

# A Strange & Beautiful Tour



Story and Photos by Aaron Teasdale

The trail has vanished. I've been following shreds and scraps of it all day, pushing deeper and deeper into the wilderness. Now all I can see is an endless sweep of golden bog, a few scattered ponds,

some patches of scrub forest, and more bog. Wet, lumpy, peaty bog, bog, bog. I've been carrying my bike for hours. There are no rangers, no visitor centers, no one to ask for directions. In fact, there is

## Nuts & Bolts: Newfoundland

**When to go:** June through September is your window for snow-free travel. July and August are the driest months. It can be hot or cold anytime, however, and fierce storms are common year-round.

**Routes:** My advice is to stick to roads. Fly into St. John's and pedal the Irish Loop or fly to Deer Lake and ride up the Northern Peninsula to the site of the first Viking settlement in North America at L'Anse aux Meadows. Nova Scotia-based Freewheeling Adventures ([www.freewheeling.ca](http://www.freewheeling.ca), 800-672-0775) offers guided tours on this route, what they call the "Viking Trail."

**Information:** Newfoundland Tourism



([www.gov.nf.ca/tourism](http://www.gov.nf.ca/tourism), 800-563-6353).  
• Atlantic Canada Cycling: [www.atlanticcanadacycling.com/planning/regions/nl.html](http://www.atlanticcanadacycling.com/planning/regions/nl.html) • [www.e-bent.com/newfoundland.html](http://www.e-bent.com/newfoundland.html) • Canary Cycles ([www.canarycycles.com](http://www.canarycycles.com), 877-422-6279) is a good, full-service

bike shop in downtown St. John's.  
• Portions of my ride took place on the East Coast Trail ([www.eastcoasttrail.com](http://www.eastcoasttrail.com)), a new 200-mile coastal hiking trail. I highly recommend the trail for dayhikes and backpacking.

**Accommodations:** I stayed at the Captain's Quarters ([www.captainsquarters.ca](http://www.captainsquarters.ca), 709-576-7173) in St. John's. It's a little rough around the edges, but it's got character and a central location, the prices are good, and they let me store stuff while I toured. Paul and Paula Mulcahy (709-682-1382) rent a cottage in Cape Broyle and are excellent hosts.

nothing as far as I can see in any direction to indicate any human being has ever been anywhere near where I'm standing.

Then, it hits me. I'm lost. I'm lost in Newfoundland and I'm completely and utterly alone.

Newfoundland is the Alaska of Atlantic Canada. The world's seventh largest island, it's a pristine and sparsely populated land of tundra and forest, ponds and bogs, caribou and moose. Its most dramatic character is revealed in its ten thousand miles of jagged, wave-lashed coastline, where for four centuries tiny fishing villages have worked the Grand Banks, one of the planet's largest and most productive fishing grounds. Some of the world's

biggest seabird colonies nest here, and offshore waters are thick with icebergs and whales. Inland from the sea, there are enormous stretches of land without road or trail or any outpost of humanity. It's an easy place to lose yourself. In both the good and the bad way.

Presently, however, a logical question would be, "Gee, Aaron, why are you trying to ride a bike through a bog in Newfoundland?" Answering that question requires a little background.

Information on cycling in Newfoundland is about as easy to find as information on cycling to the Earth's core. There are no travel guides to the island. No bike maps. Lonely Planet's 944-page

Canada guidebook features a meager forty pages on Newfoundland. Long an island of single-minded fishermen, Newfoundland is only beginning to understand its considerable potential for tourism.

So in early September I flew into the capital city of St. John's with a mountain bike and a trailer, but no plan. I figured I'd buy some maps and find a good dirt road route, but the maps didn't show many dirt roads. Travel in Newfoundland has traditionally been by sea, and for centuries the only overland paths were simple cart tracks linking coastal villages. Many of these tracks still exist, or are purported to exist, and when I found a set of maps that showed them running nearly the length of the Avalon Peninsula, which stretches for one hundred miles south of St. John's, it was decided. An exploratory tour down Newfoundland's ancient cart tracks sounded perfect. On paper at least.

It began at the easternmost point in North America, beneath the 170-year-old lighthouse at Cape Spear. The first cart track I came to was wide and smooth and reminded me of an ATV trail. This may have had something to do with the fact that it was an ATV trail, albeit one with a four-hundred-year history. Most of the

towns here were established by British fishermen in the seventeenth century, while later years saw the mass Irish immigration that today gives the southern Avalon its strong Irish character. In fact, the two-lane highway that circles through the region is called the Irish Loop. Though the road has little shoulder, it also has little traffic, and I used it to safely trundle through towns and link cart tracks.

