

Our neighbours to the north



Newfoundlanders are proud of their homeland and love nothing better than a sing-song. Little wonder that almost a quarter of them claims Irish ancestry, writes **Eamon Donoghue**

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the main attraction in a region awash with whales, icebergs, untamed landscapes, unique history and cuisine, is the Newfoundlanders.

On the most eastern edge of North America, the people are warm and funny, proud of their homeland and fond of a get-together, a chat and a sing-song. Little wonder, then, that almost a quarter of the population claims Irish ancestry. And remarkably many of them still hold the Irish accents of their never-forgotten relations, who deserted the British fishing boats as far back as the 1600s.

I was there for five days, and I was as taken aback to hear Wexford and Waterford accents by the end of the trip as I was the very first time, when I thought I was being imitated. Despite the accents, it is a Canadian province – at least according to 51 per cent of the voters in a 1948 referendum – and it retains some of the Canadian stereotypes you’d expect to find on your travels. Think moose, beavers and vast woodland.

This, however, is a Canadian region like

no other, and it’s only four and a half hours from Dublin. My flight set off from Dublin at 8.30am. Shortly after 10am I was on my way to pick up my car rental.

I started my trip with a walk up Signal Hill, overlooking the province’s capital, St John’s. The views were amazing, only briefly interrupted by a spell of thick fog and wind. The Ales and Tales tour begins at the top of Signal Hill and retraces the final battle of the Seven Years’ War, along the Ladies’ Lookout Trail. Legend has it the women of the city came here, to the city’s highest point, to look out for ships carrying their sons, husbands and lovers.

I was looking out for a glimpse of a bald eagle’s nest below. And down further, the Quidi Vidi Brewery where the trail wound up (the Iceberg beer is a must here – made using water from icebergs, they say it is 20,000 years in the making and it’s as crisp as you’d imagine.)

I spent my first night in The Inn by Mallard Cottage, in Quidi Vidi, a charming little fishing village, 20 minutes’ drive from St John’s international airport. An

18th-century Irish-Newfoundland vernacular style cottage, it’s one of the oldest wooden buildings in North America, with its original fittings still intact or recreated with great imagination.

The next morning brought an early start with Joseph O’Brien taking me on one of his whale and bird boat tours. These tours depart from Bay Bulls – situated along “the Irish loop”. The O’Briens have been fishermen for generations, but with the industry struggling Joseph decided to try something new. Thirty years later, he’s still going strong. “They said I was mad, but who’s laughing now?” he says.

He employs 30 staff and takes up to 750 people a day out to see the largest Atlantic Puffin colony in North America and an array of different whales and rock types. They get icebergs too at certain times of the year.

O’Brien is a brilliant storyteller who cares dearly about the area and its wildlife. We easily saw 10 humpback whales that morning with one even breaching in front of us. It was worth the flight alone.

For lunch I continued along the Irish loop to “Lighthouse Picnics” in Ferryland. Local woman Jill Curran transformed the neglected lighthouse where her great-grandfather was once keeper into a unique lunchtime location. Her lunch basket included freshly squeezed lemonade, a chutney-glazed ham and brie sandwich – on bread baked in the lighthouse – and a strawberry rhubarb fool.

There’s an endless choice of stunning views on the cliff’s edge to lay down your picnic mat, breathe in the salty fresh of the Atlantic and watch the whales blow.

Sullivan’s Song House in nearby Calvert is on the way back from Ferryland and it’s basically an open invite from Sean Sullivan for a cup of tea and a sing-song in his kitchen. It is hard to believe Sullivan, with his thick accent, has never been to Ireland.

At this end of the Irish loop – which for centuries had been cut off from the mainland – customs that came from Irish ancestors have been maintained in isolation through simple things, such as these intimate get-togethers.

That afternoon I make my way back to St John’s, a charming place which a slight hipster vibe. The city’s unique layout is largely the result of quick rebuilding in the aftermath of two great fires in 1877 and 1892. The oldest streets in the new world run into each other rather aimlessly here, while little jelly bean houses line the hilly streets.

I spent much of the next day wandering around “The Rooms” with archivist Larry Dohey, where provincial archives, art gallery and museum are all combined. The Talamh an Éisc (The Fishing Ground) exhibit answered a lot of my lingering questions about the region’s early Irish settlers.

Tell anybody in St John’s that you’re going out for dinner and they’ll light up and ask, “to Raymond’s?” It’s been named the top restaurant in Canada, with world re-