

PassageMaker Magazine

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GOING WITH THE

FLOW





STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
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AN IMPROMPTU CRUISE

ALONG CANADA'S ENCHANTING EAST COAST

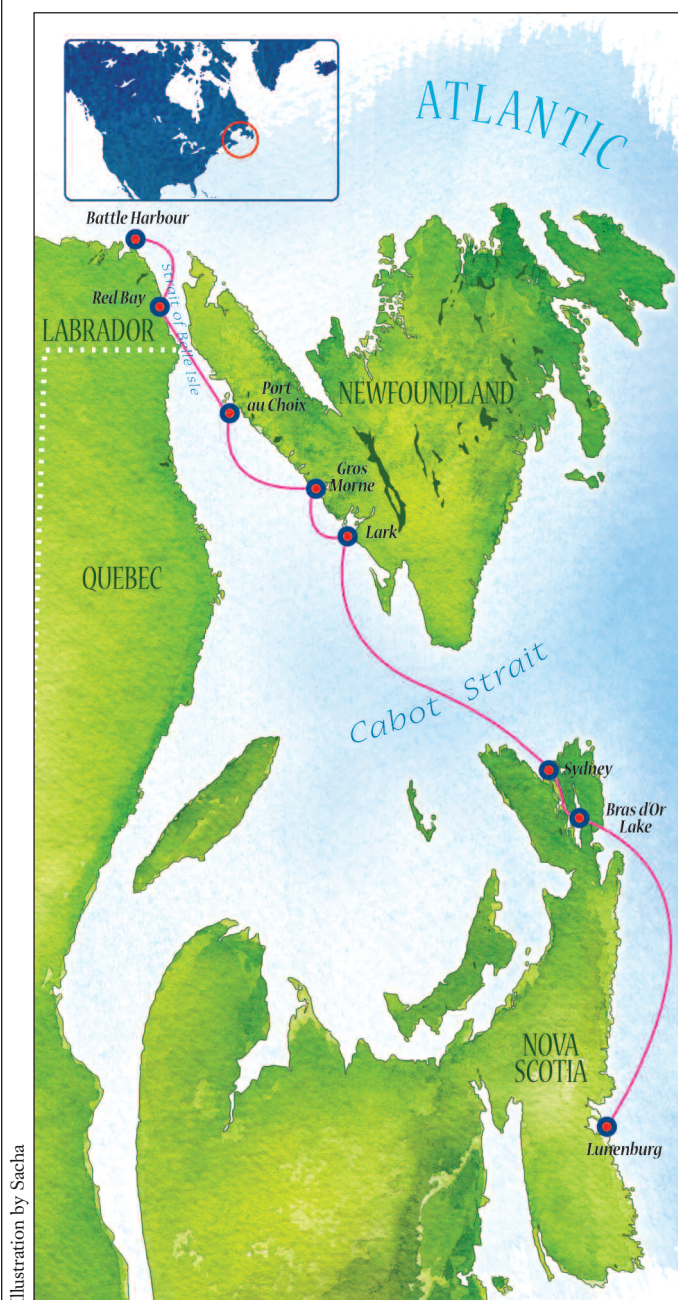
Our anchor is set off Red Bay, Labrador, and we've just begun dinner when a loud *whoosh* resounds through the hull. Looking through the saloon windows to starboard, we see the tail of an enormous humpback whale diving after a dinner of capelin, a sardine-like fish.

Within minutes, the Strait of Belle Isle is full of humpbacks that have decided to join the party. There are tails, flippers, heads, and spouts everywhere, and we suspend our meal to watch theirs, taking pictures from the flybridge. Eventually, the evening breeze drives us inside—the water temperature is a bitter 37°F—and we go back to our dinner of fresh halibut while continuing to watch our cetacean cousins.

Our original cruising plan for last year was to travel from California to Ireland and the United Kingdom by way of Panama and the Azores. Then, we discovered that the distance across the Atlantic via Newfoundland and Greenland was similar. With a hankering to see icebergs, we went to plan B.

