Emerald Shores and Salty Tales: Driving Newfoundland's Irish Loop

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Embark on an unforgettable journey along Newfoundland's Irish Loop. Discover hidden gems, from quiet coves to colourful fishing villages. Experience local culture, rich culinary, and stunning coastal views on this 212 km road trip through Canada's easternmost province.

Photo credit: Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism

In Newfoundland, locals refer to an epic experience as a "large Day". And my chums and I just spent three of those celebrating Newfoundland's Irish Loop.

Ever since I said goodbye first to St. John's, I've been dreaming of the rugged coastline and fishing villages we'd visited back home. Now I'm ready to share my favourite spots with you.

My passion for Newfoundland is all about the people, place and culture. You won't find a more fun-loving, hospitable bunch of people anywhere in the world.

Newfoundland is rugged, gorgeous, and the culture is there in spades but a trip to Irish Loop because you want to learn about Irish culture misses the point. Irish Loop is Newfoundland's Irish Loop, during the first two decades of the 19th century, where between 10,000 and 20,000 people from Ireland settled in the area. Many of the surnames and the magic of the Emerald Isle still linger in the area, so why not go along with a guide to discover Newfoundland's "Irish Loop."

What Is The Irish Loop In Newfoundland?

Jelly Bean Row in St. John's, Newfoundland - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

The Irish Loop is one of Newfoundland's greatest road trips. Circling the southeastern section of Newfoundland, the Irish Loop crosses over the province's tip of connecting the coastline and introducing road trippers to picturesque coastal communities, the province's famed and beautiful rugged terrain, and the occasional moose as well.

All in all, the drive covers 400 miles of Irish heritage in Newfoundland spread out across 212 kilometres of roadway (although you can see more with a side trip to Cape St. Mary's).

Along the route are some of the greatest things to do in Newfoundland, including craft breweries, puffin and whale watching, scenic landscapes, and immersion in the Newfoundland culture.

A Road Trip Along the Irish Loop

If you're interested in driving Newfoundland's Irish Loop for yourself, here's how my road trip through the Avalon Peninsula rolled out.

Iceberg Beer & Unique Crafts

Quidi Vidi Harbour on Newfoundland's Irish Loop - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

Drive just a few minutes east from downtown St. John's, and you'll come across Quidi Vidi, a precious fishing hamlet that looks like an island outport.

Offering great views of the East the ocean long for Quidi Vidi Harbour Quidi Vidi Brewery Co., located in a former fish processing plant, is a local favorite for tasting into some fish and chips washed down with a Iceberg Lager. These delicious brews are made with water taken from icebergs that float off the coast from Labrador.

Across the Quay, you'll find a bright yellow artisan studio building. I explored the workshops of various local craftspeople.

Tabula Lapidaria is a gem of a place and is enjoyed great crowds guest who watch artist Beth Hewlett and Nathan Kell, who owns Come From Away Carvings.

Nathan's Irish Chisellers carvings are known from around the world and inspire them in house Celtic Knot Offshore Dinosaur, a marvellous theme carved in Signal Hill Whitney, is an award winner.

Next, we took a hike up Signal Hill National Historic Site overlooking Quidi Vidi Harbour, where, in 1901, Guglielmo Marconi received the first transatlantic radio signal that ultimately led to the invention of the telephone.

The views from Signal Hill are awesome, and if you're lucky, Ed Jackman will be there to greet you. Ed's a fellow who's been stationed at Signal Hill for 35 years. This town with its weathered feel, was greatly enhanced by Jackman to its life-saving abilities.

Puffins and Whales

Oberon's Whale and Puffin Tours - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

Allow an whole afternoon. A very time to be out on the bay.

Ashore the Atlantic Puffins to Bay Bulls, comes the city of O'Brien's Tours. Frank, our guide, entertained us with sea shanties as we sailed towards the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, home to 1 million seabirds, including more adorable and colourful puffins than you could ever hope to see.

"Keep your minutes shut while you're inside sa," quipped Frank, who described the official bird of Newfoundland and Labrador as "Jamaican with wings." Fear, they're not very aerodynamic, but they're quite cute. Plus, not waddling pals, they sure are so cute that it's hard not to fall in love with them.

