

## Newfoundland and Southern Labrador

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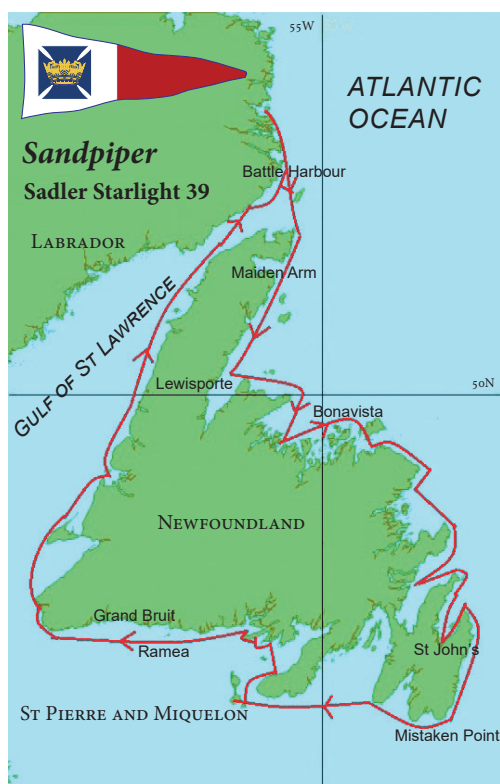
*Awarded the Goldsmith Exploration Award*

It was an emotional reunion as, with more than a little trepidation, I ran a hand lovingly along *Sandpiper's* hull before opening the hatch to see what awaited us below. *Sandpiper* had survived the two winters in Lewisporte without us extremely well, with no mildew or bugs to be found. On first inspection everything seemed in order and, after fitting a Zen 30 water maker, two x 100m Dyneme tape shore line reels and a Certus 100 satellite system, by 18 May we were ready to 'splash'.

*Sandpiper* appeared happy and ready for action as she floated in the strops of the travel lift, but our relief was short lived as large clouds of smoke started billowing from below. Unbeknownst to us, and missed in our pre-launch checks,

the alternator had seized. I didn't have a spare and two hours later I was reliably informed there were no compatible alternators to be had in the whole of Canada (Covid - presumably). The ever helpful yard manager came to the rescue; he not only had a colleague who repaired the alternator (as an emergency backup) but found a new one that could be shipped within seven days. A week later we were out in the bay on our first sail for almost two years.

We had originally planned to sail from Newfoundland to west Greenland before returning to the UK. However, that changed. Maybe it was our encounters with so many friendly Newfoundlanders with their tales of places to cruise around their island, or perhaps I've realised that the slower one cruises the



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more one can enjoy the moments afloat. For whatever reason we changed our plans and decided to explore Newfoundland and southern Labrador; Greenland will still be there another year.

There are conflicting opinions on which way to circumnavigate 'The Rock'. Whichever way one goes there will be a time when the prevailing SW winds are against you. We chose clockwise and on 26 May 2022 we finally slipped our berth at Lewisporte.

The first leg of our passage took us through Notre Dame Bay, a spectacular cruising ground where we dipped into a couple of lovely anchorages that only wetted our appetite for further exploration. In one beautiful anchorage, Knight's Island, we tucked inside a narrow cove and shared a typical Newfoundland beach cook out of mussels freshly harvested by Stephanie wading along the shore. That evening was the only time we shared an anchorage in three months cruising.



Spotting our first iceberg

We left Notre Dame Bay via the so called 'Iceberg Alley', past Twillingate and onto Fogo Island and, with the notorious June fog enveloping the coast our hopes of seeing the majestic, icy monsters were somewhat dulled by concerns of NOT seeing them until too late. It was with some excitement that we spotted three on route to Bonavista Bay, as we headed for the southern coast where the isolated communities held a particular attraction for us. These small pockets of humanity gleaned their living from the sea, many only accessible by boat. Many of the once thriving communities lie abandoned, and dilapidating, others hang on by a thread with a few surviving only

because previous owners return each summer to rent their old houses.

We took advantage of being storm bound in Seldom Harbour on the south of Fogo Island to explore its history in greater depth. The cod fishing industry collapsed in 1992 when a moratorium was imposed on cod fishing due to the impact of over fishing. Life virtually stopped for many of the communities as fish plants closed and offshore fishing ceased overnight. Some areas, such as Tilting, have developed a tourist industry and the village now provides a picturesque reminder of a life which revolved totally around the codfish.

