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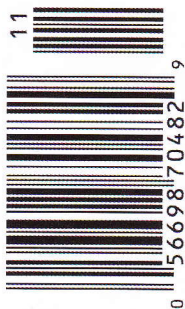
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Crossing The Big Land

By Dale Dunlop

The Trans-Labrador Highway ends
the isolation.

Part I

Labradoreans call their home The Big Land for good reason — with almost 300,000 square-kilometres, it is substantially larger than Great Britain. And while Great Britain has over 60 million residents, Labrador has fewer than 30,000. With so much territory and so few people, it is not surprising Labrador was, until very recently, substantially isolated from the rest of Canada. It was only in 2010 that the last portion of the Trans-Labrador Highway was completed, allowing residents of the east and southern coasts to drive to central and western Labrador and then into Québec.

What follows is a description of the Trans-Labrador Highway (TLH) as my son and I found it in August 2011 as part of a 4,000-mile great circular route that started and ended in Halifax. Our vehicle was a 24-foot Midi Motorhome, generously subsidized by Go RVing Canada. We picked it up at the Canadream location

just outside Halifax. After driving more than 1,000 kilometres in 24 hours, including nine hours on the Cape Breton-Newfoundland ferry, we arrived at St. Barbe near the tip of the northern peninsula of Newfoundland. From here, we boarded the ferry M.V. Apollo (only \$28 all in) for a 90-minute sailing across the Strait of Belle Isle to Blanc Sablon, Québec, near the Labrador border.

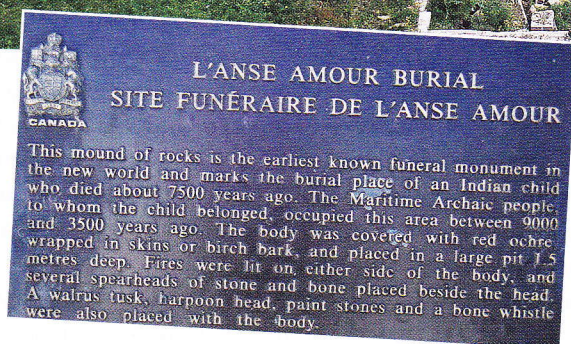
This passage is known for its icebergs and whales and this trip did not disappoint. Only one sizeable iceberg was visible far off, but the whales made up for it. As the ferry neared the Québec shore, huge flocks of seabirds appeared overhead, indicating the presence of a large shoal of fish (probably capelin). Soon, a pod of humpback whales surrounded our boat. One of these massive creatures put on a spectacular display, breaching the water's surface by thrusting its huge body almost completely out of the water — twice. Welcome to Labrador.

The roads in Newfoundland had been excellent, but the pavement on this side was in pretty poor shape. While still in Québec, we stopped in at a small store that had a larger selections of wines than any we encountered in coastal Labrador, so if you are a wine drinker, stock up here.

Our first stop in Labrador was the Labrador Visitor Centre, where we found an informative and well presented history of the Labrador coast, decorative wall hangings, and a striking painting of a wolf under the northern lights, of which you can buy a poster, (which I did). Most importantly, here you can — and absolutely



Fossils



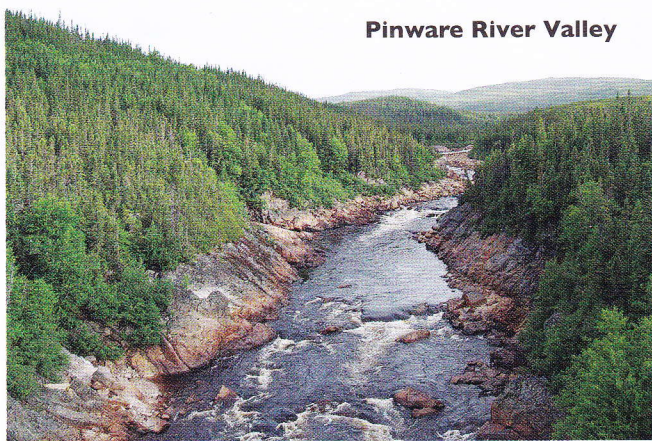
The lighthouse is a marvel and, at 109 feet, is the second highest in Canada. It was so well constructed that after 150 years, the original stairs to the short ladder to the top are still in use. Best of all, we were allowed to climb to the top, from where there was a magnificent view up and down the Strait of Belle Isle. This stretch of the Labrador coast is infamous for shipwrecks and you can see where the British warship Raleigh foundered in 1922. Looking straight down, we saw large, perfectly symmetrical squares of rock on the shore that were actually fossils laid down when Labrador was situated in equatorial waters. The first and second floors contained a museum that told the history of Labrador's south coast. It was \$3 well spent.