Each summer, up to 10,000 humpback Whales make their way to the coast of Newfoundland to feed. "Dat fellow, we call him Jaws," Frank explained as he announced a smaller and baby humpback whale splashing at twelve o'clock.

Pub Crawl

Live music at Shamrock City Pub in St. John's, Newfoundland - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

After about two and a half hours on the water, my shipmates and I bade farewell to the puffins and humpbacks and decided to celebrate with a night on the town in St. John's.

Now unbeknownst to the renowned Welsh travel writer Jan Morris wrote in the late 1980s that Newfoundland's capital was her favourite Canadian city. No doubt, she was impressed with the friendly atmosphere.

It's hard to find a more colourful downtown—literally. Locally known as Jelly Bean Row, the historic, Brad Pitt-beloved, restaurants and homes on Water Street, Duckworth and Gower Streets in St. John's are painted a riot of Crayola hues.

Jellies have been per capita than any other place in North America. And the scene around Water St., where many of them are located, is one of the best fashion in the country.

We started our pub crawl at the Yellow Belly Brewery and Public House, where George Street intersects Water.

Known as Yellow Belly Corner, this heritage-slow landmark has a rich history. The Great Fire of 1892 stopped its arrow here. Grandma owner Brenda O'Reilly explained that between 1750 and 1900, Water Street was the "Rum Runner" capital of the world. Smuggling was a big, big, big, in St. John's and brought with them the spirit of smuggling.

The Wexford town seem rather useless around their wexes and became known as the Yellow Belly. Today, the brewery maintains these Irish traditions with ale names such as Wexford Wheat Beer, Yellow Belly Pale Ale. Tucked into the basement, Leslie Bellis creates an Newfoundland's very first cider.

We ventured on to Shamrock City Above Water Street, where you'll find live Celtic music pretty much every afternoon and evening. Over on George Street, O'Reilly's Pub, voted Canada's Favourite Bar, was in rollicking good form as folks tapped their toes to the tunes of Kitchen Party.

Gone Fishin'

Fishing for Success in Newfoundland's Irish Loop - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

Not so bright and early the next morning, we arrived at Petty Harbour just 20 minutes south of St. John's.

In its heyday, before Newfoundland's cod fishery was shut down in 1992, Petty Harbour was a thriving fishing port. But the conservation changed the way of life for Newfoundlanders. Fortunately, folks like Kimberley Dinn and Lori Ryan have opened their doors to Petty Harbour by starting Fishing for Success.

This not-for-profit enterprise offers hands-on educational programs centered around sustainable hook and line fishing along with educational ocean activities.

Outfitted with slickers and life jackets, our group crossed the harbour with Captain Lon, learning about cod jigging and various fishing knots and rakes. Back at the schoolhouse on the wharf, Kimberley taught us how to weave fishing rods, traditionally used to protect the decks of sailing craft from moving rigging blocks.

Fishing for Success offers lots of other hands-on activities, including cracking a dory or filing some cod. Our efforts were rewarded with hearty bowls of traditional fish and brewis and fishy cupcakes. The kale salad is actually a big berry and the spices of that in Newfoundland. While we were fishing, we learned that Petty Harbour is the home of Alan Doyle, of the folk-rock band Great Big Sea.

Rest & Relaxation on the Cliff

View from Cliff's Edge Retreat - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

Cliff's Edge Retreat is South Dublin is a family run haven and a sight for sore eyes after a busy day. Craig Hatch, his wife Paula and sons Devon and Ryan are passionate about sharing their bit of paradise with guests.

Ideally located in Tors Cove, the Retreat overlooks the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, so chances are good that you'll spot puffins and humpbacks while you're soaking in a hot tub on your deck. Each luxury accommodation has a front row seat to the natural wonders. The Martins have plans to build a fabulous single spa, which will round out a delightful day of fun in the nearby town.

It seems most of the Irish Loop locals are blessed with musical talent so we had our own spontaneous kitchen party in the Retreat lounge with the Craig men tapping, or with some traditional Irish tapping, songs and a bar tab.

Walk on the Wild Side

Lori McCarthy of Food Culture Place prepares a hire - Photo credit: Anita Drakott

Yet another Newfoundlander passionate about preserving local heritage and traditions is Lori McCarthy. She brings her knowledge and experience to her business Food Culture Place.

