next with tiny villages nestled at the heads of each bay and cove. We quickly deduced that if we stopped to see all of them we would never reach land’s end at the tip of the peninsula, so we captured a few photos, and motored on.

When we reached the RV park where we intended to spend a couple nights, I inquired about the availability of lobsters. Following the directions given, we proceeded to the waterfront and there located a lobster broker from whom we procured live lobsters for \$5.20 per pound. We cooked them in a large pot we had brought for that purpose, the first of its many uses during the ensuing eight days. One source with whom I later spoke averred that Newfoundland lobsters are the best of all, but then I learned that he hails from Gander, NL so his view may be a little slanted. I can state unequivocally that the ones we enjoyed were superb, and our menu featured lobster on 12 of the 19 days we travelled. (Some of them came from Nova Scotia.)

Next morning we stooped once again to the jerky/granola/apricots regimen because the tiny hamlets in that part of the world boasted no Tim Horton’s. Soon we could see the coast of Labrador across the Strait of Belle Isle, about 15 miles wide at its narrowest part. Then we rounded a headland and there was an iceberg, scarcely a mile at sea. It was what we came to see, so we had to stop and photograph. It was shaped something like a Viking ship, rising up on both ends from a shallow mid-section and if nothing else, it certainly looked majestic resting serenely in the rippled surface of the strait. The immensity of the drifting hulk was brought home by the realization that we were viewing only about 1/8 of the iceberg! At that juncture, my quest to see an iceberg was satisfied and I could have been content with that one sighting. As things turned out, it was but the first of twelve that we saw that day, and the first of 20 that we saw in total. Only one other afforded such a close-up viewing and there were several that could only be appreciated through the lens of a 10-power binocular. No matter the viewing distance, all were admirable, each with its distinct and unique shape. And all were calved from glaciers somewhere, either on the east coast of Labrador or the west coast of Greenland, and all were

slowly making their way southward on the Labrador current. The vast majority of them follow the north coast of Newfoundland and then turn south down the east side. It was one of these that put the Titanic on the bottom, not far off the southeast corner of the province.

That part of Newfoundland, that is the peninsular projection on the northwest corner, exhibited things other than icebergs. I was compelled to photograph large sleds, some of two solid runners and some with four runners. With snow gone, many of the sleds were on their sides, runners in the air. By asking a passerby we learned that the sleds are used for hauling firewood out to the road in winter time. They are towed by snowmobile and the cut wood is stacked by the roadside where it was awaiting pickup by whoever cut it. Obviously, theft is not commonplace, since the wood is left unattended. Another example of community trust is in the gardening practices. We kept seeing small corals, some constructed of posts and rails, others constructed of posts with fishnets strung on them, and could not decide what the purpose of them is. Again a passerby came to our assistance and told us they are garden plots. People lay out a small piece of tillable soil, fence it to keep the moose and caribou out, and plant it in vegetables. The lady recited a litany of cool weather crops that included cabbage, carrots and potatoes. She named others but those are the ones I remember. It was soon after learning the purpose of the plots that we saw men working the soil, mostly using a spade, in preparation for spring planting. I thought of the tomato plants I had stuck in the ground the day before we left and hoped they would be growing when we returned. There would be no tomato plants here!

The place where we left our travel trailer was no more than a hundred miles from the end of the peninsula so one would think we could shoot up there, take it all in, and be back by noon. Problem is the road does not go to land's end and stop. It shoots off in several different directions, and each spur required separate investigation. By the time we finally headed south again, the day was done and we barely had time to stop and photograph the caribou we found along the way. And those are a story all their own. The first one, Barbara saw but I did not. She told me she saw an albino something or other, but could not say for sure what it was. I was at a loss for an explanation until I finally got to see a caribou. They are the woodland variety of caribou, more diminutive in stature than other caribou species I have seen, and much lighter in color. Indeed, they appear white. A closer look reveals a pale tan streak on the flanks, but a first glance, especially at a distance, says "albino something or other."