On our way north from the Bahamas, we learned that cruising friends were in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, not that far off our track. An imminent northeasterly gale made a Saturday night dinner invitation all the more alluring. Canadian customs kindly drove down from Halifax to clear us in, and we were free to explore Lunenburg. This was the beginning of a totally unplanned and very pleasant sojourn through fascinating cruising grounds, proving yet again that, in boating and in life, some of the best experiences come from simply going with the flow.





SO MUCH TO SEE

Lunenburg is a picturesque maritime village that has not changed that much from how it looked 100 years ago. The harbor area has a combination of working waterfront and summer tourist infrastructure, including wireless Internet at anchor. There are a variety of restaurants, shops, and marine resources that are accustomed to dealing with both commercial and recreational marine needs.

Lunenburg was such a pleasant surprise that we began to study the cruising options between here and our jumping-off point for Greenland—which presented an immediate problem. You could spend years cruising Nova

Scotia, Newfoundland, and Labrador and not see it all. With five or six weeks until ice conditions were likely to be favorable in Greenland, we decided to sample each area, getting a feel in case we came back this way at some point in the future.

If you are already on the East Coast of the U.S., this part of Canada offers wonderful cruising opportunities. Short passages between protected anchorages are the rule, with fascinating history and self-reliant, friendly, and interesting folks ashore. And as you move “down east” toward Labrador, the rewards increase.

We arrived in late May, considered early in the cruising season. But with a good heating system, you could easily start a month earlier. The local boats were going through their spring commissioning, and lilacs were beginning to bloom. The Nova Scotians tell us some of the best weather arrives in September, but if you are not going to store your boat in this part of the world, you’ll probably want to head back toward Maine by mid-September.

There are a variety of cruising guides available for Nova Scotia. For Newfoundland and Labrador, the Cruising Club of America offers a pair of wonderful handbooks. The Canadian government’s *Sailing Directions* are a good addition. We found the Canadian Hydrographic Service electronic charts to be reasonably detailed and accurate, as were the Nobeltec C-Map vector charts we checked. We also carried Canadian paper charts covering as far as Battle Harbour, Labrador.

For years we had been hearing about Bras d’Or Lake on Cape Breton Island. As it was on the way, we decided to give it a quick look. You enter the 424-square-mile saltwater lake via a set of tidal locks at St. Pierre—a bit simpler than our passage through the Panama Canal six weeks earlier. Once in the locks, tie up, answer a few questions for the friendly lockmaster, wait 10 minutes for the water level to adjust, and then anchor off the town of St. Pierre.

Bras d’Or Lake is filled with lovely, protected anchorages, and enough small villages are scattered around to provide supplies and diversion. We found Baddeck to be particularly charming. We dallied there for a few days, taking advantage of the wireless Internet signal in the anchorage to check on a boatbuilding project in New Zealand.

COLD WATER, WARM HEARTS

Cruising from the top of Cape Breton Island to Newfoundland, you have two options. Depart from the town of Sydney and head around Newfoundland counterclockwise, or journey up the west coast of Newfoundland to the Strait of Belle Isle. In either case, the passage involves a 60- to 80-mile crossing of Cabot



Strait, which can be bouncy, but Canadian weather forecasters have a good handle on the patterns. The key is to be patient.

As is also the case in Maine, the cold water in this region has a reputation for creating fog. We opted to travel Newfoundland's west coast, as it provides the most direct route to Greenland and less fog than the east coast, although the Strait of Belle Isle can be choked with ice early in the season. Familiarity with

where to visit, especially if you are short on time. The choices include deep fjords, abandoned fishing villages, and such historical sights as the thousand-year-old Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows. We worked our way northeast through Lark and Gros Morne, and then rejoined "civilization" at the fishing village of Port au Choix.

As it has for thousands of years, Port au Choix takes its living from the sea. Locals use nets, pots, and hand



We've shared the ocean with whales in many parts of the world, but we've never had them join us for dinner, as this mother and child plus 30 friends did off the coast of Red Bay, Labrador.

radar certainly is an asset here. Perhaps we were lucky, but we found fog less than a quarter of the time.

