

Biking the Viking Trail

Tour of Newfoundland

Above, Gros Morne's red-dish-tan Tablelands are unique as evidence of Continental Drift; below, the author at speed.

Under the curled brim of his Bike Virginia cap, the grinning, weathered face of Mike Cecil greeted us as my husband Joe and I rolled into camp at Hawke's Bay, Newfoundland. It was the end of a perfect 60-mile day — fun, fast, mostly flat, and windy.

"I have the lead for your story!" proclaimed Mike in a gravelly drawl. He paused for effect. "'If you don't like 25-kph tail winds, don't take this tour!'"

We laughed. "That's it!" I said. "I'll write that down."

Several others from our group of 24 American and Canadian cyclists came over to crow about their accomplishments. Bill and Ann, an Ontario couple with a Tandem Two'sDay and a set of matching jerseys for each day of the tour, seemed to win bragging rights.

"It only took us three hours to do almost 100K," said Bill, shaking his head in disbelief.

Nobody could remember a better wind-assist. Even I had powered up the hills in my big ring. That's rare for me.

Heading up route 430 on Newfoundland's western coast, we'd had a great, blue-sky day to just ride. Here stands of sweet-scented pines; there bare, wind-blasted trees beyond which we could see undulating shore, seabirds on the exposed rocks, and

whitecaps. Everywhere at road's edge, bent in the wind, but-tercups, bluebells, orange hawkweed and other wildflowers bloomed at once, as if in celebration of Newfoundland's short summer. Punctuating this dramatic meeting between sea and land was an occasional, tiny fishing cove or minuscule town — and little else.

And that was part of the attraction. To the east of us hulked the Long Range Mountains, undisturbed by roads or human habitation. Early in our trip we had crossed those mountains. Now they would continue within view at a companionable distance as we headed north. We were riding The Viking Trail, the only through-road on the Great Northern Peninsula, which points into the North Atlantic like a finger. It beckoned us toward our ultimate destination, L'Anse aux Meadows, a small fishing village at the northern tip of the peninsula.

There, four days from now, we would see where Leif Eriksson and his Vikings settled a base camp for exploring North America a thousand years ago. We would view the authenticated remains of sod huts that constituted "Leif's Camp" and stand within the reconstructed village at the National Historic Site, where archeologists have verified the Norse sagas.

New to Me

It was not Leif Eriksson, however, who named this vast island Newfoundland. It was Giovanni Caboto, a.k.a. John Cabot. Enterprising but close-mouthed European fishermen had already been hauling in rich catches of cod off the Grand Banks when this Venetian explorer, sailing for



by Susan Weaver

England's King Henry VII, landed in 1497 and claimed this "New Founde Land" for England.

"The sea there," he reported, "is swarming with fish, which can be taken not only with the net, but in baskets let down with a stone."

Canada's huge, easternmost province is a new found land for me, as well. I'd never given much thought to it until last year, when Joe and I toured Prince Edward Island with Gary Conrod's Atlantic Canada Cycling (January/February 2000 *Adventure Cyclist*). During the trip, we asked one rider who'd taken all of Gary's maritime tours, which one she'd enjoyed most.

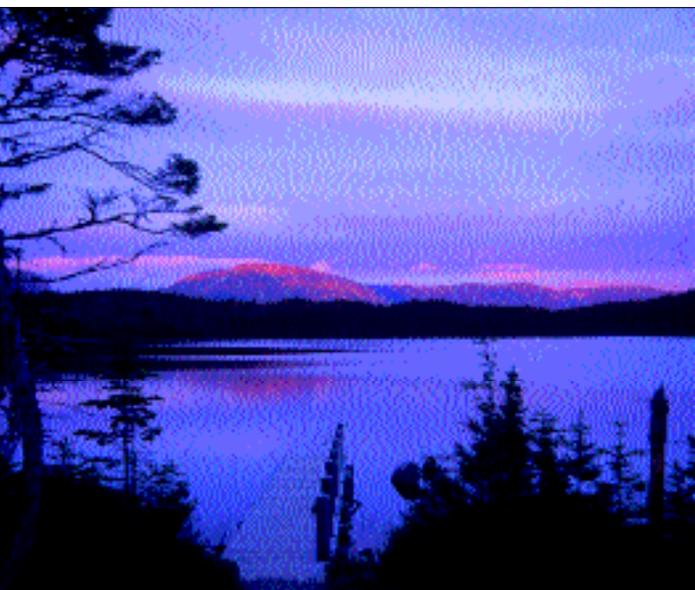
Without hesitation she said, "Newfoundland — for the scenery and the people!"

