

# NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

*WHALES, TRAILS AND VIKING TALES*

By CATHY SENEAL

*Western Newfoundland and Labrador have long been on my list of places to visit for barren wilderness—and remarkable human migration history at its furthest reaches. When it's not about flavourful seafood, sweet berries and sweeping history, Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula is all about wild, wild nature. Whales breach and icebergs glisten just offshore a tuckamore laden coastline. Add in Labrador—a landscape with granite boulders strewn like a giant's marble game—and you have an incredible drive.*





### **WALK THE MANTLE OF THE EARTH**

Heading north up the 526-kilometre Viking Trail (Route 430), the first detour for our careful of friends was Gros Morne National Park to stroll the UNESCO-designated Tablelands Trail.

With its red, Mars-like terrain, a half billion years ago, the Tablelands lay below sea level, until shifting plates forced ancient continents together and thrust up the ocean floor.

In the park's northern section, we walked an orchid-dotted trail to reach a boat tour on Western Brook Pond, the most dramatic way to experience this inland fjord, where waterfalls descend from green 600-metre cliffs higher than Toronto's CN Tower.

### **A BASQUE WHALING STATION ON LABRADOR**

Continuing to St. Barbe, we traversed the Strait of Belle Isle to Labrador and loaded our car onto the Blanc-Sablon Ferry, which takes roughly two hours to cross.

Fares range from \$9.50 for a senior to \$35.25 for a vehicle and driver and depart morning and afternoon every day from May 1 to Jan. 7 and once in the morning Jan. 8 to April 30. Here, we spotted our first berg. Rapt by the dramatic coastal bluffs, we drove an hour north along Labrador's Expedition 51 route to Red Bay Basque Whaling Station National Historic and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the best preserved example of early industrial scale whaling anywhere in the world. Inside the station, a massive 400-year-old bowhead whale skeleton, as well as an original whaling boat are on display. On the site's west side, a couple of us climbed 689 steps up Tracey Hill for an expansive—and very breezy—view of the sheltered harbour.



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## WHALE WATCHING IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Back on Newfoundland, we continued north up the Viking Trail to where the road meets the saltwater at St. Lunaire-Griquet.

Clad in flotation suits and looking like a waddle of orange penguins, we marched into Zodiacs with local tour operator, Dark Tickle Expeditions, and headed out into the heart of Iceberg Alley. Operating from mid May to Oct.1, the company runs public tours (private charters are also available) for viewing icebergs, whales, dolphins or birds. Peak viewing season for icebergs is typically from late May to early July for icebergs, early June to late August for humpbacks, minke and fin whales, late July to late September for Atlantic white beaked dolphins and early June to mid-August for Arctic terns, guillemots and kittiwakes.

We circled a massive one glistening in the sunshine, revealing contoured blue and white striations. While zooming out to another unique berg, guide Mo Hyduk, declared “I think we have whales, people!” Motoring up the coast, we watched in awe as two humpbacks fed in White Cape Harbour, one breaching in front of us.

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF VIKINGS

Continuing even further north up the Great Northern Peninsula, L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site and UNESCO World Heritage Site —remains of an 11th century basecamp—depict the Vikings earliest landing on North America about one thousand years ago.

The visitor centre leads you through the tales of exiled murderers and Viking explorers who came from Greenland to establish an outpost. While the centre is full of intriguing artifacts—such as Icelandic fire starters and bronze cloak pins—the Viking encampment in the distance beckoned.



This place at the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula felt like the end of the world.

Past the low berms—remains of what would have been sod dwellings—a large, reconstructed sod hall is filled with weapons and sheepskins. Viking interpreters sat around the fire, telling stories while crafters wove sailcloth and spun wool.

History in Newfoundland and Labrador, whether cultural or geological, is captivating. Being outdoors at these sites, however—walking a windswept point, climbing ancient granite, or cruising a sheltered bay—was what entrenched me fully in the experience. And what made the Great Northern Peninsula memorable.