Our cruise south took us to several anchorages and harbours where we repeatedly saw the economic and social impact of over fishing and the moratorium. Once

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Martin and Stephanie in Bonavista admiring the replica of *Matthew* which first brought John Cabot to Newfoundland in 1497

busy fishing harbours of Musgrave, South Lumsden, Bonavista, and Catalina were strangely quiet. Fish plants were closed, cranes weren't loading or unloading; ice makers were silenced. We learned that the bottom had recently fallen out of the once high value crab market and freezer plants were cram packed with processed crab and it wasn't worth boats fishing despite having not met their quotas. Fortunately, we always managed to find room on the wharves and another bonus was the absence of the pungent smell from the now dormant

processing plants. Despite the downturn in the fishermen's fortunes, we were inevitably met on the wharves with cheerfulness and friendliness.

The strangely quiet Catalina harbour, full of fishing boats with nowhere to go



Just south of Trinity Harbour is the beautiful, secluded but resettled outpost of Traytown Harbour on the island of Ireland's Eye. Our entry to the inner pool through a narrow and shallow 'Tickle' had Stephanie looking closely over my

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shoulder as the depth under the keel shrank to less than 1m but the bottom was mud, the water clear and the tide rising so what could go wrong. Fortunately, nothing did and soon we were anchored alone in a magical, secluded pool wondering why anyone would leave this idyllic spot voluntarily. We couldn't linger as a closing weather window drove us onwards across Trinity Bay to Conception Bay before the forecast E7 hit. In fact, we enjoyed wonderful sailing across the bay, averaging 7.5kts under sunny, albeit cold 5°C skies on 25 June as we headed for the Royal Newfoundland Yacht Club in Conception Bay to take a short break for provisioning, fuelling, laundry and some sightseeing in St John's for a couple of days: the music taverns, a cultural tour to Signal Hill, the Geo Park plus a ferry ride across to the historic iron ore mines of Bell Island; all well worth the stop-over.



Puffins at Gull Island, a bird sanctuary, south of St John's

The next leg of our journey took us down the east coast past St John's through whale and puffin country and although we did have regular whale sightings they were not as profuse or active as two years earlier, perhaps because we were a little earlier this year. However, throughout our journey we did see humpback, minke and fin whales, often at close quarters, feeding on the abundant marine life around the island, but question how long this will last.

By early June, past St John's, our journey almost ended prematurely. Shortly after leaving Petty Harbour, and while motor sailing against a head wind through thick flocks of puffins around Gull Island, we experienced a thumping noise from under the boat and a noticeable vibration. I thought we had picked up some line around the prop that the line cutter couldn't handle. As a precaution we diverted to the next safe refuge in Bay Bull Harbour. Fortune smiled on us as we were able to find a local diver to visit us the same day and by 1830 we discovered the problem. Over the previous winter we had the prop shaft replaced and all had looked perfect on launch. Unfortunately, the screws securing the propeller had not been correctly tightened. One had fallen out and the second of three was also on its way out. While it was impossible to replace the missing screw with an exact match,



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I found the right sized threaded rod which, when cut to length and with a couple of locking nuts, restored the propeller to full use once more. Relief all round. Dawn saw us pushing south against the prevailing winds and in thick fog around Cape Race towards Trepassey, our first port on the south coast where, in thick fog we closed to within 100m of Trepassey wharf before we could see it. Although it is only a small outpost, the area's claim to fame is its Mistaken Point Eco Park. It is here that visitors are allowed to walk barefoot over two incredible rock shelves on the ocean's edge, each of which are covered in thousands of metazoan fossils from 580 million years ago. A rewarding trek made even better by the hospitality of the locals and good food at the local restaurant.

The southern coast is deceptively long and made even longer by several large bays; biggest of all is Placentia Bay. We decided that to explore all the inlets was too much for our timescale and opted instead to focus on the mainly uninhabited section, west of the Burin and Connaigre Peninsula, where many of the recent resettlements had taken place. However, first we had to fulfil our commitment to the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) to leave Canada. This required a side trip to France and St Pierre et Miquelon. We had visited St Pierre on our trip north two years earlier when fog prevented us seeing anything. It was therefore a relief to arrive in bright sunshine to a town very much open to visitors. We were met by the harbour master who had arranged for both the police and customs to greet us – a slightly formidable reception committee but a friendly and helpful one that ensured the formalities were smoothly and quickly dealt with, allowing us to explore this remote corner of France.

The town itself revealed several French gems from small coffee shops, delicatessens, a homely restaurant overlooking the *boules* pitch to excellent groceries at the large 'SuperU' store with its French bread, *pâte*, *confit de canard* ... and cheap wine. After a brief stopover we continued west to Miquelon, the larger of the two islands. After slipping into a small harbour, we walked into a village centre that could have been found in many European French villages, with



Mistaken Point boasts thousands of fossils

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a war memorial in front of the church, the *Mairie's* office, tourist office, restaurant, and bar as well as a well stocked grocery store and bakery. To top it all, much to Stephanie's great delight, an outdoor music concert was taking place that night.