Our first night was spent in Pinware Provincial Park, the only such park along the entire TLH. Although there were serviced RV sites in L'Anse au Clair and Red Bay associated with motels, we opted to stay only yards from the ocean in a beautiful location where the Pinware River meets the ocean. As it turned out, the capelin had just finished spawning and seabirds by the thousands were thronging the beach in search of expired capelin and/or their eggs. Although, at first, the smell was a bit off-putting, we soon realized it was a small price to pay to observe such a wonder of nature. Also of note was a baited bear trap not 100 feet from our location — we did see the bear at dusk and he was a big one, but luckily he was prowling the opposite bank of the river.

The 22 camping spots at Pinware were all in use that day and we got to meet many of our fellow explorers,

should — pick up a complimentary satellite phone that can be dropped off at a number of spots on the TLH, including Labrador City if you are driving the entire route.

The next stop was L'Anse Amour lighthouse, just up the road. After turning onto the side road to the lighthouse, we found a plaque on the right that identified and explained the oldest known funeral monument in North America — a pile of carefully placed rocks that, at 7,500 years old, was older than the pyramids and Stonehenge. And does anyone still believe it was Columbus who discovered North America?



Pinware River Valley



One of several high bridge crossings to Red Bay

most of whom had come long distances to discover Labrador — British Columbia, Alberta, California, Florida, Nevada and even Switzerland were represented. During the coming days, we encountered the same groups over and over again, developing a shared sense of adventure and camaraderie.

The drive from Pinware to Red Bay was very scenic, first a landscape of green hills covered with glacial erratics, and then crossing the red sandy Pinware River valley over several high bridges to Red Bay. Red Bay N.H.S. is the No. 1 attraction on the Labrador south coast. From about 1540 to 1600, Basque whalers from Spain made this area their summer headquarters for hunting right whales. The whalers' legacy was largely forgotten until archaeological excavations commencing in the 1970s revealed a huge trove of artifacts as well as several sunken ships, including the largest Spanish galleon north of the Caribbean.

The site consists of two interpretive buildings and Saddle Island, where most of the activities took place. The first building contains the remnants of a chalupa, the small open boats the Basques used to harpoon the whales that were many times bigger than the boat, and a mural of whalers using a chalupa. The second explains



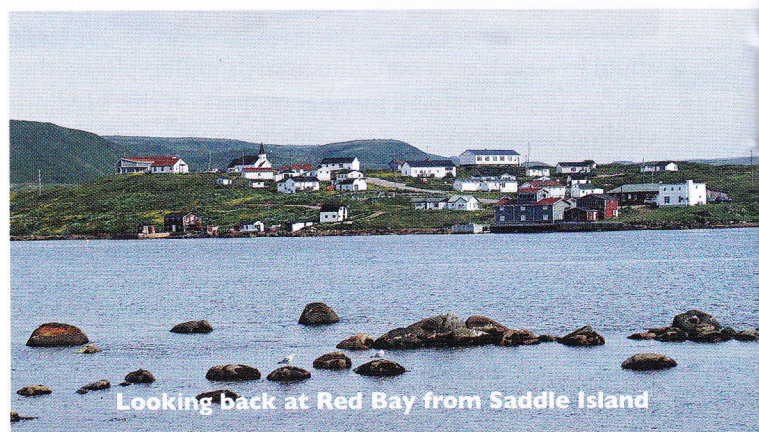
**Interpretive building
Remnant of a chalupa**

the history of whaling through various artifacts, including many from the Spanish galleon.

