

# NEWFOUNDLAND VACATION • HOMES



## **Tide's Turning: Mainlanders are pulled by the lure of Newfoundland**

By Carroll Holland

*The Ottawa Citizen 2007, Citizen Special*

*Published: Saturday, April 07, 2007*

---

There's a lot more of the British Isles in present-day Newfoundland than lilting tones and language reminiscent of another place and time.

In Trinity Bight, a cluster of small communities facing the coves of the Atlantic, the rugged terrain with its countless headlands is reminiscent of the far-off western coast of Ireland and other parts of the British Isles. For good reason. In long-ago, geologic time, underground continental plate movement literally shifted part of southwestern Europe to this area.

A Winnipeg artist first pointed this out to me as she set up her easel to begin a day of painting by Devil's Cove in Port Rexton, an idyllic, unspoiled community on the southern coast of the Bonavista Peninsula.

"It's just as beautiful as Scotland," she said, recalling a recent trip there. "And it's a lot cheaper."

The new-found island was called "trans-Atlantic Ireland" in the 18th century because of settlement by Irish fishermen attracted by the Grand Banks cod. Until recently, their descendants accounted for about 50 per cent of the population of the huge island.

Today's population shifts are quite different. With the destruction of the cod fishery, Newfoundland residents seek work on the mainland. Vacationing mainlanders, meanwhile, are discovering the island's many charms, telling their friends, and planning repeat visits to this island with its gift of a simpler, friendlier, more human-scale way of life.

I'm one of those mainlanders. You might want to make a cup of strong tea (in Newfoundland fashion) before my stories begin. Are you ready?

Between the main headlands of Port Rexton and Trinity East, its neighbour to the west, there is a 5.3-kilometre, relatively easy hiking trail called Skerwink.

Promontories drop dramatically to turquoise-coloured water lapping an isolated beach often surveyed by a bald eagle. Intriguingly eroded rock formations loom from the water. Moss drips from weathered trees before the path leads out to a grass-covered headland. During the summer, whales can be seen on the trail of capelin, their favourite food.

When the trail with its occasional steep climbs runs close to the edge of a cliff, sturdy guard rails made of tree branches provide unobtrusive protection.

On our return one day last September by way of a grassy, interior track, we turned at the chatter of an excited squirrel to find a strikingly beautiful, young red fox following us. It eyed us without fear and stopped a few feet behind us whenever we stopped; it would stretch out on its black-tipped forelimbs or sit on its haunches until we all resumed our walk. It left after about 15 minutes when we met Hedley, a local resident, coming the other way on the path. He'd seen the fox before on the path and said that its den was in the meadow.

**Continued on next page**

The pristine area has the look and feel of a well-kept secret, even though Travel+Leisure magazine ranked Skerwink Trail among its top 35 walks in North America and Europe in 2003. The well-maintained trail gets lots of visitors in the summer, but never in disturbing numbers, say local people. In part that's because of its isolation, but the trail also has lots of competition. Historical foot trails link other coastal communities along the peninsula, each with its special features. All the trails we tried were well maintained.

It's not just the scenery that's a big draw. We also discovered a cultural richness that is every bit as enticing as that spawned on the islands off the coast of Europe.

I confess that the writing of Ireland's literary giant James Joyce has never stirred me, no matter how often I've returned to Ulysses and no matter how hard I've tried. But to end a day of hiking and picking partridge berries and blueberries by hearing Marjorie Doyle read at a hillside inn from her book, *Reels, Rock and Rosaries: Confessions of a Newfoundland Musician* -- now there's an experience I'll never forget.

Marjorie's musical offerings from Newfoundland some years ago on the late-night CBC radio program *At That Time of the Night* were the delicious nightcaps that often lulled me to sleep. And now here she was enchanting me in person with her own distinctly Newfoundland-quirky stories. How lucky can you get? Needless to say, I'll never have to force myself to read her book, which I hastily purchased.

Everywhere there is inspiration.

Authentic folk art abounds in the often audacious colours -- green, red, yellow, blue -- of clapboard houses.

At **Devil's Cove**, a vacation home in which we stayed, there's a magnificent, blue-hued print of a whale on one wall of the upstairs bathroom with its blue and white, period decor. I'd luxuriate in the cast-iron bathtub and watch the moon rise over Fox Island, then head downstairs and poke about the superbly restored and authentically furnished Port Rexton home.