It was on the afternoon of that first day that things began to get strange. After pedaling through the town of Witless Bay, I rolled onto another cart track. After several miles of green shrubland, I came to a graveyard of old Newfoundland. In a large clearing in the brush, rusting train cars sat alongside old fire engines, and rotting piles of sea rope lay haphazardly coiled on the ground. A couple of miles distant, the ocean reached to the horizon — blue, endless, and dotted with rocky isles. There were no towns for miles. It was as if the ghosts of Newfoundland's past had deposited their accoutrements here, on a forgotten piece of land above the sea.

A mile or two past the graveyard, the



**St. John's Harbor.** Iceberg viewing is a popular tourist attraction here much of the year.

track dissipated into spongy heathland. Ahead lay only a wet, flat landscape of stubby spruce and bog. The ride became a walk or, less euphemistically, a soggy, wretched trudge. At any point I could have turned around and returned to smooth,

black tarmac, but I couldn't bring myself to do it — the allure of ancient cart tracks and this strange world of forgotten memories I could sense but never know held me firmly in its grip.

This should have been my first



**Cape Spear.** The remains of a WWII battery at North America's easternmost point.

clue that Newfoundland was really one big bog, broken up by ponds, streams, and the occasional patch of stunted, wind-blown forest. A beautiful landscape, yes, but perhaps not suited to exploratory mountain bike touring. But noooo, I charged onward, determined not to let reality interfere with my romantic visions

## *Last came a crimson moon, which I could see through the foot of my tent, climbing over the edge of the sea...*

of ancient-cart-track grandeur.

Sometimes it paid off. The following day I headed for La Manche Provincial Park. Here the cart track had been restored, and it rolled and plunged through dark forest and into pocket meadows dappled with wildflowers. Weaving around beaver ponds and precipitous gulches, the trail led to the coast and the ruins of La Manche, a fishing village that was destroyed in 1966 by either a hurricane or a tsunami, depending on what account you hear.

Looking around, I realized I had La Manche Bay to myself — as I would have at every campsite for my entire trip. I clambered out onto a jumble of sharp, black boulders and watched the waves rush and swirl below me for a long, long time before crawling into my tent for the night.

Shortly after leaving camp the next morning, I came to a series of 157 stairs that led up and down the side of a cliff and eventually to a suspension bridge over the La Manche River. Storms destroyed six different bridges here in the years before the village was swept to sea, and the new bridge, built primarily for hikers, features deeply anchored suspension cables and a stout, seventy-two-foot-tall tower. The bike and trailer had to be portaged over the stairs one at a time, and once at the bridge I leaned over its side-rails and watched pink jellyfish and eiders swim in the deep water below.

Waterfalls poured into big, clear pools where the river cleaved along a cliffside. Too inviting to pass up, I lay by the pools for a while, watching ravens and kingfishers, before pedaling up a long dirt road to the highway.

Though I could have continued camping by the sea for the rest of time, I also wanted to see a fishing village from the inside. Rolling into the town of Cape Broyle, population 633, I headed straight for the home of Paul and Paula McCahey, and the beginning of my crash course in Newfoundland hospitality. Newfoundlanders are quite possibly the friendliest people on the planet, even allowing for free baggage carts at the airport in St. John's. The McCaheys confirmed for me. Though many Newfoundlanders on the Irish Loop seem unsure of how to capitalize on burgeoning tourist traffic, they recently began hosting travelers in a small cottage next to their home.

"It's hotter than the gates of hell out there," Paula said, inviting me into her kitchen and out of the bizarre September heat that had pushed the mercury into the



**Rugged coastal backdrop.** Riding a cart track in La Manche Provincial Park.

high eighties.

Their cottage was rented for the night, she said, but I was welcome to stay in their spare bedroom and join them for dinner that night. And for breakfast and lunch the next day. Did I need a ride anywhere? Perhaps I'd like to go out with Paul in his dory, a traditional fishing boat? "Here, sit down," Paula commanded, "and have some pie and ice cream."

Over a holiday-caliber turkey dinner the next day, Paul and Paula told stories of battling one-hundred-meter waves at sea. Paul works for the Coast Guard and fixes fishing cables on the side, and Paula studies whales and other marine wildlife. They both come from families that have lived in Cape Broyle for generations, and their home originally belonged to Paul's grandfather. Clearly they were both tough as railroad ties, but like most Newfoundlanders I met, quick to laugh.

Fortified by my stay at the McCaheys', I pedaled through the village of Ferryland, past an archeological site where the four-hundred-year-old British colony of Avalon was being excavated, and onto Ferryland Downs. A dirt road led along a two-mile peninsula to Ferryland

Head, where I set up camp in the shadow of a red lighthouse.

