

CROSS COUNTRY SKIER

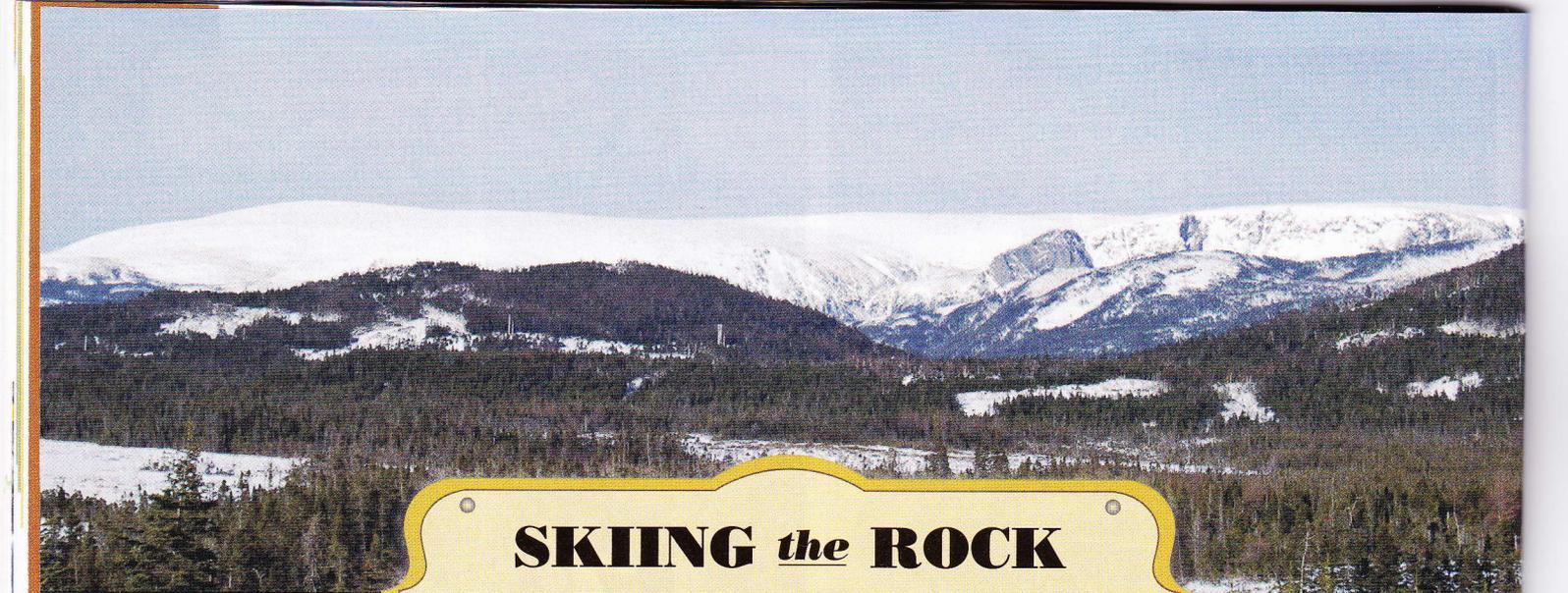
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THE FINE ART OF SKIING
THE FIRST NORTH
AMERICAN SKIERS
BIATHLON FOR KIDS
WOMEN'S LONG
DISTANCE RACING
NEWFOUNDLAND'S
GROS MORNE
WISCONSIN'S
KETTLE MORaine



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SKIING *the* ROCK

Newfoundland's Gros Morne

By Dale Dunlop

Newfoundland, a.k.a. “The Rock,” (for reasons obvious to anyone who visits), is Canada’s eastern most province. It is a land of anomalies. It is almost 2,500 miles closer to Europe than to Vancouver on the west coast of Canada. Despite being almost as large as Cuba, less than half a million residents call it home.

Despite being the site of the only authenticated Viking settlement in North America, with two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and having thousands of miles of pristine coastal and wilderness beauty, few tourists visit. Despite a history of over 500 years of difficult economic conditions and privations, Newfoundlanders are without doubt, the most hospitable people any visitor to Canada will encounter. Perhaps one of the most under-appreciated facts about Newfoundland, at least for skiers, is that western Newfoundland gets over 16,200 inches of snow every year and conditions remain excellent well into the late spring.

In the first week of April 2011, long after the snow disappeared from my native province of Nova Scotia, I had the chance to check out the trails of western Newfoundland and once again enjoy that legendary Newfoundland hospitality. Once over the island, on the short flight from Halifax to the tiny airport at Deer Lake, I could see immediately that everything on the ground was white — a good portent. On the ground, I met my guide, retired teacher John Moores, and within minutes of landing we were off to Gros Morne National Park, less than 30 minutes away.

