

Getting to this bucolic Newfoundland spot is half the battle

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BATTLE ISLAND, Newfoundland — Standing on a hilltop on an island off southern Labrador, all I can see are miles of deep blue ocean and icebergs drifting by a cluster of small islands whose fishing villages are abandoned now. A humpback whale surfaces nearby, and tomits and ospreys soar overhead. I am reminded of a local saying I heard en route: "Labrador: It isn't the end of the world, but you can see it from here."

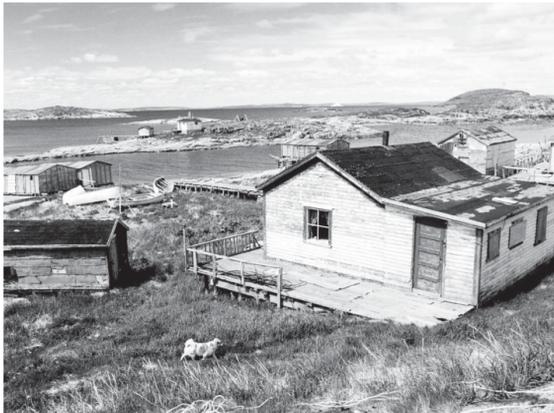
On Battle Island, I feel like I am seeing it up close. The nearest town, Mary's Harbour, is on the mainland, a 45-minute boat ride away. Here, the doctor visits once a month, the dentist every couple of months, and up until a decade ago, phone numbers had just three digits. The gravel road leading to Mary's Harbour was built just five years ago.

As I discovered, it's worth the effort to get here. Battle Island is home to a charming restored fishing outpost, Battle Harbour, that was once the de facto capital of Labrador. It's hard to imagine, but

for more than 150 years, this 1-square-mile island was a social and economic hub, providing goods and medical services to thousands of people along the Labrador coast. It was also the main port of call for hundreds of European and North American schooners that plied the Labrador Sea fishing for cod, seal, and salmon.

By the late 1800s, the island had more than 300 permanent residents and a thriving mercantile industry. It was also the site of Labrador's first hospital. A fire in 1930 destroyed the hospital and several other key buildings, forcing many residents to establish and settle in Mary's Harbour. A continual decline in the fishing industry over the next several decades, followed by a moratorium on cod fishing in 1992, led people to permanently resettle on the mainland.

Today, Battle Harbour is home to a summer community of nine people who work at the Battle Harbour historic site. Twenty-two of the island's 55 original buildings have been fully restored over



KARI J. BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Visitors to Battle Island get a glimpse of what the area looked like when it was a thriving fishing community.

the past 15 years, thanks to the nonprofit Battle Harbour Historic Trust. They include the oldest Anglican church in Labrador and several other buildings that offer some of the coziest accommodations on the Labrador coast.

Visitors can stay in the Battle Harbour Inn, which sits on a hill overlooking the village and Great Caribou Island; a 1904 self-catering cottage; a circa-1830 fisherman's house that's lighted by oil lamp and heated by woodstove; or a self-catering bunkhouse that sleeps 12. All told, the site can accommodate up to 48 people. You'll fall asleep to the sounds of ocean swells crashing on the island's rocky shores.

Mike Earle, Battle Harbour's manager and resource curator, gives lively tours of the site and takes people on boat excursions to

visit other abandoned communities, to go whale watching, and to explore the icebergs that drift here in the summertime.

On the 2½-hour tour, Earle tells visitors the history of the old mercantile operation while guiding them through the storehouses. Visitors can also see the room where Robert E. Peary, the arctic explorer, held his press conference in 1909 to report his successful expedition to the North Pole.

Then there is the general store, which still provides food, clothing, and supplies to locals and visitors. Stroll around the island's many red-roof buildings on restored boardwalks and wharves. Old dories rest on the docks and embankments along shore, and the original houses that have not been renovated maintain a certain charm.

Getting to Battle Harbour is half the adventure. I spent two weeks driving from Boston to Labrador via Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, using ferries to link Maine and the Maritime Provinces. Alternatively, you can fly to

Fifty-six miles from Blanc Sablon is Red Bay, which was once the heart of the Basque whaling industry. At the Red Bay National Historic Site interpretation center, there are a 430-year-old whaling chalupa (boat) and several hundred other artifacts on display.

Then, it's another 55 miles along a dusty gravel road to Mary's Harbour.

Along this southern coast, there are just two radio stations, the mayor of one town also runs a bed-and-breakfast, and I met people who will drive more than 400 miles to

visit the closest McDonald's. It may feel like the end of the world, but now you can get there from anywhere.

Contact Kari J. Bodnarchuk, a Portland, Maine-based freelance writer and photographer, at travelwriter@karib.us.

If you go . . .

Battle Harbour

Battle Island, Labrador & Newfoundland, Canada
709-921-6216
www.battleharbour.com

Open July 1-Sept. 15. Accommodations: \$22 for a bed in dorm-like setting; \$79 for a single room; \$88 for a double room in the Battle Harbour Inn; \$132 for a cottage

with a double and two single beds, or a double and four singles; and \$220 for a cottage that sleeps seven people. Provincial Ferry Services: The St. Barbe-Blanc Sablon auto and passenger ferry runs daily from mid-April to mid-January. One-way fare: Adult \$9.90, children ages 5-12 \$5.30, under 5 free; car \$20, bike \$4.

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