A blue sky ebbed to pink and the lighthouse beacon came to life. Miles down the coast, the Black Cove lighthouse flashed through the dusk. The sky was clear, so I didn't bother with a rainfly. I realized later, as I lay on my back with nothing but a screen between me and the astral canopy, that this was one of the best decisions of my life. Mars flickered red and countless distant stars arched overhead, and then came the Northern Lights, reaching across the night sky with phosphorescent green tendrils. Last came a crimson moon, which I could see through the foot of my tent climbing over the edge of the sea and rising above my toes. I just lay there beneath it all, naked and smiling.

Magic moments like these fed my resolve to continue my off-highway explorations and are the reason why I'm now standing lost and alone, a tiny speck on an endless sweep of bog in nowhere Newfoundland.

My dubious plan is to ride a dozen miles down the remote southeastern Avalon — an area a clerk at an outdoor shop in St. John's had called, "as close to nowhere as you're going to get." It's the last day of my

tour, and, looking to move fast and light, I've cached my trailer. The goal: to reach the southern tip of the peninsula and the lonely lighthouse at Cape Race by way of an old explorer's trail that follows the coast and dates back to when the French and British fought for control of the island. I still haven't found that trail, though, and the one vague trail I did find led into this boggy hinterland and disappeared.

In the tiny town of Cappahaden the day before, a man of many wrinkles and two, maybe three, teeth, had warned me in thick and unintelligible Newfoundlandic English about trying to cross this country. Some places in Newfoundland, like Cappahaden, are so isolated that seventeenth-century Irish and English dialects, long lost in their homelands, are still perfectly preserved. I gathered more from tone and body language than actual words, but I was able to make out "cliffs," "can't get out," and "bad place." I picture him and his big toothless laugh as I climb to a barren high point and sit in the shadow of a large rock to survey the landscape. As far as I can see in every direction, there is nothing

but tundra angling up to gentle ridges, ponds, and patches of low forest. The coastline, all raw cliffs and coves, curls away into the distance. In a meadow far below, a giant bull moose slowly approaches a cow moose while I study a map. My legs, covered in peat and mud, bake brown and crusty in the sun.

It pains me to admit it, but there isn't enough time to push on to Cape Race, even if I could find my way. Nor is there time to attempt retracing my steps. So I hoist the bike and do the only thing I can — head for the sea. There I hope to find the explorer's trail and a way back to the day's starting point at Chance Cove, where a dirt road leads to the highway and, eventually, to civilization.

Bog, I soon realize, will not be my biggest obstacle. Suffocatingly dense forests of short, wind-blasted balsam fir — what Newfoundlanders call tuckamore — soon force me to my knees. I crawl and squirm for an hour, pulling my bike behind me. Soon I see a break in the trees. Blue sky! Maybe I can reach the coast and stroll back to Chance Cove, whistling along the

seashore. I push forward with a burst of optimism. I reach the opening and...see it fall away into a plummeting cliff. I stare down the cliffside for a minute, teetering on its edge. There's no way down alive. There's a view across the sea, though, and I can see Chance Cove. Unfortunately it's down a cliff, across a cove, and over an impossibly wooded peninsula.

Eventually, I find remnants of the explorer's trail which leads to a thick, old sea rope tied to a tree and hanging down a steep ravine. It's impossible to know how long it's been there, but I like to imagine it was left by early French explorers who made their way down this coast centuries before. With one arm holding my bike on my shoulder, I grab the rope and begin a controlled slide downward. At several points, my feet slip completely out from under me and I hang from the rope with one arm, but after a few minutes I'm at the sea.

The shoreline's large, mossy rocks make walking difficult, but by sunset I reach the far point of the peninsula that marks the beginning of Chance Cove. I sit

for a minute to watch fifteen-foot waves curl and crash into high purple rocks. The lighthouse beacon at Cape Race blinks in the pink light to the south, marking the end of Newfoundland and the beginning of thousands of miles of cold blue sea. A bald eagle soars overhead, bound for some other wild point on this wild reach of seashore. We're two lone travelers, passing in the dusk.

Though my arms and legs are bloody from the clawing of the forest and the voracious biting midges, I have no regrets about the day. The misadventure, like my whole tour and like this entire strange and beautiful isle, was filled with its own magic. I'm already thinking about returning, maybe with a touring bike next time. It's clear now — mountain bike touring is not the ideal way to see Newfoundland. But, hey, somebody had to try. **AC**

*Aaron Teasdale is a writer and photographer living in Missoula, Montana, with his family, who allow him to continue bike touring in mysterious places.*

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