Gros Morne is a four-season natural wonderland that was among the first in Canada to be designated a World Heritage site. It contains a couple of truly unique North American landscapes — the Tablelands and genuine fjords with cliffs up to 2,000 feet high. Both can be explored by the intrepid backcountry skier.

The Tablelands represent one the very few instances of ultramafic rock formation on earth — which in plain terms means places where rock from the earth’s mantle that has been thrust upwards by tectonic forces exposing rock that was formed miles below the earth’s surface. This rock, peridotite, has few nutrients with the result that, when not covered with snow, the Tablelands looks almost exactly like the pictures of Mars sent back by the Martian Rover. However, in winter it is an almost-flat mesa-like mountain covered with a blanket of deep snow that overlooks the stunning fjord, Bonne Bay, 1,000 feet below, and the peaks of the Long Range and Lookout mountains to the north and west.

Thanks to Parks Canada it is possible to explore the Tablelands in winter. A back-country cabin just below the tree-line at Southwest Gulch is available by reservation for a modest fee; however, it is only for the experienced skier with good navigational and wilderness skills. There is no marked trail and the elevation gain is considerable. Weather conditions can be unpredictable and extreme. John told me the story of his last visit to the Tablelands. He was storm stayed for two days in the cabin. The third day dawned sunny and mild, making perfect conditions for him and his companion to ski from the cabin up to the top of the Tablelands, and make a circular traverse along the edge of the cliffs before the long decent to the bottom. He said it was the best day of skiing in his life.

The other outstanding feature of Gros Morne, the fjords, also provides options for slightly less-challenging

skiing and other adventure. Baker's Brook Pond, despite the name, is actually a large deep landlocked fjord surrounded by immense cliffs from which frozen waterfalls dangle and are a magnet for ice climbers. There is a marked and usually groomed five-mile/eight-km. trail to Baker's Brook Pond where Parks Canada maintains a fully serviced cabin that can be used as a base to explore the area. Once there, skiers can stay on the snow-covered ice surface and look at things from below.

Baker's Brook Pond is one of the few places where "snow devils" are regularly seen. A snow devil is a mini-twister that is generated by winds whipping down the steep cliffs. Although it sounds dangerous, it really is more of an interesting and rare natural phenomenon as evidenced by videos of snow devils posted on YouTube. After skiing below the cliffs and frozen waterfalls, many skiers elect to don snowshoes to trek to the top of the cliffs for an eagle's eye view. If staying overnight is not an option, the Berry Hill-Baker's Brook trail makes for a good day's outing.

There are a great many backcountry opportunities in Gros Morne that simply involve parking your vehicle and heading out. Frequently you will

come upon ponds surrounded by cliffs or some likely spots to find the moose and caribou that are plentiful in the park. While a guide is a good idea, it is not a requirement and anybody with competent navigational skills and common sense shouldn't have any trouble.

If your preference is something a little less adventuresome, then western Newfoundland has plenty to offer, starting right at Gros Morne. The park's visitor center is located near Gros Morne, a barren looking mountain that is the highest in western Newfoundland. In summer its summit is often the object of a gruelling hike that rewards the successful with phenomenal views that have made the climb world famous. In winter, the summit is unattainable, but by skiing the groomed and tracked trails that loop out from the visitor center you can catch some great views of this white-capped mountain. Altogether there are six trails here, all with modest lengths, but combining them provides a good morning of classic or skate skiing. The warming hut located at the halfway point will be a welcome sight on the coldest and windiest of days.

If the wind is up, which it often is in Gros Morne, a good option is the

Wigwam-Stuckless trail system that connects ponds of those names. This trail is generally in the lee of the mountains, and winds its way through beautiful forests, including an enchanting birch forest reminiscent of New England or Sweden. It follows the course of a small brook part of the way and then the shoreline of several small ponds. This is a linear trail just over eight miles (about 13 km) in length with parking lots at either end. It is usually groomed, except for the steep portion from the parking lot on the south side to the bridge over the Lomond River. There are a few tricky sections at each end, but after making the descent into the valley is done, it is only moderately difficult.