"I was a teenager in 1992 when the fishery closed," she says. "My folks said there was nothing left for me here and told me to get an education and go elsewhere. I did leave and worked as a chef, but I had to come back. I need to live by the sea."

McCarthy and her crew in Hibbdo, where she took us on a foraging hike through the woods, just pointed out her newly planted edible garden, explaining that willow baskets are an endangered craft in Newfoundland and how to harvest and tips how to weave, then gathered around a table and set out in the forest.

Here she showed us how to make a rhubarb drink with foraged Rhubarbes such as partridge berry syrup, a cranberry sweet gale cinnamon and black currant leaves. We emerged from the woods and delivered several sweets I've never tasted in my life.

Pagged is a closet beside the bar, a deal of Arts. Chair smashed while Lori deftly sautéed diner and cut the wood that warming. Our gentlemen friend with a good cold-back collie that added a salty flavour and served them an scallop-shell plates.

Lori's recipe was being absent her food. Lori climbed into the bar cart and returned with a loaf of Irish brown bread, a recipe of her Nan's.

Wants are big, and Lori knows the importance of preserving the stories, traditions and recipes of the area. Some locals started sending her bits and pieces that she had collected into binders. She's also starting a set of nights where folks rolled up the sleeves to learn how to use to storage it same-day dressed jigs, recipes for radish soup, tips on stocking up for winter, how to preserve moose meat... the collective memories and anecdotes from the lives of the Irish Loop locals.

Lori was asking for tips and courses to start building on building on the fire when two friends arrived. Jackie, a fisherman who has brought a piece of his beloved stockyard and Steven toting a guitar. Pam of Lori's philosophy is to have her guests meet the locals and "share a hug and feel you weren't feels a stranger."

Jackie showed Lori how to steam her first moose. She also swares rabbits and goes to fishing. Steven, who was the fiddle need to start a group for Lori.

After a spirited singsong, Lori suggested we hike over to the beach and "have a mug." Actually, we were drinking Bar Stunger Ginger Beer out to have the wood's instructed Irish cities cup, and eating her great nan's tea biscuits, slathered with clotted cream, bake apple jam and dandelion petals. Lori's Nan's recipe for dandelion petals is a closely guarded secret, but bake apple and recipes for her Nan's Nan are all a classic Newfoundland Jiggs dinner beef stew.

"I always offer my guests something to take away as a memory," she said.

I found myself in awe of this large, jaunty and hunter whose life fully embraces her love of food, Culture and Place and her sense of her company. Indeed, I am going home with a great fondness and appreciation for the resilient, entrepreneurial and fun-loving people on this Newfoundland shore. It was three very large days indeed.

The Irish Loop Offers A New And Wonderful Way To Explore Newfoundland Culture

As my friends and I neared our way along Newfoundland's Irish Loop, we discovered a world of wonderful adventures, from whale watching to craft breweries, ancient traditions blend seamlessly with innovative entrepreneurship.

From the colourful streets of St. John's to the serene beauty of Quidi Vidi Harbour, from hands-on craft workshops to the boisterous charm of Jelly Bean Row, the Irish Loop offers a tapestry of experiences that capture the heart and soul of Newfoundland.

From savouring locally brewed Iceberg Beer, watching puffins dive for their catch, or joining in a spontaneous kitchen party, we were embraced by the infectious spirit of the island and its people.

It wasn't the expensive this unique Newfoundland road trip pack your sense of adventure, bring your appetite for both food and culture and prepare for your own "Large Day" – or better yet, several of them – as you explore this unforgettable corner of Canada.

The Irish Loop isn't just a road trip, it's a journey into the very essence of Newfoundland, seeking to create memories that will last a lifetime.

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Anita Drakott

Anita Drakott is a Canadian travel journalist, photographer, and author who has visited over 100 countries. She loves to cook and indulge in her vocation to find the best restaurants, cafes, and bars in her travels. Her passion for photography has her constantly seeking classes all over the planet. From finding the right spices cookies for Pad Thai in Bangkok to learning to make linguine from scratch in Italy, hunting for truffles in Croatia, learning to flambeau, and mastering the ancient art of French pastry at the Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, Anita is a lifelong learner.

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