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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

The Canadian Island for When You Really, Really Want to Get Away

The tiny island of Battle Harbour, open only three months of the year, sleeps up to 30 tourists at a time and can take days to get to. That's the point.

By Madeline Weinfield

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Battle Harbour was once a major fishing hub but is now uninhabited except during the summer months. PHOTO: DRU KENNEDY PHOTOGRAPHY/NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR TOURISM

On a recent trip to Battle Harbour, an island in Canada's Labrador Sea, I heard the Northern Lights. Or at least I think I did. Scientists still debate whether the aurora actually makes any sounds, but as I gazed at the chartreuse display, I thought I could make out a faint whispered whistle in the night's otherwise profound silence. A true separation from the din of daily life eludes most of us, even on vacation—but in that moment, I was sure I'd found it.

For most of the year, the remote island of Battle Harbour in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador lies empty, pummeled by relentless snowstorms. Icebergs regularly float by in the bay. But for the three months of summer, the island opens briefly, like a portal to another quieter world. I had traveled to the island from New York City with my new husband as part of our honeymoon.

True solitude and silence, it turns out, requires a small odyssey. To get to Battle Harbour, we flew from New York to Toronto; and then to Deer Lake, Newfoundland. From there, we drove three hours up Newfoundland's west coast, hopped on a ferry to Quebec and then continued our road trip on the Trans-Labrador Highway, a road only fully paved in 2022. Finally, an hour-long ferry from Mary's Harbour on Labrador's mainland brought us to Battle Harbour.



There are no cars or roads on Battle Harbour; houses are connected by a network of footpaths and boardwalks. PHOTO: BATTLE HARBOUR HISTORIC TRUST

Stepping off the boat, I spotted a few dozen saltbox-style buildings near shore. The sea and the sky seemed endless. A few hundred years ago, the scene on the dock would have been very different. Despite its remove, Battle Harbour was once a thriving hub of Canada's cod

fishing industry at a time when specimens pulled from the Labrador Sea could rival small children in size. But after a major fire devastated the settlement at Battle Harbour and decades of overfishing diminished cod stocks, Battle Harbour's boom days dwindled.

In the 1960s, after Canada's controversial campaign to resettle some of the country's most remote communities, the island was left even more isolated.

Today Battle Harbour is a National Historic District run by the Battle Harbour Historic Trust, which has painstakingly restored the 19th-century fishing cottages and outbuildings, and transformed them into guest accommodations and mini museums. Between 20 and 30 people can stay overnight at a time on the one-kilometer-long island in the rustic but comfortable cottages or at the small inn by the harbor. My husband and I stayed in the most remote of the island's restored houses, a whitewashed cottage at the northern edge of the island with a wood-burning stove and a lofted bedroom.



The Battle Harbour Inn is one of a handful of accommodation options on the island. PHOTO: DRU KENNEDY PHOTOGRAPHY/NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR TOURISM

Guests can book cod-fishing lessons and cooking classes. A general store that once catered to survivalists and fishermen now sells snacks and souvenirs. Should you grow tired of Battle Harbour's footpaths and views, the crew will take you across "the tickle" to nearby

Great Caribou Island, arm you with a packed lunch, a map of the hiking trails and walkie-talkies for emergency use, and pick you up a few hours later.

But we had come to Battle Harbour to sit back and feel the days stretch out and time slow down, so we booked very little. Instead, we watched the shore for humpback whales and the skies for bald eagles. We read books and went for slow, mindful walks around the island. We met other guests over dinner in the communal dining hall every night, and had occasional conversations with the island's caretakers. Many of them are Labrador locals who spent their childhoods on the island, and relish any opportunity to come back.

If You Go...

Plan and book your visit at BattleHarbour.com. Packages for a two-night stay for two people start at around \$1,015 and include the return ferry, accommodation, a guided tour and all meals while on island. Additional activities such as boat rides, fishing excursions and bar drinks are extra. Battle Harbour is open this summer until Sept. 2.

Three More Islands Ideal for Solitude Seekers

Isle au Haut, Maine

This island, part of Acadia National Park, offers all of the popular park's natural beauty with none of its crowds. A 45-minute ride on a small ferry from Stonington on Deer Isle drops you at the start of a network of gorgeous, largely unpeopled hiking trails. Hotels are nonexistent, but you can stay the night at the island's campground or one of a handful of vacation rentals. Just book well ahead of time, as options fill up fast.



The lighthouse on Isle au Haut in Maine. PHOTO: ALAMY

Ocracoke Island, North Carolina

Ocracoke is perhaps best known for a unique dialect rooted in the Scottish and Irish colonists who settled the island in the 17th century. Today the island is connected to the mainland by several ferry routes and a (very) small airport, but that sense of isolation lives on in its windswept beaches and herds of wild horses.



Vacation homes dot the landscape on North Carolina's Ocracoke Island. PHOTO: ALAMY

Orcas Island, Washington

Any local will tell you that to experience the tranquility of Orcas Island, you should visit in the shoulder seasons, when oyster shacks and hiking trails remain open and accessible but the crowds thin out. But if you do go to this gem in Washington's San Juan Islands in the summer, you can escape the throngs at tucked away spots like Pebble Cove Farm, an inn and animal sanctuary right on the water.



The waterfront community of Olga on Orcas Island. PHOTO: ALAMY

Corrections & Amplifications

Packages for a two-night stay for two people at Battle Harbour Inn start at around US\$1,015 and include the return ferry, accommodation, a guided tour and all meals while on island. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the nightly price starts around \$215 a night and includes ferry transfer, accommodation and meals. Also, an earlier version of this article and the correction incorrectly said that the price was C\$1,105, which is equivalent to US\$740. (Corrected on June 24)

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Videos