Then comes the best part — for only \$2 you can make the short trip to Saddle Island and be left to explore on your own. Leaving at 10 a.m. on a warm, sunny day, we had the island to ourselves. A circular hiking path had 34 marked spots of interest, including aboriginal sites, shipwreck locations, tryworks where blubber was rendered, and a Basque burial ground. On landing, we were struck by the many varieties of wildflowers and the clarity of the water over the seafloor, studded below by sea urchins, mussels and northern whelks.

Walking up a ridge, we crested it to see an amazing sight. Directly ahead was the rusting hulk of a half-sunken freighter. In the mid-ground was an armada of gannets diving like avian torpedoes into a school of capelin with such rapidity that the booming noises of their splashes sounded like a small-calibre machine gun. To top it off, there was a majestic iceberg in the distance. We couldn't tear our eyes away and stared awestruck for a good 10 minutes.

Continuing on, we came across a large gull rookery where small chicks were attempting to hide in the mossy



Looking back at Red Bay from Saddle Island



undergrowth. They need not have worried — the moment we got close, the parents would dive bomb so close to our heads that retreat was the only option. All too soon our allotted hour was up and it was back to shore. However, those with more time can charter the ferryman, Truman Macey, to take them out to see icebergs, gannets and whales. He can be reached at truman-sherry@hotmail.com.

Ending our visit to Red Bay, we crossed the street to Whaler's restaurant, where junior enjoyed a traditional Labrador meal of corned beef and turkey augmented with root vegetables, cabbage and stuffing. He said it was the best turkey dinner he had ever tasted. I had a very good fish soup, after which I indulged in an ice cream sundae topped with squashberry, partridgeberry and cloudberry purees — delicious.

Most of the southern coastal communities have created walking trails to nearby look offs. While it might not be possible to climb them all, Tracey Hill Trail, outside of Red Bay, is a must. Constructed entirely as a boardwalk or steps to protect the fragile moss and lichens, the trail climbs to increasingly higher look offs over Red Bay. At one spot, there is a small pond where the ubiquitous Captain Kidd is reputed to have hidden treasure. The highest point is a glacial erratic known as American Rockyman, for unknown reasons. From here, we spotted 13 icebergs. This is not a demanding hike and should not take more than an hour.

The pavement ends at Red Bay and the first gravel stretch is 76 kilometres to Mary's Harbour. To describe the road as bad would be to compliment it; this is both-hands-on-the-wheel and eyes-on-the-road driving over hard washboard the entire way. The pretty coastal landscape gave way to tuckamore, stunted firs and spruce that are terrible to walk through and pretty lousy to look at. Eventually, the highway reached a treeless plateau