We stayed another night, sole occupants in the RV park, and early next morning headed south two hundred miles, back to Trans-Canada Highway One (TCH 1), then east and north to the north central coastal area. TCH 1 is a splendid roadway with numerous passing lanes and a very nice surface. I appreciated the broad corridor along each side of the road that is kept clear of trees so that when a moose ventures toward the road it is visible long before getting on the pavement. Having said all that, I will hasten to add that most of our travels were on secondary roads and we travelled the "big highway" only when it was the only way to get where we wanted to be. Very much of Newfoundland has no roads. The whole south coast is reachable by motor vehicle at only a couple points. Both of those come off TCH 1, go south to a coastal village, and stop. Travel along the south coast is accomplished only by ferry. There are no villages in the interior part of the province; it consists of taiga, or boreal forest, with myriads of lakes and streams – arguably the most beautiful streams to be found anywhere on the planet. There is precious little cleared arable land as we know it, therefore not much crop growing. In the southwest corner, about 40 miles north of Port Aux Basque we saw several small farms in a river valley and passed near what is said to be the second largest dairy operation in Canada. I chose to

not believe that boast because I have seen many large dairy operations in Southwestern Quebec and Southeastern Ontario, all of which appear larger in scope than the one on Newfoundland.

One might wonder about the type of trees so I will relate what I saw. There were birch trees, both white and yellow, and aspen. I recall no other hardwood varieties. Most of the trees were conifers. Balsam fir, some type of spruce and tamaracks made up most of the forested areas. The layer of top soil overlying the granite bedrock was generally skimpy and most of the trees were therefore more stunted than grand. The tallest trees we saw were on the southern half of the west end of the island, where some balsam firs towered 60 feet or more. I looked for but did not see any pine trees. I was more impressed by the number of robins! Something about the place seems to attract them because they were found everywhere we went.

The whole north coast is an endless array of coves, bays, arms, inlets and harbors. We took aim on a centrally located RV park from which we could strike out and explore the region at our leisure and booked four days in a no-frills RV park that had just opened for the season. The town adjacent to it boasted a Tim Horton's and that was enough of a calling card for us. Our first morning there we went as far north as one could on the central coast, to the tip of a peninsula with a manned lighthouse. There are precious few manned lighthouses left in the world, but we did get to visit the one at Twillingate. We had hoped to see puffins there but did not. It is, in fact, not the right setting for puffins, no matter the season, so we had to settle for more icebergs. There were a total of five visible from the headland but none as close as those we had seen on the northwest cape. While photographing the Twillingate Lighthouse I heard some sweet lilting notes with a familiar ring to them emanating from the top of a balsam fir. With the help of my binocular I was able to identify the source as a white throated sparrow. They migrate through Wisconsin but they nest in Newfoundland. For reasons not entirely clear to me, I was kind of glad to see that little blighter singing from his lofty perch.

The next day we went to Gander first, not to see the town, which came into existence because of its airport, but to see the historical airstrip which was of such prominent significance during World War Two and subsequently. When I was a young lad, working in the fields in the summer of 1943, it was commonplace to have a plane towing two gliders pass overhead, bound for places unknown to me. I learned subsequently that the gliders were built in Norway, Michigan, or maybe even Iron Mountain, and they were destined to be used in the Normandy invasion – D Day. One of their stopping points, after exiting continental U.S., was Gander, NL. Then it was on to Greenland and eventually England. Of course it goes without saying that no one knew where the gliders were going, or their intended purpose, and it was many years later that I learned their travel route and where they ended up.