She went on to talk of icebergs and whales and moose and fjords along the coast and rugged, friendly people.

So, in mid-July, Joe and I would find ourselves at the Deer Lake Motel, where The Viking Trail intersects the TransCanada Highway, to meet our group for a 10-day, 400-mile bike tour. After stowing our camping gear in Gary's truck, and with a last glance at the giant concrete moose in front of the Irving gas station, we pedaled up the entrance ramp to route 430/The Viking Trail. We were headed toward the mountains and our first campsite in Gros Morne National Park, a popular destination with hikers and cyclists who crave dramatic scenery and a challenge.

Our very first day delivered on that promise. We soon left most of civilization behind, except for cars and trucks on the highway. That morning, a cow moose peered out to the roadway, saw us, turned tail and lumbered back into a thicket. Soon after, we spotted a beaver dam and lodge across the road.

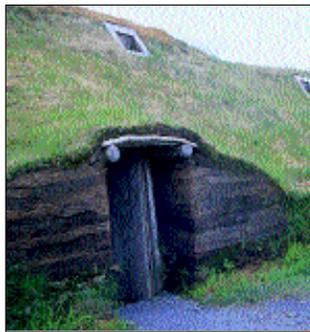
By lunchtime, we were encountering climbs that took our breath away, as did our first view of the Park's famous fjords. Roadside buttercups framed the pewter waters of Bonne Bay; under a canopy of storm clouds, hills on the far shore rose in shades of gray. We stopped at a rest area for another vantage point on this long arm of water and the surrounding hills. There we saw a man with his young family



and their SUV with Ontario plates.

"Where are you from?" he asked, eyeing our bicycles. "How do you like Newfoundland?"

These were questions we'd been told to expect from Newfoundlanders, but from this guy from Ontario? We



answered in the positive, and returned the question.

"Oh, I'm from here," he said emphatically. "I live away, in Ontario now. We're back for vacation."

It was the kind of welcome we'd encounter again and again.

Reconstruction of Norse huts at L'Anse aux Meadows, where discoveries in the 1960s revealed that the Vikings beat Columbus to the New World.

Journey to the Center of the Earth

Our tour would spend three nights within the 1100-square-mile park. It takes its name from Gros Morne ("Big Gloomy") Mountain (2,644 feet), part of the Long Range Mountains, which form an alpine plateau in Newfoundland before disappearing into the sea. Avid hikers make a point of ascending Gros Morne Mountain, a rigorous seven-hour effort repaid (on good-visibility days) with an unmatched perspective on the fjords and forests below.

To fully appreciate the park's geological significance, however, most in our group decided on a day-ride past The Tablelands instead. As Earth Science buffs know, our planet has a molten core, surrounded by a mantle of peridotite (magnesium- and iron-rich rock), enclosed within an outer layer of the earth's crust. On land, this crust is usually tens of kilometers thick, but in Gros Morne, movements of the continental plates 600 million years ago opened up a crack, allowing a chunk of the upper mantle to ooze up from underneath. In brief, the ensuing geological drama included the formation and eventual disappearance of an ancient sea, followed by more continental drift and upheaval.

Today, The Tablelands are that peridotite from the mantle, shoved to the earth's surface, revealing what would normally require a journey toward the center of the earth to investigate. Thus, the region was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 to preserve it.