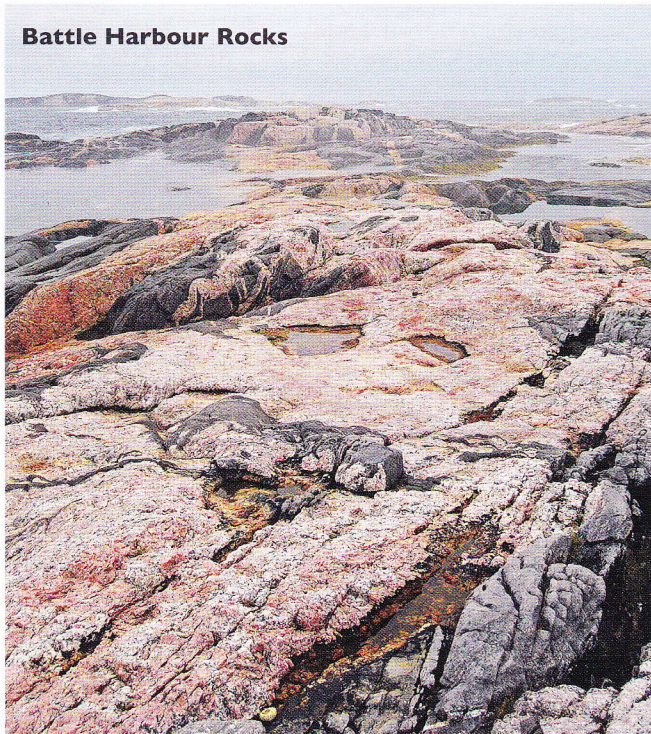


that, in turn, gave way to taiga, also called boreal forest, the largest coniferous forest on the planet. One Labrador tradition we observed were the many komatiks, small wooden sleds used to haul wood or game to the highway in winter, simply left in place for the next winter.

Despite the poor road, we were passed by a steady stream of vehicles and, entering Mary's Harbour, we found out why — it was the last day of the Crab Festival. With a couple of hours to kill before taking the passenger ferry to Battle Harbour, we parked the RV at the terminal and walked to the local recreation hall, where hundreds of Labradoreans, and now us, enjoyed traditional music while downing a few cold ones.

Anyone who has ever been to Atlantic Canada has

Battle Harbour Rocks



seen the iconic postcard of a small boy flanked by two giant codfish with the caption, "In Cod We Trust". That picture was taken at Battle Harbour in the late 1800s and that was our next destination.

Battle Harbour is on a small island nine miles off the coast of Labrador. Established by English merchants in 1775 as a fishing premises, it grew to become the largest settlement in Labrador, and its unofficial capital. It was here the Marconi Co. set up towers to broadcast news of catches and prices up and down the coast, and here that Robert Peary announced to the world that he had conquered the North Pole.

Being the largest out-port in Labrador, however, did not save Battle Harbour from the resettlement programmes of the 1950s and 60s designed to move inhabitants of Newfoundland and Labrador's out-ports to larger coastal communities, where better government services could be provided. By the late 1980s, Battle Harbour was down to a few permanent residents and looked like it was headed for extinction.

The Battle Harbour Heritage Trust was established in the 90s to preserve the remaining buildings and provide a chance to experience the out-port way of life. Among the 20 different structures preserved are the commercial fishing premises, the general store, the RCMP detachments, and the church. The best thing about a visit to Battle Harbour is that you can overnight in one of these historic buildings, and we intended to do just that.

Embarking on the M.V. Iceberg Hunter, which takes passengers only, it was an exhilarating hour-long trip during which we passed low lying green islands and huge

waves breaking over shoals far offshore. Before entering Battle Harbour, we passed the largely deserted community of Trap Harbour on Great Caribou Island, and then motored into the sheltered passageway between that island and Battle Harbour Island.

Approaching Battle Harbour was like sailing into the past — no cars, telephone or power poles loomed overhead, but instead there were two long abandoned Marconi towers. Some buildings were weather-beaten while others looked as fresh as the day they were built. It was a short walk to the general store to register. We were the only two people assigned to the bunkhouse, which could sleep up to 13, each in a tiny wooden bunk about four-feet by six-feet. There are no keys to the rooms — every public building on the island is left unlocked.

After settling in, we returned to the general store — where the second floor served as the communal dining room — and were served a delicious meal in the company of about a dozen others staying overnight in other various locales. There were shared stories, guitars appeared, and as the music began and darkness fell, there was a genuine feeling of slipping back to simpler times.

In the morning, I walked around the entire island and was frankly amazed at the variety of sites on such a small place. After visiting the fishing premises, the Grenfell office, the well-preserved church, and numerous other buildings, it was time to explore Battle Harbour's rocks, featured in many Newfoundland and Labrador tourism ads.

The ads have featured shots of light dancing off these rocks at water's edge and are so colourful, many would assume they have been Photoshopped, as did I. When you see these rocks with your own eyes, the fantastic wide quartz veins of pink, purple and rose ripping through the darker rocks, it is clear the ads were not doctored, but real - awesome and a sight worth making time for.