We continued east and south, almost as far east as one can drive, before turning north again toward **Cape Bona Vista**. It is also heralded as the point of discovery because it is believed to be the site where John Cabot landed in 1497 and made this “new found land” a part of England. I puzzled over place names like “Bona Vista” and “Terra Nova,” wondering why an Englishman like Cabot would append Italian names to things. It turns out he was not really John Cabot, but Giovanni Caboto, a Venetian Merchantman sailing under the auspices of King Henry VII of England, who found the new land. There was a lighthouse on that cape also, and it was there that we saw a lot of black guillemots, a new bird on our life list (one of nine for the trip). It was there also that we learned that moose are not indigenous to Newfoundland, but were introduced in 1922. One might say they have done well, maybe because the wolves have been exterminated. The best part of conversing with the man who controlled access to the lighthouse was that he had heard that some puffins had returned to a cape not too many miles from where

we were. He showed us where the puffins nest when they return to his cape, but they had not yet returned. Armed with that bit of knowledge, we were compelled to visit the other cape. On our way, in an effort to fine tune our directions, we asked precisely the right man and he directed us to the place where we could park, then walk, and we would indeed see puffins.

We struck out on a stony foot path toward the tip of a peninsula which got precariously skinny at one point. We pressed on. When the area broadened, Barbara waited while I went scouting. The peninsula was cut off from its former part by wave action of long ago, and what had formerly been a part of the peninsula was now an island, an impregnable fortress rising up from the sea, separated by a scant fifty feet from the part on which I stood, even less at sea level. And across the way, on the tiny island, were scores of puffins! I hurried back to get Barbara and then together we watched them for quite some time. They are curious creatures, with their enormous orange bills and tiny, too small, wings. On land, their stance is quite upright and with their stark white bellies and coal black backs, they remind me of penguins, without looking like penguins. It was such a perfect set-up because they realized I could not fly across that opening and therefore could not reach them, and they were content to go about their business while we watched. They nest in burrows, in the thin layer of soil atop the rocky isle. I was told that each puffin returns to the same burrow every year, but I had no way to verify that bit of lore. I watched one in particular that disappeared into its burrow, then reappeared a few minutes later. It entered and emerged from the burrow several times but I could not observe that it was doing anything to improve living conditions. Every once in a while one or a pair of them would decide to do a fly about, beating the air with their stubbly little wings that are obviously better suited to swimming than to flying. They would orbit their little island domain a time or two then settle back in. Their landings were of a controlled nature, not given to crashing in, a real fete considering their diminished wingspan. Gliding is absolutely out of the question for a puffin.

The puffin nesting burrows were spaced very closely – about a foot apart – and they were exclusively on the periphery of the islet. The reason for this is that when it is time for the youngster to leave (they have only one each year), it goes over the edge of the burrow and it is airborne in a rapidly descending flight path. It exits only on a high tide and it must make it to the water on the first try. There is no second attempt. Gulls and jaegers abound, waiting to prey on any hapless chick that lands short. On the water, the chick is in its element and can escape danger by swimming and diving. Outside the water it would be helpless.

Having mentioned gulls, I must go on to say that while the puffins occupy the peripheral brink of the islet top, the grassy interior, interspersed with rocks, housed hundreds of nesting gulls, mainly herring gulls and black backed gulls. It was while watching the gull activity that I chanced to see something for the first time in my life – a gull swooped down to its mate sitting on the nest and gave it a bite to eat – quite a big bite. Having witnessed and digested that act, the meaning hit home when I realized that once there are eggs, that gull must remain in place until the young can fly away. Should the gull leave the nest for an instant, there would be any number of rapacious critters swooping in to eviscerate the nest.

That day proved eventful again when we saw a male Northern Harrier perform its courtship ritual. It climbed rapidly on fast beating wings to a height of 125 to 150 feet, then descended like a dive bomber straight toward the turf, pulling up at the last possible moment, only to soar again to a dizzying height, from which it once again plummeted earthward. This is the type of show that one would expect to witness for four or five iterations, but not so that day. We finally concluded that there were no female harriers in the area so that guy kept up his climb

and dive routine until he passed from our view, still climbing and diving as he went, hoping there was a lady harrier out there somewhere that would take notice.