Abstract as this may sound, these formations contrast dramatically with their surroundings. Amid green mountains and lush meadows, The Tablelands rise, reddish-tan and barren—because their peridotite is inhospitable to plant growth.

"Haunting topography," Joe called it. "So empty and so uncrowded."

He would remember this varied route, from Berry Hill Campground to Trout River and back, as a challenging and favorite day. It had a little bit of everything: killer climbs and scenic descents into coastal towns, plus a boat ride for us and our bikes from Norris Point to Woody Point and back again later, saving us extra miles around the long fjord.

After a hearty breakfast at Woody Point's Lighthouse Restaurant, we were climbing until The Tablelands came into view. At a roadside rest stop, I attempted to make sense of interpretive signs about plate tectonics and the earth's mantle. We wondered at pockets of snow that still remained near the top of these barren formations, and at narrow waterfalls that coursed down their precipitous slopes. Then, we ventured on, into Newfoundland's famous wind — a headwind on this day.

Entering the small harbor community at Trout River, our turn-around point, took me a step back in time. Four boys at a sleepy intersection were selling Kool-Aid. As it was just 60 degrees out and overcast, the would-be entrepreneurs weren't getting much business. They wanted to earn money for a dory and motor, they said; their persistence impressed me.

Nuts and Bolts

GETTING THERE: My husband and I flew Air Canada/Canadian Airlines into St. John's, Newfoundland, where we rented bikes and a car (both prearranged) to tour eastern New-



Woody Point harbor and The Tablelands in Gros Morne National Park.

foundland before driving to meet our bike tour at Deer Lake. There we dropped off the car. We returned to St. John's via DRL Coachlines (709-738-8090), a long-haul bus system with a stop at the Irving gas station in Deer Lake, across from the Deer Lake Motel. DRL accepted the bikes as luggage, with the handlebars turned, pedals removed, and cardboard taped around the bikes for protection.

Most participants drove from home and took the car-ferry from North Sydney, Nova Scotia to Port aux Basques in southwestern Newfoundland. For ferry information, call Marine Atlantic (1-800-341-7981).

There are airports in Deer Lake and in St. Anthony.

BIKE RENTALS: We rented hybrid bicycles at Canary Cycles in St. John's (709-579-5972; e-mail: canary@firstcity.net), a full-service bike shop. Reserve well in advance.

GENERAL INFORMATION: Call or write Tourism Newfoundland & Labrador, P.O. Box 8730, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada A1B 4K2 (1-800-563-NFLD; 709-729-2830; e-mail: tourisminfo@mail.gov.nf.ca). Ask for their comprehensive travel guide and road map.

TOUR OPERATORS: Our 10-day Viking Trail tour was operated by Gary Conrod of Atlantic Canada Cycling, P.O. Box 1555, Station M, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3J 2Y3 (902-423-BIKE; e-mail: cycling@atl-canadacycling.com; web: www.atl-canadacycling.com/newfoundland/tour).

Freewheeling Adventures (RR#1, Hubbards, Nova Scotia, Canada B0J 1T0) offers 6-day tours of the Viking Trail, as well as less challenging tours in eastern Newfoundland (1-800-672-0775; 902-857-3600; e-mail: bicycle@freewheeling.ca; web: www.freewheeling.ca).

BIKE PREP: There was enough broken pavement on route 430 that we appreciated the extra margin of safety we had with hybrid tires. A triple chaining is a must.

Newfoundland

GROS MORNE NAT. PK.

On my return ride, their pineapple Kool-Aid in my water bottle tasted sweet and good. The sun had come out, and a tailwind sped us back to Woody Point.

Northward

We had sun and tailwinds as we left Berry Hill Campground, riding north on a day that would give us some of the best and the worst that the Great Northern Peninsula has to offer. The best: another boat ride, this time on the Park's Western Brook Pond, a land-locked freshwater fjord carved in the last Ice Age, and a popular attraction in Gros Morne.