Turning upward along the trail, I climbed to the two Marconi towers and the Canadian flag that flies from the highest point on the island. On the way, I passed the sad sight of a plane wreck, in which three young men were killed after getting lost in the fog. Less mournful was the communal cemetery, where colourful lichen encrusted headstones contain many fine carvings.

Once again, it was time to leave a place before we really got to know it. After a hearty breakfast, we bid goodbye to most of the others staying on longer. While life for Battle Islanders may have been made easier by being moved to the mainland, I cannot believe it was necessarily made better.

Part two of our journey continues in the January/February 2012 RV gazette. **RV**



By Dale Dunlop

Part 2 Crossing The **Big Land**

The Trans-Labrador Highway ends the isolation.

We pick up the story after Dale and his son leave Battle Harbour Island...

Back on the mainland, it was soon apparent the road to the next town, Port Hope Simpson, was no better than the one we were on the previous day. Filling up here, we headed out on a 410-kilometre stretch with absolutely nothing in the way of services. At Cartwright Junction, the newest stretch of road begins. Here, the TLH leaves behind the historical fishing way of Labrador life and turns inland to the new Labrador, where hydro, mining and lumbering are king. Frankly, the long drive to Happy Valley-Goose Bay is not very interesting — it is classic taiga with lots of muskeg. Despite the nearness of the Mealy Mountains to the north, the road is flat, but though it is still gravel, it is definitely in better condition than the previous stretches.

Nearing Happy Valley-Goose Bay the soil gets very sandy, a feature that continued for a substantial

distance. Crossing the Churchill River, blessed pavement reappeared, and we headed for the only real RV park in Labrador — the Goose River Lodge just north of Goose Bay which had 10 serviced spots, only one other of which was in use. On the long crossing that day, we passed the first RV going the other way.

The next day dawned bright, and I noticed as I was showering that the water wasn't draining. Looking outside revealed the reason — a flat tire with a shiny nail sticking out of it. What would have been a disaster almost anywhere else on the TLH, because for safety and liability reasons CanaDream does not provide jacks, was no problem here. The RV park had a compressor with which we inflated the tire and drove to the aptly named The Repair Shop in Happy Valley, where matters were quickly attended to.

Our unexpected visit to Happy Valley was serendipitous. We were waved down by a resident who, seeing the British Columbia plates on the RV, mistakenly assumed we were from there. Turns out he was Herb



Happy Valley-Goose Bay Lookout

Brown, former B.C. resident who moved to Labrador many decades before to teach school at various remote communities. Now retired, Herb is the owner of Birches Gallery, the largest gallery anywhere specializing in Labrador Aboriginal art. He invited us into his amazing home/gallery, which was a treasury of beautiful and unusual artwork. Any visitor to Happy Valley should not pass up a visit to this gallery. You can get a preview at birchesgallery.com. As an added bonus, Herb is an organic farmer, so we were able to buy some fresh produce, which we ate over the next few days.

Leaving Happy Valley, we headed for North West River on the northernmost road in Labrador, passing along the way several Innu summer encampments. North West River is one of the oldest communities in Labrador, originally founded as a Hudson Bay post more than 200 years ago. Donald Smith, better known as Lord Strathcona of 'the last spike' fame, spent 20 years here as factor. The Hudson Bay post is now the Labrador Heritage Museum and is well worth a visit. Here, you can tour the old post, examine some very well-done

from the ill-fated Leonidas Hubbard expedition of 1904. Hubbard wanted to be the first to cross Labrador from south to north, but his hubris led him to ignore the advice of local guides and he promptly got lost and eventually died. The real story is that in the following year, his widow Mina returned and accomplished the feat her husband could not.



