

THE LOW DOWN



GO HERE

BATTLE HARBOUR, NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR

Raising the dead in Labrador's
historic island outport

BY TIM JOHNSON

There's a specific time of day—a brief one, that passes quickly—when Battle Harbour truly touches you. Supper's done—the cod cakes all cleaned up by hungry tables of guests—and a long, warm summer's day starts to fade. Looking out over the sweep of the village, the walkway to the bunkhouse, the Merchant's House crowning the hill, the steeple of the church and the sprawl of the old cemetery just beyond, the sky gives up its blue for shades of amber, then pink, then the purple of a deep, dark bruise.

Maybe the sound of an old sea shanty is coming up, over there in the Loft, guitar and accordion coming to life. Perhaps a few have risen, beers in hand, to dance.

But you hear them—the voices of the dead. Or maybe it's better to say, you feel them, in a deeply sensory way. The laughs, the tears, the happiness and hardship. The triumphs and bitter disappointments of cod fishers who came “down to Labrador,” like gold miners looking for a lucky strike, seeking their fortune.

Alive again, through their descendants, and those who make the effort to take a trip here, to a place where ships once filled the tickle so tightly that, people say, you could walk clear across to Caribou Island without getting your feet wet.

BATTLE HARBOUR IS very remote—and, truth be told, takes a special effort to reach. Coming from the island of Newfoundland in my rental car, headed to Battle Har-

bour for a four-night stay, I drive onto the *MV Qajac*, the Trans-Labrador Ferry crossing the Strait of Belle Isle. Back on dry land, I roll north, up and down on a road cut through the giant headlands of The Big Land, like being raised and lowered on the thick shoulders of burly men. Little villages nestle at the bottom.

A few hours later, I park my car in the dirt lot at Mary's Harbour, and proceed on foot onto the *MV Iceberg Hunter* for a 45-minute trip, sailing past a series of islands, barren and stark and uninhabited. Rounding the final corner, a small but bustling village reveals itself before us, wharves full of boats and visitors and residents filling the wooden footpaths.

Around 1990, this “outport” town was ready to fall into the sea. After the school closed in the 1960s, there was little to keep families here, and the community was “resettled,” with houses, in some cases, floated across the water to nearby villages connected to the road.

“It would've been all gone by now, if someone hadn't stepped in,” says Peter Bull, executive director of the non-profit trust that brought this place back and maintains it now. A government official named Gordon Slade, a former deputy fisheries minister, championed the cause, formed the Battle Harbour Historic Trust and started raising money.

Fishermen became restoration carpenters. The village rose again and became a National Historic District, home to the only two national historic buildings (the bunkhouse and Smith Cottage) where you can sleep overnight.



Once known as the “unofficial capital” of Labrador, today, Battle Harbour offers an intimate nature-meets-culture experience. BELOW: Gentle hikes, berry-picking and cod-fishing excursions are on the docket.

Battle Harbour, Newfoundland & Labrador



IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE:

While you can also fly to Happy Valley-Goose Bay, most will reach Battle Harbour via a flight to Deer Lake, in Western Newfoundland, and then drive north, riding across on the Trans-Labrador ferry. (Of course, you can also drive your own car—the Labrador Highway is now fully paved, all the way from Quebec).

STAY:

Rates include three meals a day, eaten promptly in the dining room at 8:00 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., as well as an introductory walking tour led by a local. Rooms are comfortable, all include en-suite bathrooms, and are in a number of historic buildings across the property. battleharbour.com

EXPLORE:

This is a destination where you can choose your own adventure. Take a hike, go for a boat ride or fishing trip, join Peter for a day of berry picking. Or just hang around the village—it won't be long until you bump into someone willing to sit down and tell you a good story. newfoundlandlabrador.com/top-destinations/battle-harbour



Years ago, this was the heart and soul of a thriving, profitable industry, in a time when people mostly travelled by water. Reaching its peak in the middle of the 19th century, migratory men and women—“floaters”—came here from around the world to haul in cod all summer, salt and cure them, then head home. A permanent population—“livyers”—supplied them, and did some fishing themselves. By the middle of the 19th century, this was the most important city in all of Labrador and its unofficial capital.

Now, it's a place where people come to play, and stay a couple nights. Rooms are comfortable, unfussy but lovely, outfitted with thoughtful amenities, like plush robes. Rates include meals, which are taken three times a day at long tables, simple, delicious, honest food like moose and salmon, all paired with the best dinner rolls you'll eat, anywhere.

ACTIVITIES ARE SIMPLE, and fun. You can pick cloud berries (known locally as “bake apples”) with Bull out on the green flanks of Caribou Island (“I was born to be a berry-picker,” he tells me as we embark on our half-day there). You can download an app and walk a path that circumnavigates Battle Island, clicking on locations along the way to

hear stories from the past, told in the voices of doctors, nurses, ministers, fishermen, policemen.

And you can hear so many stories first-hand, too. The beauty of this place is that almost all of the workers are also former residents. And a number of those who were resettled still maintain cabins here, interspersed with the guest buildings; spots where they love to spend their summers.

I head to the kitchen to bake those legendary rolls with Daphne Smith. As we roll and knead, she tells me about her childhood here. When she was a kid, in addition to their textbooks, each child had to bring to school a stick of firewood, the work of keeping the furnace going a collective effort.

“We had to grow up fast, do all the chores, clean the dishes, put the clothes on the line, mop the floors, because mom and dad were always out there in a fishing boat,” she tells me, as we get those flaky, mouth-watering buns ready for the oven. Life was challenging, back then—the last supply boat came in October, then no more arrived until the next summer—but it was lived together. Remoteness is relative. They had all they needed, she said, including each other.

And, like so many before me, I go fishing, guided by a former pro named Calvin Trimm. “Let ‘er go until she brings up,” he says, noting that using rods like we are today is a bit strange, to him—they always jigged with hand lines.

Trimm reels off stories as quickly and effortlessly as he does

fishing line. The times they would take out a team of sled dogs to cut wood, stacking it next to the sea. In spring, when the ice broke up, they would go in a boat to bring it back. “We didn't have a supermarket, so we had to hunt, or fish or pick all our food,” he remembers. “Rabbit, geese, herring, capelin.”

Today, the cod hit early, and often, and it's easy to see the draw for all those fishermen over the centuries, when these waters teemed with easy catches. Reeling hard and taking out our limit, we return to the village, and Trimm cleans the big, meaty fish, which Smith will cook for dinner tonight, pairing it with halibut for a beautiful “surf and surf” combination.

Later, dinner done, bowls of rolls consumed, I make my way to the Loft. And I hear it. I feel it. It's all there. The sun waning, Battle Harbour presses in around me. So many stories, right there in the air. The voices of ghosts, but the animate, too, history very much a living thing here on this small island.

I hear the keys going on the accordion, the crowd in the Loft starting to get a little loud. Tomorrow, I'll be a “floater” again, just passing through, but happy to be among the modern “livyers,” keeping Battle Harbour going. Until then, a whiskey, some song and a good sleep up in the Merchant's House, until a new day breaks over the tickle. ✕

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