A rich variety of books, magazines, music tapes and video dramas beckon from shelves and tables, promising glimpses into the rich and rigorous nature of a unique part of the English-speaking world. Exploring the offerings, discovering magical sounds and words, reminded me of the joy of searching on a beach after the tide went out, and finding a tiny, solitary, purple starfish.

A CD set titled *Tales from Pigeon Harbour* turned out to be hilarious outport stories by Ted Russell, taken from original, old CBC Radio broadcasts.

*Hard Light*, a collection of poetry by Michael Crummey, still has a grip on my heart, heightened by the memory of the every-changing light on the sea and on waving, golden grass, and by the memory of the gentle touch of salt-water spray on my face as I read on the porch.

Nearby Trinity is a national historical site where new history is being created by the 29-year-old Rising Tide Theatre company in its new Rising Tide Arts Centre. That's where we saw the opening night of an impressive, Newfoundland-based folk opera called *The Nobleman's Wedding*, written by Pamela Morgan of Figgy Duff renown. It was superb, as were two other performances we saw in the community hall of a nearby old church: *Theresa's Creed* (a mother's poignant and hilarious soliloquy about life in a 1960s outport, played brilliantly by Donna Butt) and *Saltwater Moon* (in which a young man comes home from Canada to win back his sweetheart on a lovely summer evening in 1926 when the moon is full).

Rising Tides' New Founde Lande Trinity Pageant, offered in the summer, is a journey with music and song through the lanes of Trinity, to retell its tales. We were told it is wonderful.

I loved hearing about the puffins that ride the waves of the Atlantic far from shore most of their lives, but return in June to the same burrow and the same mate to produce offspring. You can see them by the hundreds in the summer from headlands reached by a little-used trail, according to environmentalist Jon Joy, who led us on a fall walk. From the same headlands, he said, you can see whales breaching the surface of the water in coves below.

**Continued on next page**

That's for me, for another time.

In the meantime, I'm going to be certain to be in the audience when Rising Tide Theatre brings its touring production of No Man's Land to the theatre in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa later this month.

*Carroll Holland is an Ottawa writer who visited Newfoundland for three weeks in September.*

### **If You Go...**

**Theatre in Ottawa:** Rising Tide Theatre brings its touring production of No Man's Land to the theatre in the Canadian War Museum on Wednesday, April 25, Friday, April 27 and Saturday, April 28. Tickets cost \$30 for adults, \$15 for students and seniors, and are available at the main box office of the Canadian War Museum or by calling 819-776-8600. (See also [www.warmuseum.ca](http://www.warmuseum.ca), select "What's On" and enter the performance date).

**Theatre in Perth:** No Man's Land can also be seen in the Concert Hall of Perth Collegiate, 13 Victoria St. in Perth, on April 15. Tickets cost \$35 per person (\$32 plus service charge) and are available from Ticketmaster at 613-755-1111. The performance is presented by the Perth Performing Arts Committee.

**Getting to Newfoundland:** Of note for Air Miles collectors: the Air Miles Reward Program offers a return ticket from Ottawa to St. John's for 1,800 accumulated miles (high season), excluding taxes.

**Where to stay:** We stayed in two vacation homes run by *Newfoundland Vacation Homes: Devil's Cove in Port Rexton and Eagle's Peak in Trinity East*. Each has its own charms, but Devil's Cove really won my heart. I've seldom stayed in a more serene environment, with the beauty of the interior matching the stunning, simple beauty of the outdoors. Each house has three bedrooms, is fully furnished and rents for \$1,120 a week, plus tax, during the summer (off-season rates are also available). The vacation homes are open from May 30 to Oct. See [www.newfoundlandvacationhomes.com](http://www.newfoundlandvacationhomes.com) or e-mail [info@nlvh.com](mailto:info@nlvh.com) or call 1-866-408-4748.

### **More:**

Newfoundland: 1-800-563-6353 or  
[www.newfoundlandlabrador.com](http://www.newfoundlandlabrador.com)  
Trail: [www.canadatrails.ca/  
hiking/nf/skerwink.html](http://www.canadatrails.ca/hiking/nf/skerwink.html)  
Theatre: [www.risingtidetheatre.com](http://www.risingtidetheatre.com)  
Puffins: [www.puffins.ca](http://www.puffins.ca)  
Pamela Morgan: [pamelamorgan.ca](http://pamelamorgan.ca)

© *The Ottawa Citizen* 2007