The cold water has another effect: it will cause your hull to sweat. Condensation will typically form below the waterline on metal and fiberglass yachts. Aboard our aluminum *Wind Horse*, we deal with this in several ways. First, the entire structure around our living area is insulated with Armaflex. This includes the deck, topsides, and the tops of tanks below the cabin soles. Under way, and on foggy and rainy days, we run a home-style dehumidifier. In addition, when we bathe, we turn on the forward stateroom air conditioner to remove the excess humidity. As a result of these efforts, condensation in the living area is reduced to less than a gallon per month.

If the outside air temperature is cold enough, our great-room windows will fog when we're working in the galley. We have found that running the saloon air conditioner for two or three minutes clears the windows.

Consulting a chart of Newfoundland, or the guidebooks, it is an overwhelming task to decide

lines to fish for cod, halibut, crab, and lobster from small boats. A few 65-foot trawlers look for what is left of the offshore fishery.

We asked the harbormaster, Kieran O'Keefe, if he knew where we might buy fresh halibut, the season having just opened. A few minutes later, Kieran came back and pointed off our bow. "See that boat over there? They've got some fish to sell." It was the first catch of the season. A few minutes later, we were laden with enough fresh cod and halibut to keep us going for a long time. (We vacuum-bagged and froze much of the supply.)

At first look, there is not a lot in Port au Choix: a basic but well-stocked market, a motel and restaurant with Internet, a pay phone, and a fish processing plant where you can get good deals on fresh fish, lobster, crab, and shrimp. But there are also 400 very friendly people who will not allow you to walk anywhere. If a local sees you on foot, he or she will insist on taking you where you need to go. We were chauffeured to a fascinating archeological museum, where we learned that Port au Choix has been populated for thousands



Top left: Bras d'Or Lake is replete with lovely villages and isolated anchorages. Top right: Lark is a typical Newfoundland village, filled with lovely scenery and friendly folks, many of whom still make their living from the sea. Above: You don't normally associate blue skies and trade-wind clouds with Labrador weather. We were fortunate to find a few of these exquisitely beautiful days.

of years by a variety of inhabitants, the most recent of which have been French, and then English.

Looking over a chart with a local trawler captain, he pointed to the town of Red Bay, across the Strait of Belle Isle on the Labrador coast. "I just heard on the radio the capelin are starting to show up around Red Bay. If you want to see whales, they follow the capelin."

It didn't hurt that the Canadian park ranger at the Baie de Choix museum had told us about a 16th-century whaling ship that had been discovered in Red Bay, which is why we later found ourselves eating dinner amongst the humpbacks as they feasted.

A LIFE AKIN TO CRUISING

If Newfoundland is a difficult place to live—by our standards, at least—Labrador is even tougher. Cold and rocky with a short growing season and dotted with small, isolated villages, it is hard for city-bred people like us to imagine how the hardy folk who live here make do. Spend a few days getting to know them, maybe have a meal or take a drive together, and you quickly develop a healthy respect for their country smarts, their dedication, and their work ethic. To live in Labrador you have to be a survivor, in the best sense of the word.



Something we found surprising is the universal preference for winter among Labradorians. Once the snow comes, the seas and rivers freeze, and those who live here have a freedom of movement that's otherwise denied. With snowmobiles, they can go virtually anywhere at a high rate of speed. Vehicular traffic during the summer is much more limited.

Most use wood for heating and cooking. To heat efficiently, the wood has to be of the correct type, and well aged, preferably for three years. Everywhere you go, you will see piles of wood drying out in preparation for burning. Wood gathering takes place in the winter via snowmobile.

Gardens are common. But with thin soil and a brief growing season, root crops—typically potatoes—are the mainstay. A variety of wild berries also are harvested.

fields, and then come home for two weeks. (Employers pay for a round-trip ticket.) Fishing used to be the main occupation. With the moratorium on cod fishing in the 1990s, the government offered to buy back the cod licenses. Only one family in Red Bay still fishes commercially.

In the early 1500s, Red Bay was the largest whaling port in the world, manned by Basque whalers. As many as 2,000 men worked in the village. Around 1540, a galleon dragged anchor and sank in the bay. The wreckage was discovered in the 1980s and is now the basis for two fascinating museums in the town.