The worst: as Joe and I rounded a corner that morning, we saw the last thing we want to view on a bike tour—a cluster of our cyclists at the road edge and a rider down. It was Dan, an experienced cyclist from Massachusetts. Conscious but in pain, he told us he'd been passed too close by a logging truck and blown off the road. His skinny-tired front wheel foundered on some rough pavement at the shoulder's edge. The trucker either didn't see the accident, or didn't care, and continued thundering on up the road.

Ironically, other passing motorists were unusually solicitous. A rider who waited with Dan for the ambulance said probably 20 people stopped to ask if there was anything they could do. Unfortunately, Dan had a broken collarbone and had to leave the tour.

As for Joe and me — call it the luck of the draw. We continued to hug the white line in steady traffic, and vehicles gave us a wide berth.

We had lighter traffic after that, and three more days of sunshine and tailwinds, during which we appreciated subtle changes in the scenery we wouldn't have noticed from a speeding car. Joe and I spotted a caribou from the road. At a particularly beautiful campground — Shallow Bay at Cow Head — our group gathered on the beach to watch sea birds fish the waters at sunset. A full moon rose above the pines that lined the beach. Then, as that was the day of Dan's accident, we returned to camp to say good-bye; he was flying back to Boston.

Glimpses into the Past

At Daniel's Harbour, a couple of towns up from The Arches formation along the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Joe and I turned off at a sign for Nurse Bennett's House, and were transported to the Newfoundland of 80 years ago. That's when Myra Bennett, at 29, came from England to provide, for more than 50 years, the only medical care along almost 200 miles of rugged coastline. Hearing her story, I could picture this strong, brave woman, setting out by dogsled over winter snow, in answer to a telegram for her help to set a limb or handle another difficult delivery. The house, filled with her furnishings, evokes the period — as does her medical equipment and the small, simple examining room her husband had built onto their home for her.

Another day we delved into pre-history to discover the Indian peoples who populated the peninsula before the Vikings made landfall at L'Anse aux Meadows. From Route 430 we took a road leading west, and into the prevailing winds, to Port au Choix National Historic Site. There on a tiny peninsula the alkaline soil (unusual for Newfoundland) has preserved clues to three pre-historic Indian cultures that inhabited the region. The earliest, the Maritime Archaic Indians, had fished the sea, hunted birds and harpooned seals as long ago as 2400 BC; in three cemeteries they buried their dead, along with weapons, ornaments and tools carved from bone, stone, antler and ivory.

While archeologists have been excavating in the area for almost a century, many of the discoveries are relatively

recent. In fact, had it not been Sunday when we visited, we might have met Dr. Priscilla Renouf, a Newfoundlander who heads a dig in the town of Port au Choix at Studio Gargamelle, directly on the route.

The National Historic Site's newly expanded visitor center is worth fighting a headwind to see the exhibits, including a reconstruction of a Dorset Paleo-Eskimo dwelling. A ranger's talk helped me envision the effects of climate changes, glacier movement, and the lives of these peoples — the last of whom left the area about 1300 years ago for reasons that are still debated.

Pay-Back Time

Each day that dawned sunny and blew us northward, our group cackled over our good luck and wondered if it would last. If it did, supposedly we could count on a tailwind even as we turned east across the upper peninsula on our 80-mile, next-to-last day.

But at Plum Point, where we'd been pampered with a motel over-night, we woke to rain.

"Typical Newfoundland weather," I joked to Joe as we set out in our rain gear.

On the highway, I felt the wind in my face and took shelter behind Joe's wheel. It was going to be a long day. For the first half of it, Route 430 hugged the coast. Here, the Gulf of St. Lawrence narrows into the Strait of Belle Isle.

We could see the shadowy profile of Labrador across the water — for centuries, the sealing grounds. On the Newfoundland side, every few miles another little settlement hove into view, with boats at anchor and picturesque fishing sheds. Anchor Point, Deadman's Cove, Nameless Cove, Savage Cove, and so on ... sturdy little towns, I thought, and sturdy people.