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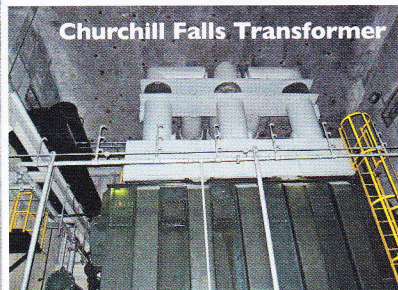
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Churchill Falls Tunnel



North West River has a beautiful location at the head of Lake Melville that is enhanced by a fine-grained sandy beach, where swimming is quite feasible. A drive up Sunday Hill leads to a wonderful view of Lake Melville and the Mealy Mountains on the one side, and Grand Lake, up whence Leonidas disappeared, on the other.

We returned to Goose Bay, which was a large training centre for RAF and other NATO pilots, and is now the primary commercial airport for Labrador. The tourism office gave us directions to a look off high above the town, from which there were fabulous views of the Churchill River, Lake Melville, and the two towns below. After this scenic indulgence, it was time to tackle the next long stretch to Churchill Falls, some 285 kilometres. We were pleasantly surprised to find the pavement extended a good 30 kilometres farther than shown on the map, and when we reached the paving crew, they estimated they were doing up to two kilometres a day, so by the time you read this, that stretch may be completely paved.

This entire stretch is among the most scenic on the TLH, the river playing a significant role, with mixed forests extending down to its sandy banks, and rolling hills in the distance. There were numerous spots to pull over beside streams and ponds that would make good camping spots. The highlight of this section is the short side trip to Muskrat Falls, about 40 kilometres out of Goose Bay. There is a 3-kilometre dirt road that leads first to look off over the river, which, at this point, has high cliffs. For reasons unknown, there is a small shrine at which supplicants have been leaving coins as gifts. This also would be a great spot

to camp. A little farther on is the trail that leads to the falls, which is about a 10-minute walk. The falls are exciting, if not breathtaking, and it is sad to know that they are slated to be developed for hydro and will probably be destroyed in the process.

This was the day we came face to face with the reality of driving the TLH in an RV. About 100 kilometres outside Churchill Falls, we came across a disabled RV we had last seen in Red Bay. Stopping, we found the owner, a very experienced mechanic, had been working for eight hours trying to jury-rig a solution to a seized engine idler bearing. He said he was almost ready to go and we volunteered to follow behind in case he broke down again, which happened about 20 kilometres outside Churchill Falls, when the temporary belt he had stitched together broke. We drove back and luckily found it, which allowed him to get underway again and limp into Churchill Falls some nine hours later than expected.

Churchill Falls has no RV park, but RVers are welcome to stay at the recreation centre parking lot, which has electrical outlets, and there is fresh water and a dumping station nearby. Although it was late, we enjoyed a glass of wine with our new friends. We also met a couple from New Hampshire who had broken down 90 kilometres outside Labrador City and waited two days to be towed in. The moral of the story on the TLH seems to be "Hope for the best – prepare for the worst".

The main reason to visit Churchill Falls is to tour the hydroelectric facility, which we arranged for the next morning. The tour begins just across from the recreation centre parking lot with an orientation session that explains the history of the development. The first



Bowdoin Canyon

thing you learn is there is no big dam, rather the water flow from the falls some 30 kilometres away has been redirected through a series of berms to the facility at the town of Churchill Falls. The wonder of the place is not what is above, but below ground. After viewing maps and a video, we were taken to the facility just outside of town, outfitted with safety gear, and taken in an elevator the equivalent of 91 floors down into the Earth. Emerging, we saw a scene right out of a James Bond movie — men all dressed in similar outfits standing before hundreds of gauges and dials, huge tunnels bored out of solid granite, and machinery of a gargantuan size. If you are a fan of engineering accomplishments on a mammoth scale, this is the place for you.

The last stretch of the TLH comes in three flavours — good, bad and ugly. The good was the final 100 kilometres into Labrador City, the bad was the washboard for the previous 100 kilometres, and the ugly was the construction on the other 40 kilometres.