Two final options within the park are the municipal trails at Trout River and Shallow Bay. Shallow Bay at the extreme northern end of Gros Morne offers something hard to find — a cross country system close to the ocean. A series of three looped trails about seven kilometers (four miles) in length generally follows the course of an old mail route along a flat surface with dunes on one side and the forest on the other. The fishing community of Trout River, in the southern area of the park, also grooms three miles (five kilometers) of trail. All-in-all



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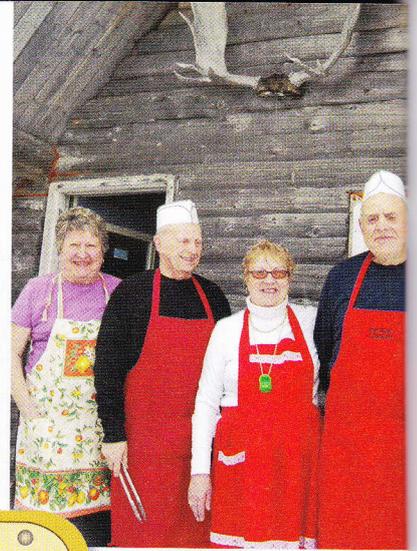
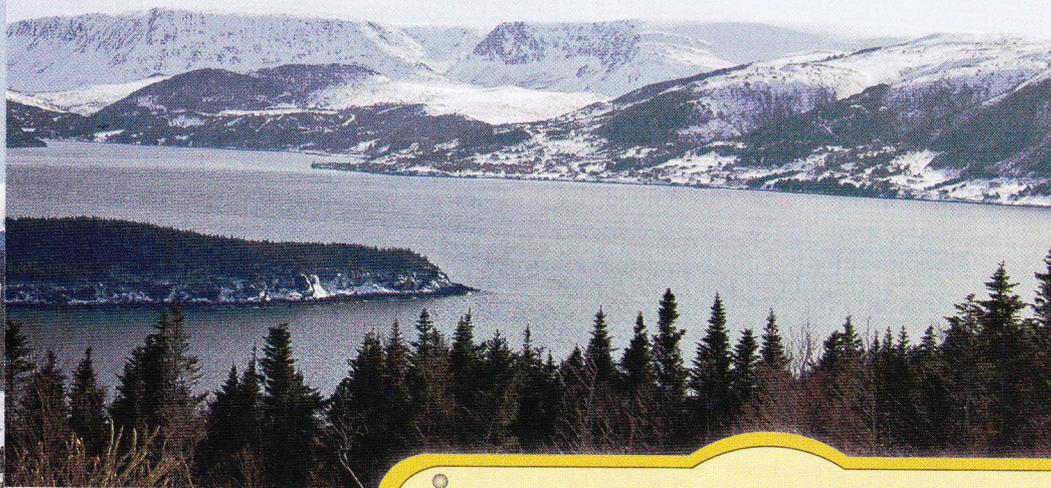
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Shallow Bay at the extreme northern end of Gros Morne offers something hard to find — a cross country system close to the ocean.

Gros Morne offers more than enough for all levels and types of cross country skiers, but that is not the only reason to ski western Newfoundland.

Blow-Me-Down Trails, just outside of the small city of Corner Brook has the largest trail system in Newfoundland and, at up to around 750 members, is the largest club east of Quebec. Newfoundlanders love to ski and have developed some great associated traditions to go with that. With over 530 kilometers of groomed trails of all levels, a racing circuit and biathlon range, Blow-Me-Down has a lot to offer skiers of any level; however, it was the Saturday morning Gazebo Gang tradition that brought me to Blow-Me-Down.

The gazebo is really an old A-frame cabin that is located at the farthest point on the trail system from the main lodge, about three miles/five kilometers. I headed out with manager Shawn Leamon on what turned out to be a snowy Saturday morning and we skied the well-marked trail to the gazebo in no time. Arriving there we were greeted by Carl King and Rod Tucker, both in their 70s, who had skied in earlier, got the fire going, soup on and coffee steaming. Soon two snowmobiles pulled up with Joan Posner and Helen Hiscock along with lots of supplies — the Gazebo Gang was complete. The four methodically set about cooking up a traditional Newfoundland breakfast, which includes eggs, bologna, baked beans, toast, coffee and, most intriguing — touton. Touton is a type of batter, somewhere between bread and donut dough, that is deep fried and served with molasses. For five dollars I had a breakfast that was not only filling, but really good.

Not long after, other groups began to arrive to enjoy the food and good company that Newfoundlanders cherish. My reluctance to depart was quickly overcome by the excellent Barry May trail, which was a technically challenging, mostly downhill, return to the base lodge, where dozens of others skiers were getting ready to depart to join the

Gazebo Gang.

My last stop in Newfoundland was the Pasadena Ski and Nature Park in the

small retirement community of the same name. Arriving on Sunday morning I found the place deserted except for the groomer, who had just finished his job, and the manager. Overnight, more than over four inches of beautiful light snow had fallen and with the place to myself I set out to explore. The area was teeming with wildlife. Within an hour I came across fresh tracks of fox, marten, and weasels; all apparently in pursuit of the rabbits, squirrels and voles which also left their tracks. Most interesting were the many signs of otters that had been sliding on the new-fallen snow as they made their way between the many small streams in the area. While I did not see a moose or caribou, I was advised that both are frequently encountered at Pasadena. A nice whimsical touch to these trails was the tiny red hearts that someone had taken the time to hang from many of the trees. In three hours of skiing I met only the groomer.

