

Tip of the iceberg

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By Anne Georg for The Calgary Herald August 8, 2008



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Giant icebergs, some the size of small ocean liners floated in the open sea. Sunlight lit the scene, showcasing blinding white glacial ice with turquoise highlights on the indigo ocean.

The ocean corridor from the east coast of Labrador to Newfoundland's southern shore is known as Iceberg Alley. It's the only place on the planet you can see these mighty icebergs making their way down the Atlantic Ocean from Greenland.

As the iceberg panorama appeared, all 30 wind-whipped iceberg chasers onboard moved en masse to get a better view. Cameras protruded from our faces like high-tech beaks, all focused on the 1,000-year-old icebergs that towered above us. The click of shutters syncopated with our collective refrain of awe.

As enormous as they are, these icebergs reveal only about one-eighth of their total size. Their bulk is underwater. Thus the expression “tip of the iceberg.”

And to borrow the phrase, the icebergs were only the tip of the iceberg of my trip to Newfoundland, although they were the siren song that compelled me to take the adventure.

I'd long fantasized about this experience. A television news item reporting the high number of icebergs floating along Newfoundland's east coast this spring inspired me to book my flight.

Within a couple of weeks I landed at the St. John's airport. It was past midnight. Nevertheless, I called City Hostel with slim hope someone would still be available to drive me into St. John's. A sleepy voice answered and said the airport shuttle service ended several hours ago.

But an exception was made and 20 minutes later Dave Barron, the hostel owner, showed up to chauffeur me.

When I told him I wanted to have a beer before turning in, he suggested I drop my gear off at the hostel and he'd drive me to a pub that would still be open. He assured me the short walk home through downtown would be safe. Dave frequently repeated similar acts of hospitality during my five-day stay at City Hostel.

Inexpensive, meticulously clean and near to the centre of town, the hostel is one of the best deals going. The typical St. John's row-house made me feel like I was coming home at the end of the day. Especially since it had laundry facilities, a kitchen and a living room. Dave was usually in the office. He runs the shuttle service to and from the airport at half the cost of a taxi. That is, if you can get him to take your money. He also operates tours. When they aren't full, hostel guests get a handsome discount. As a local he knows the best places to eat and drink.

Dave recommended Velma's Place on Water Street for fresh Newfoundland cod. Velma's is an unassuming family restaurant that probably serves the best traditional Newfoundland cuisine in the world, including scallops, mussels and lobster in season.

Velma's pan-fried cod makes all other cod dishes I've tried taste anemic in comparison. It was served with “scrunchions,” a Newfie condiment made of small pieces of pork rind fried until they are crispy. Salty and cholesterol-rich, scrunchions are a comfort food. Like the islanders themselves, they're full of unpretentious flavour.

At 73 years old and somewhere under 5-foot-3 inches tall, Stephen Lane is one such salty Newfie. He's a familiar figure at popular watering holes on George Street, the heart of St. John's pub district. I first met him at O'Reilly's where he was lord of the dance floor. First he jigged solo. Before long an attractive young woman joined him. That ignited the place and soon the dance floor was full of dancers jigging to the Celtic band.

"Before Stephen started jigging he was 6-foot-6," the musician on stage joked. In Newfoundland, humour is as ubiquitous as Celtic music. Most of the Newfies I met shared a joke, a strongly held opinion or a song with me. A disproportionate percentage of the population seems to play the accordion, including Stephen Lane. I ran into him at another George Street pub on a Saturday afternoon. He was ensconced with a couple of musicians jamming and jigging, as the spirit moved him. If there were a soundtrack to accompany my trip to Newfoundland it would be a Celtic-inspired accordion.

I had it in my mind to bring an accordion home and learn to play it as a way to keep part of Newfoundland with me. Dave directed me to O'Brien's, a traditional Newfoundland music store. It has bragging rights to being "the oldest store on the oldest street in the oldest city in North America."

Once again, Dave steered me to the right spot. A wall of shelving that ran behind the counter was devoted to row upon row of accordions. Proprietor Gordon O'Brien served me. He was congenial, walking this dilettante through the arcane minutiae of the accordion.

"What chord do you want to play in?" he asked.

