



Dancing in the Woods on Canada's East Coast Trail

STORY AND IMAGES BY CATHY SENECA

As a traveller who likes to hike when I visit a place, the East Coast Trail (ECT) had long been on my mind. This 336 kilometre long coastal path edges Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula and has superb ocean views while crossing through rugged wilderness and small communities. When my cousin Laura expressed interest in an active vacation, off we went.

We got the physicality we were seeking early on in our six-day experience on the Spurwink Trail. Because of uncommon rainfall, hiking meant walking along rooty, rocky, boggy paths with rivulets running down the middle of the trail. Always reconning for obstacles ahead, we bounded from rock to root, swung around tree trunks, cowboy marched from mossy side to side, often using both walking

sticks for leverage. It became rhythmic and at times felt like dancing.

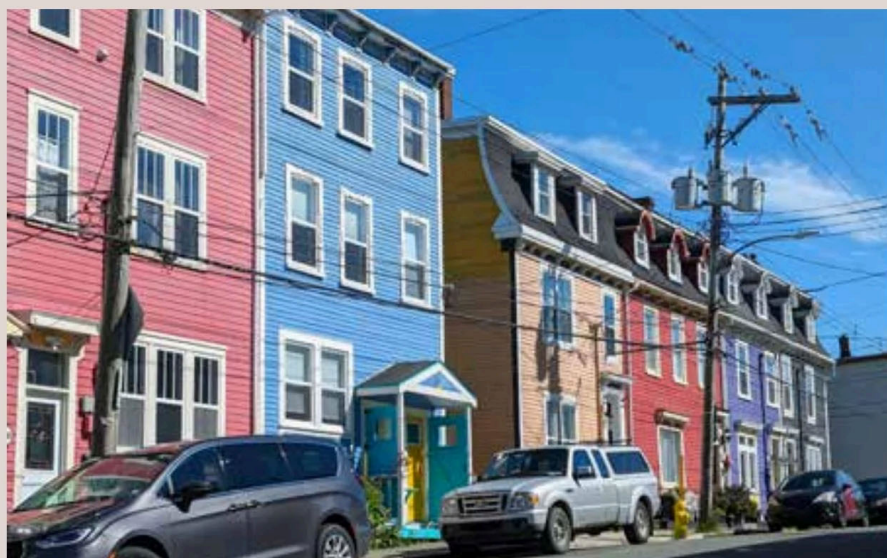
Quidi Vidi Loop - warming up for the real thing

But the first morning, right from our St. John's inn, we set off in the fog on a non ECT hike too sweet to miss. We familiarized ourselves with the app while we circled Quidi Vidi Lake and climbed the ridge over the storybook village.

The fog burned off by the time we finished our first chowder and Iceberg lager—yep, real iceberg water—at Quidi Vidi Brewing Company and started our ascent to Signal Hill Historic Site.

This place stood out beyond it being Marconi's first transatlantic wireless signal receiver. Endless wooden steps led down to a colossal outcrop, with wide Atlantic vistas and a cliff hugging walk along the harbour entrance.

Now warmed up, we headed two hours south of St. John's past crab factories, offshore islands and dense





forest—to Belle Maison, in tranquil Port Kirwan, population 22. We were ready for some gnarly trails.

Women love to hike

Thru-hikers are rare on the East Coast Trail. More often, hikers pick from 25 well marked paths between Cappahayden, the southern terminus, to Topsail Beach in the North.

One can taxi to trailheads from St. John's, but the best option for us was Great Canadian Trails' (GCT) 6 day East Coast Trail Experience. The company provided top notch hiker accommodations, trailhead shuttles, load free hiking, a self guiding app, and Garmin tracker for our self guided hikes.

On our first wilderness drop, driver Jamie Hill showed us how the satellite trackers work. "See this dot? These two women are hiking the La Manche trail. I know exactly where they are along the trail."



We met Siri and Amy, the dots, later around the dinner table at Belle Maison, along with Lynn and Jill. We were all women in our mid 50s, 60s or 70s, which amazed me. I later learned that two thirds of hikers on GCT's East Coast Trail experiences in 2023 were women and three quarters of those women were over 55. Apparently, women love to hike.

Spurwink Trail – it's all about the journey

"Hikers couldn't cross Chance River yesterday to get to Berry Head Arch – it rained for 12 hours yesterday. But it's all about the journey," said Sharon Sinnott, chef, host and trail advisor at Belle Maison.

Just after we crossed a smaller river the next morning, we met a longtime hiker doubling back.

"Bad news – we can't cross Chance River," he said. As he was a Newfoundlander who had been hiking 24 years, we heeded his advice but wanted to see it for ourselves. We marvelled as Chance River gushed over sharp slate right into the Atlantic. Uncrossable. We ate our lunch in an open rocky cove and took in the stunning views. No Berry Head Arch for us. But "what a journey!" we shared later, over Sharon's tasty chicken with apple and calvados.

Why are we here?

In moments that didn't require dedicated foot eye concentration, Laura and I yakked about everything from childhood memories to our grown children to asking, "why are we here?"

The dampness made hiking doable, if demanding. When we looked up though, there were fairytale forests with bright lime lichen, fuzzy fiddle-heads and white-flowered cracker berry. Indigo waves pounded craggy cliffs and gulls soared over sea stacks. The constant wild rewards made it clear why we were there.

La Manche to Brigus South (almost)

Concerned about the previous days' rain, and that we were averaging only 10 kilometres a day, we opted to hike in and back instead of trying to complete 16 kilometres end to end.



After easy walking the first couple of kilometres, we explored building foundations of the abandoned La Manche village and took in waterfall views from the 50 metre suspension bridge, replaced after the original bridge was washed out in 1966. Further along, we ploughed through dense forest and spent time observing a bald eagle before turning back.

Petty Harbour to Cape Spear – what I envisioned

Our last day started in Petty Harbour, one of the most charming towns along the peninsula. After a streak of straight up rock scrambles, the trail broke out onto an 80 metre heath laden plateau. Formations along exposed cliffs looked like a giant's lumber pile had slid over. We could see Cape Spear, North America's most easterly point, off in the distance.

Despite the scrambles and the rain, this turned out to be our favourite section. Immense headlands poked the Atlantic and precipitous gulches appeared metres to our right. It

was exactly what I had envisioned the East Coast Trail to look like.

In the fog, we arrived at Cape Spear National Historic Site and the end of our hike. Chilled but giddy, we snapped ussies and sighed. "I loved every minute of it," Laura said.

Great Canadian Trails' Experiences

Our experience included three nights at Belle Maison. Bonus: snack shack for meal prep, boot dryers, daily laundry, hot dinners and a glorious hot tub. Hikers may also stay at Bread and Cheese Inn in Bulls Bay or Coast & Trail Haven – new for 2025 – in Pouch Cove. Pouch Cove opens options for the most northerly trail sections between Cape St. Francis and Flatrock.

Cathy Senecal has sought the wild in places since cruising down the Zaire River in the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa. She's travelled to more than 40 countries, often in the search of wild animals, places and experiences. @wildtripsawait