While the cross-country skiing is enough reason to visit western Newfoundland, it is not the only reason. Marble Mountain is the largest downhill ski hill in Atlantic Canada and it gets by far the most snow. It has great views of the Humber River valley and some really challenging terrain, including the legendary OMJ trail — you can guess what the letters stand for. Also not to be missed is the Marble Zip line, one of the largest in Newfoundland, that crisscrosses the front of Steady Brook Falls. This hands-free zip line allows the participant to take a 360-degree video of the falls, Marble Mountain, the Humber River and the canyon below. It's open year round and well worth taking a few hours off from the trails.

Getting to western Newfoundland is easy. There are direct flights to Deer Lake from Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax. The following websites should help you plan your trip.



MOOSE RUN



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For more information

www.newfoundlandlabrador.com
www.gowesternnewfoundland.com

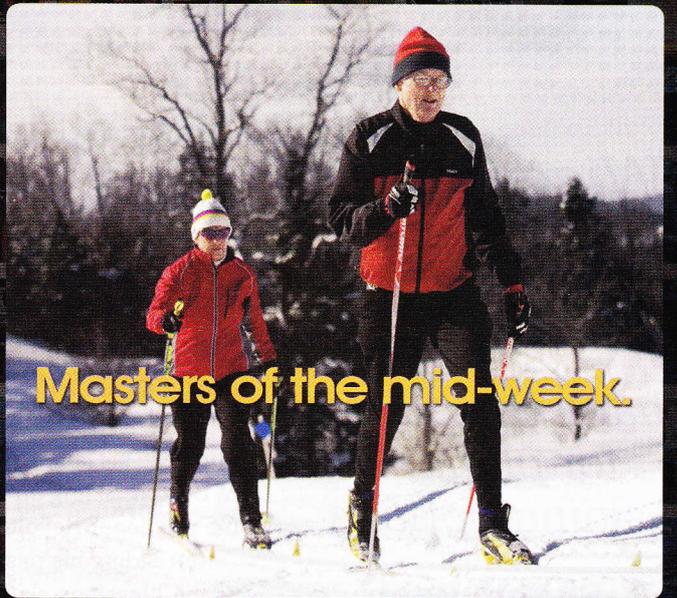
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Dale Dunlop is a freelance travel writer and book author who writes extensively about outdoor activities in eastern Canada and the United States. He is a member of The Explorer's Club of New York and currently sits on the board of the Travel Media Association of Canada. He is an avid, if not overly accomplished, cross country skier.



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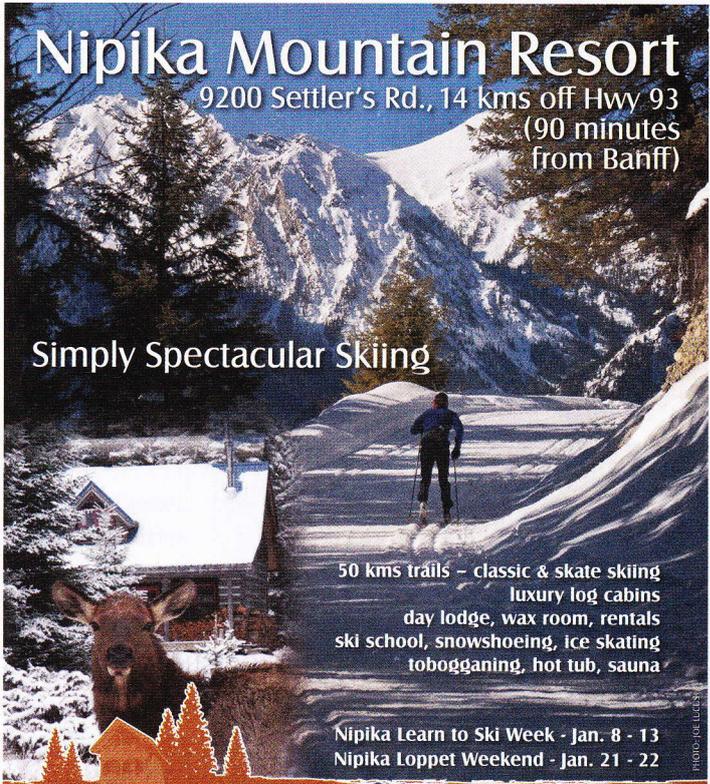
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