Apparently accordions come in a couple of different chords and with one chord or two. I don't have an opinion about which chord I prefer, or even why I might prefer one chord over the other, or two over one, or vice versa.

The patient shop owner realized the depth of my ignorance and talked me out of my purchase. Instead, I took a portrait of him with his wall of accordions as my keepsake. He suggested I go a couple of doors down to hear some of St. John's finest accordion players.

Auntie Crae's Tuesday afternoon jam sessions are a St. John's tradition. The century-old general store has been renovated into a specialty grocery store that sells everything from artisan jellies, sandwiches and coffee to loose tea and exotic spices. The musical variety of jam takes place in a large lunchroom that opens from the store. It was packed with locals listening to several musicians, among them the promised accordion players.

I listened hard but couldn't distinguish one chord from another. I abandoned my fantasy of dancers jigging to the dulcet sounds of my accordion. Then someone mentioned a group of women who held a weekly "accordion circle." There was still hope. I could move to St. John's.

It used to be that no one moved to St. John's. The province's fisheries were in decline and the young and employable left in droves. Not now. Offshore oil is creating an economic boom in the province and St. John's is becoming known as Canada's "funky capital." With house prices up an average of 23 per cent over last year, realtors act as mediators in heated bidding wars.

The boom extends beyond St. John's to villages like Tors Cove on the South Shore. I found the village in my never-ending quest for icebergs.

I'd driven my rental car south, searching for the East Coast Trail, a network of over 500 kilometres of hiking trails, about 220 of which are developed. I'd intended on taking a short hike, but rugged coastline, spectacular vistas of ocean and icebergs around every bend lured me ever further. After a couple of hours walking I was still promising myself to turn around after the next bend.

Then, just outside of Tors Cove I met a local who introduced himself as Scott. He's a transplanted Haligonian via Alberta's oil sands, now retired in Tors Cove. He was resting on a rock surveying the icebergs as they lazily floated down Iceberg Alley. He invited me to have a beer on the patio of his comfortable shack, which is nestled on a hillside overlooking the dramatic coastline. We chatted while we watched the icebergs bobbing in the cove and further out at sea. Scott shared gossip about the village and talked about local real estate prices. He said pieces of coastal paradise were selling for a fraction of what they'd cost on Canada's west coast.

I didn't see any signs of the real estate boom the next day when I travelled by car up Route 80 on the Avalon Peninsula. It led me through semi-deserted hamlets with faded wooden houses dotting the rugged wind-swept shoreline. Icebergs dazzled me as they nonchalantly drifted by on the sparkling sea.

Most of the peninsula is an empty jumble of rock and small lakes framed by the sea. It clearly defines Newfoundland's moniker "The Rock." Because no major industrial polluters operate on the island, it's one of the most pristine corners of Canada. The air is breathtakingly fresh. Lakes and ocean are crystal clear.

I went north up Conception Bay to Bay de Verde, a fishing community first settled in 1662. With its heyday well behind it, the population has been dwindling for several

years. Less than 500 people call this town home. They live in boxy wooden houses scattered on a steep rock overlooking the bay.

Bay de Verde describes itself as “A Town With A View.”

I stopped the car to check it out. What I saw perfectly punctuated my adventure. There, parked in the middle of the harbour like it owned the place was a monster iceberg. It dwarfed the fishing boats. I knew I'd reached my final destination. I'd come to Newfoundland to see icebergs. I'd seen them: at sea, from a boat, in coves, from the East Coast Trail, while drinking beer with a local, and now in a working fishing harbour. I'd also glimpsed the metaphorical tip of the iceberg that is Newfoundland — just enough to compel me to come back again. For now, I could return home satisfied.

If You Go

- City Hostel, 8 Gower Street, St. John's, 709-754-4789. For information and bookings: hostels.com or Email: cityhostel@gmail.com
- Velma's Place, 264 Water Street, St. John's, 709-576-2264,
- O'Reilly's Pub, 13 George Street, St. John's, 709-722-3735, oreillyspub.com
- O'Brien's Music Store, 278- Water Street, St. John's, 709-753-8135, obriens.nf.ca
- Auntie Crae's, 272 Water Street, St. John's, 709-754-0661, aunticraes.com
- O'Brien's Boat Tours, Bay Bulls, NL., 709-753-4850, obriensboattours.com