After Eddie's Cove, the road turned from the coast. Mile after mile of undeveloped land took on a scrubby sameness. Now, still riding into the wind, it was we who had to be sturdy. Except for utility poles and the road, Joe said, these bogs, lakes and stunted forests must be what the Vikings saw. We slogged on.

Eventually, we met some of our group where the support van had stopped to offer water. Everyone agreed that these were the longest 80 miles anyone could remember. It felt good to commiserate. Just then, up chugged the oldest member of the tour, silver-haired Earl Butts, 84, a retired Air Force general from Florida. He was still rising to the challenge. We would too, even though it meant crossing the last of the Long Range Mountains, mere hills this far north, before reaching camp at Pistolet Bay.

The Northern Tip

By this last day, Newfoundland and the Great Northern Peninsula had come to signify many things to us. But just in case we needed some last impressions, the land and the weather gods pulled out all the stops during a day that we wish could have been two.

A sunny morning and surprisingly easy ride back through the hills (what a difference a night's sleep makes) offered glimpses of sparkling Pistolet Bay. Joe spied an eagle above the trees. Then, near the northeast coast, sun met fog to cast a dreamy, timeless feeling over the rocky shore and headlands. Soon, amid reminders that we were nearing Norse country and tourist amenities, the sun deserted us.

After leaving L'Anse aux Meadows, with 10 miles to St. Anthony, our final destination, drizzle would suddenly change into the worst downpour I've ever experienced cycling. As thunder rumbled out on that open stretch of

highway, I put out my thumb for the first SUV to come along. A Newfoundland man with his little daughter pulled over; we loaded my bike in the back, and then drove along, hoping we'd see Joe before we hit him. Fortunately, he'd pulled off the road and we spotted him.

The man never complained, though we soaked his car seats and he got drenched. A shrimp fisherman on vacation from a big freezer-factory boat that fishes year-round, he said he's seen all kinds of weather up on the Davis Straits, but he'd never seen rain that heavy in a Newfoundland summer.

As for L'Anse aux Meadows, the National Historic Site preserves a properly desolate, treeless meadow vista leading down to the shore. Some in our group saw a cow moose emerge on a cliff behind the visitor center. Silhouetted against the sky, she paced back and forth, then trotted down to the shore and swam across the cove.

"Don't scare her," the ranger cautioned, "or she might try to swim too far out and drown."

I'd have liked more time to absorb this place that has changed modern views of New World history. Before the discoveries here, no one knew for sure whether the Norse sagas bore any truth. The tales related how Leif Eriksson and his crew departed from the Greenland colony, crossed the water to a rocky coast called Helluland (Baffin Island), and sailed south along the coast to the wooded Markland (probably Labrador). Then they entered a shallow bay and established a settlement in a green meadow. From there, the legends said, they explored a place where wild grapes grew that they called Vinland.

In 1960, a Norwegian explorer and writer, Helge Ingstad, following clues on an old Icelandic map, discovered the settlement's remains after inquiring of a local fisherman if there were any old ruins in the area. The sod walls he was shown looked promising. Ingstad returned with his archaeologist wife, Dr. Anne Stine Ingstad, who led extensive excavations.

Today, rangers conduct groups of visitors to the dig sites, now sodded over. Our guide showed us where the living quarters (shared by some 80 men and a few women) had been, as well as the carpentry/weaving shop, the shed for boat repair, and the facilities for smelting iron and smithing boat nails. Nearby, we entered reconstructed sod huts with peaked roofs and timber frames.

The next day, our tour would end with a public bus ride from St. Anthony back to Deer Lake, retracing in hours our journey on The Viking Trail. It would be, I imagined, almost like a movie in reverse, seeing again these places that now held so much meaning for me. ●



The author's husband patronizes the Kool-Aid stand in Trout River.

Susan Weaver wrote "Stopping Makes Sense," an essay about the importance of taking one's time on tour, in the August 2000 issue.