In Newfoundland, for every inhabited town like Red Bay, you will find several deserted fishing villages. Many of the homes in these villages are still furnished, and some families return from time to time to use the abandoned



The same piers that used to service the cod fishing fleet at Battle Harbour have been refurbished and provide a secure, comfortable berth for visiting yachts.

Living in these small communities is very much like long-term cruising. You need to be self-sufficient, carry large inventories of food, and watch your water supply. Just 20 years ago, the norm in Red Bay was to haul barrels to a spring for water, chop holes in the ice, and fill the barrels with a bucket. Today, the 280 residents have running water and electricity, but they keep the wood stoves and buckets ready for when the winter storms knock out power.

There are few options for earning a living locally, other than working for the government. So most of the men travel to other areas, work 28 days straight in construction, at one of the mines, or in the oil

houses as vacation spots. If you enjoy solitude and exploring ghost towns, this is the place for you.

THOSE BEAUTIFUL BERGS

The most interesting of the abandoned villages has to be Battle Harbour. This fishing “stage” was initially established in the 17th century and was in continuous use until the recent collapse of the cod fishery. Over the years it was the unofficial capital of Labrador and was home to one of the few hospitals in the region. It was at Battle Harbour that Robert Peary made his famous announcement that he had reached the North Pole. Unlike the abandoned villages that pepper the coast of



Newfoundland and Labrador, Battle Harbour was taken over by a nonprofit trust and is being restored. You could not find a more fascinating place to spend a few days at the dock (it being too tight and too rocky to anchor).

As a guest in Battle Harbour, you'll have a chance to dine ashore camp-style and meet other folks who have taken the ferry to visit. These tend to be fascinating people who can provide an intellectually stimulating interlude. Michael Earle, manager of the Battle Harbour Historic Trust, is a knowledgeable host and tour guide.

Cruising in this part of the world means spending a lot of time at anchor. Some of the anchorages have rock

of Newfoundland and Labrador began a policy of enticing outport residents to move to centralized villages, where it was easier to provide "services." This policy was, and still is, controversial. Many of the residents of Battle Harbour moved 11 miles across the bay to the village of Mary's Harbour. We did, as well, in search of a wi-fi connection with enough speed to download the latest weather and a place to gather fresh supplies.

We found both. We also found more friendly Labradorians who were as interested in our way of life as we were in theirs and who shared some interesting facts about life in these parts. For example, polar bears



Left: Many of the old buildings at Battle Harbour have been restored with traditional paint schemes. Right: Icebergs from Greenland wend their way down the east coast of Labrador and into the Strait of Belle Isle.

bottoms or grow a heavy beard of weed or kelp. The new-style anchors, like Rocnas or Spades, work best. An all-chain rode is a requirement, in our view, and you'll want to have a storm-size anchor for everyday use.

One of the drawing cards of northern Newfoundland and Labrador is the giant icebergs, which arrive on the flow of current from Greenland's Disko Bay. Earlier in the year, bergs and sea ice choke the coast. Typically, by June, the bergs start to thin out. For us, these were not only a visual treat, but also a chance to practice radar and sonar detection of the massive ice chunks, as well as visual watch-keeping for the smaller offshoots, called "bergy bits" and "growlers." We knew we would need to take care with these when leaving Labrador and approaching Greenland, and this interlude provided us a welcome course in navigating the bergs under controlled conditions.

Starting in the early 1950s, the newly formed province

visit in the spring, following seals down the ice, and have a habit of breaking into mountain cabins and creating a mess. Black bears are plentiful, but they usually shy away from human contact. With this discourse on local fauna, we inquired if it might be possible to purchase a bit of caribou steak for our freezer. We had developed a taste for it in Red Bay, where it was one of the featured menu items at the Whaler's Inn.

The answer was no. "You cannot buy any, but we will give you some!" A typical Labradorian response.

Along Canada's eastern coast, the weather can be overcast, rainy, and foggy; you can also find sunshine, puffy cumulous clouds, and even monsoon-type afternoon thunderstorms. If you don't like the weather, just wait. It will change, often several times in a day.

You could spend a lifetime exploring this part of the world and still not experience it all. 