Just after crossing the Churchill River, not far out of Churchill Falls, there is a parking lot from which you can hike to the falls and Bowdoin Canyon. A 10-minute walk on a very good trail leads to an overlook over Bowdoin Canyon, which comes as quite a surprise with its high cliffs and many hued rocks which change colour as the light intensifies or fades. Fifteen minutes on is what we both considered the most awe-inspiring site in Labrador: Churchill Falls. Many people assume the Churchill Falls development completely destroyed these falls, once one of the largest by volume in the world. While what is left is

but a trickle of what must have been, what remains is still magnificent. At 275 feet, the falls are more than 100 feet higher than Niagara, and almost as wide. Returning to the RV, we were wistful that we had now seen just about all the TLH has to offer.

Arriving in Wabush and then Labrador City, it was immediately apparent these were mining towns as the landscape changed to reveal entire mountains being systematically demolished, and red dust blew everywhere. The tours once offered of the mines have been discontinued, so there really is no reason to linger here. Not far past Labrador City, the TLH ended at the Quebec border, but the journey was far from over as we still needed to successfully navigate Quebec's infamous Highway 389. There was 600 kilometres to go to get to Baie Comeau and the way home.

The first town in Quebec is Fermont and it is worth the short detour for two reasons: you get your picture taken underneath the giant mining truck just outside of town and visit the town's unique layout. Instead of a bunch of cookie-cutter company houses, Fermont consists largely of one building stretching in excess of a kilometre in which everybody lives and conducts business. From the outside, it doesn't look like much, but inside is a beehive of activity with all manner of stores and services offered to the people who live somewhere down its lengthy halls.

Leaving Fermont, the pavement ended after passing through the middle of a massive mining development that has to be seen to appreciate the scale. The next 70 kilometres or so were probably the most dangerous on the whole trip — the road was narrow, rough,



Manic Dam

winding and there was a constant stream of trucks, many oversized, that left dust clouds that made it nearly impossible to see. The road was crossed many times by the railway that hauls the iron ore to Sept Iles. At one place, we passed a train going north that had a number of flat cars with RVs on them — these people were sensible enough to avoid the 389.

The pavement unexpectedly reappeared at Fire Lake, and we made good time to Gagnon, a former mining town of 4,000 residents that is now a ghost town. All the houses are gone, but the remnants of the streets remain and we found a good camping spot beside the river that runs through the former town.

It rained heavily that night and the long stretch to Relais Gabriel was slick with lots of trucks, the pavement having ended after Gagnon. A pleasant distraction was the passage through the Groulx Mountains, which could have been the inspiration for any number of Group of Seven paintings.

After Relais Gabriel, which is just a truck stop, the highway became a bone-jarring mess. It was simply hard to believe a highway carrying this volume of truck traffic could be so poorly maintained. I had driven better roads in West Africa. Just when it seemed something had to snap, the pavement reappeared, but it was a sucker play and lasted only five kilometres. There was another 50 kilometres of gravel until the road passed over the top of a dam and then, seemingly right in front of us, was the unbelievably big Manic 5 dam.

The road descended an 18-degree grade to the bottom of the dam and the pavement made its true reappearance. The rest of the way to Baie Comeau

was still narrow and we constantly had to pull over to let oversize loads carrying huge machinery to the iron mines pass, but it seemed like an autobahn to us. Finally arriving at the end of Hwy. 389, we had a choice to make for the first time in 1,500 kilometres — east to Sept Iles, west to Quebec City, across the river to Matane by ferry, or, if we were crazy, back the way we came. As we didn't have reservations, we had a little trouble finding a ferry, but eventually boarded one at Saint Simeon and had a very pleasant crossing to Riviere-du-Loup. **RV**

BEFORE YOU GO

There are a number of precautions to take and things to know before you attempt the TLH:

- In my opinion, the highway is not really suitable for towing; the more axles, tires and hitches, the more likely to find trouble. The best RV to tackle the route is probably a truck camper, followed by a mid-size single unit RV.
- Take at least two spare tires. We heard lots of stories about multiple flats in one stretch.
- Take advantage of the complimentary satellite phone — it could save your life.
- Never pass a gas station without filling up. There is usually only one in each town. Expect to pay high prices.
- Prepare to spend at least two nights with no outside facilities.