Having seen icebergs, eaten lobster, and now found the puffins, we had an attitude of *fait accompli*, and were content to return to the southwest corner of Newfoundland, which we had visited so briefly our first night there. After a stop at Tim Horton's, we were soon back on the big highway with only 340 miles separating us from where we planned to spend the next two nights. This gave us one full day to explore that southwest corner. The road (I will refrain from calling it a highway) from Port Aux Basque extends eastward along a very rocky coast a scant 25 miles and ends at a walkway leading to a stone lighthouse that was built in 1872. The adjoining village is named Rose Blanche, or White Rose. It seems a lot of the early settlers in this part of Newfoundland were French so there are a lot of French place names. Anyway, its claim to fame is the stone lighthouse and I was compelled to make the walk. It started off uphill so Barbara elected to sit that one out, even though it was only a bit over a mile round trip. It was a tough mile. Even though it was late May, it was early for Newfoundland and the lighthouse was closed to visitors, so I had to content myself with looking at it from the outside (which was probably the best way to see it anyway). As I neared the lighthouse I could hear a moaning sound coming from some offshore area. It was a whistle buoy – a sound I had not heard for a long time. There are very few whistle buoys in Brillion.

Having toured as much of the southwest corner as can be seen by motor vehicle, we returned to Port Aux Basque and then went north along the west coast. It was in that area that we passed the large dairy farm and after pressing on northward along the coast, eventually ran out of road in that direction. A small village near the road's end looked promising for lobster procurement so we made our way to the waterfront, asked the right questions of the right people, and soon became the proud owners of the lobsters that we would cook later in the day for consumption on our homeward trip. We had three lobsters that totaled eight pounds, (cost \$40) so one can readily deduce that they were quite large. We planned to share one between us each of three days, which we did, using the last of our lobster at a lunch stop in Eastern Ontario.

And now, back on our home turf, when someone asks what Newfoundland was like, I can readily state that it is a magnificent place, different from any other Canadian Province, with too many breathtaking ocean views to absorb in eight days. (But we did our best!) It is a rather large island, populated mainly on its perimeter, with almost no habitation on its south coast. Its people are friendly (we were never fired upon) and eager to help the wayward stranger. Its interior is largely roadless with more lakes and streams than one can count, with trout in most of them. Atlantic salmon spawn in many of the waterways and catching them is a serious endeavor by many sportsmen (and women). There is but one major east-west highway that runs from the ferry terminal in the southwest corner to the provincial capital city, Saint John, 565 road miles away. This city also happens to be the oldest city in North America. The people are proud of the fact that the first radio signal to be sent across the Atlantic Ocean was sent from Signal Hill, just outside Saint John. They are also proud of the fact that Newfoundlanders were the first responders in coming to the aid of folks who survived the sinking of the Titanic. When air traffic into the U.S. was shut down on 9/11/01, scores of commercial jetliners landed at Gander, NL, disgorging thousands of passengers into a welcoming community that absorbed the unexpected deluge into the gracious arms of its inhabitants. Newfoundland's political past is interesting in that, with its discovery by Giovanni Caboto in 1497, while sailing under British orders, it became the cornerstone of the British Empire in the "New World." It remained a part of the British Empire until 1832 when it became a sovereign nation with its own government and

currency. Its troops fought on our side in the First World War. Then in 1932, after about 100 years of sovereignty, it became once again a part of the British Empire. Seventeen years later its people voted to become a Canadian province and it remains so today. (If you are mathematically challenged, that would be 1949.)

Its geographical setting makes Newfoundland a traveler's destination rather than a stopping point on the way to somewhere. We programmed eight full days to motor around and thought to see all of it in that time. We soon realized that we would be skimming rather than absorbing if we tried to hit all of it, so we opted to take in a part of it and absorb that much well. I reckon one could easily spend a month if he were to try to explore every road's end hamlet. We added 2,250 miles to our vehicle odometer during our 8-day odyssey; I like to believe that we saw well that which we did visit, but fully recognize that we still missed some pieces. It was a memorable and rewarding outing and we are glad to have had the opportunity to make the journey. Since lobsters, icebergs and puffins were topmost on our bucket list, we look upon it as a most successful outing.OK