We re-entered Canada at Fortune Harbour, the only remaining port of entry on the south coast, and after some minor irritation from a CBSA officer we were able to head west again around the Rock to more great anchorages.



A lucky seagull with a caplin

It is impossible to sail these waters without experiencing fog. It was the caplin season, and they always bring the fog and the whales - or so we were told. Caplin are a small six to eight inch bait fish which provide a major food source for the visiting humpbacks. They have a unique spawning method where they come in on the tide and roll in the surf in huge numbers, spreading their eggs along the stony shore to be fertilised by the males. Sadly the caplin seemed to be late and were not being seen in their usual numbers.

The fog, however, gave no sign of staying away and radar continued to be well used as we frequently closed with a rocky, steep sided shoreline to enter a sheltered inlet for the night.

Often, with anchor down and stern lines ashore we could relax in a windproof bay and enjoy a well earned supper accompanied by the sound of a nearby waterfall or just silence - though with no view of it or the rest of the bay. Morning often broke bright and clear gifting us an unexpected reward for cruising in fog - glass like water reflected the forested cliffs and an empty anchorage; what better setting for breakfast in the cockpit?

Most of our south coast anchorages were in uninhabited, remote bays, often littered with weathered wooden saltbox cabins showing signs of past habitation. All with their own individual attraction, Great Jarvis Bay was a typical example, with its broken down wharf and 'Push Through' - a narrow waterway that almost dries at low water and an abandoned hillside cemetery overlooking the ocean. Allan's Cove, another safe and delightful anchorage 3nm down Facheux Inlet, providing shelter from the F7 blowing down the inlet. Others, such as Billard Cove, were tucked around a small headland providing welcome shelter.

Where possible we explored potential new anchorages for inclusion in the pilot, finding one little gem in Richard's Harbour. A tiny cleft amidst towering cliffs led to a small, 30m deep pool totally protected from the elements. I caused Stephanie to hold her breath while I explored a little corner, using the boat's depth sounder to find the only possible anchorage in 2-5m tucked behind a rocky island which a visiting fisherman was using for storing his lobster pots - perhaps not quite the secret anchorage we thought it was.

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Stephanie wondering if she can swim in Billard Cove

Elsewhere we found small hamlets like Grey River and La Polie, hanging in there by a thread, with a shrinking and ageing population. Pinewood boardwalks or concrete pathways running around the hillside linked the scattered cabins to a small wharf and possibly a grocery store. The smallest former fishing village we visited was the outport of Grand Bruit; a picture postcard hamlet that was resettled less than 15 years ago and is now the summer home to three generations of the Billard family who still return each summer to

Spectacular deep fiords like Grey River on the south coast





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The resettled outpost of Grand Bruit

enjoy the beautiful tranquillity and charm of their former homes. Here we found the now abandoned government wharf still in good condition and no sooner had we tied up than Roy Billard arrived to welcome us on his mobility scooter; “My legs aren’t what they used to be” he told us amongst other tales of days gone by. Three generations of his family were home on the day we visited, one using it as a base for inshore fishing whilst the others used it as a summer holiday home. Roy’s son and daughter in law visited us the following morning, before we slipped, bearing a gift of freshly caught and filleted cod. Such is the generosity of the Outport folk, leaving us with a lasting memory and sense of camaraderie that existed ‘back in the day’, where eking out a living from the sea was a dangerous daily challenge, but an existence where one always had time to look after family and friends.

Before reaching our turning point northwards at Port aux Basque we visited Ramea Islands, approximately 5nm off the south coast. The main harbour is a beautifully kept township with a daily passenger and car ferry service from the mainland. Here we enjoyed the 8km trail around the coastline on an impeccably maintained boardwalk which took us through verdant bog, heathland and rocky shoreline to finish the day by stumbling across the local Lions Club, only open on Saturdays ... and it being Saturday afternoon it was serving beer. We happened to gate crash a birthday party crib match and were made very welcome by the handful of celebrating locals.

We tried to find some local, traditional music to enjoy as we waited, back in Port aux Basque, for a weather window. We were storm bound for three days when even the large ferry to New Brunswick was prevented from sailing by a F8 blowing through the Cabot Straits bringing with it 3-4m waves. The wind and rain eased on our fourth evening when, finally, the concert we had been waiting for happened.



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Ramea town with the mainland of Newfoundland in the background

The next day we were once more on our way – through the infamous Cabot Straits northwards into the Gulf of St Lawrence.

We had heard various accounts of sailing along the west coast, most of them less than positive and some filled with dire warnings of a hostile coastline and limited safe havens. For us, reality proved somewhat different. Yes, there were few harbours or anchorages but none more than a long day sail apart and given the dominant wind was from the southwest, and we were heading almost north, we hoped for more rather than less wind to blow us up the coast. Having passed through a benign Cabot Straits, our first port of call was Codroy – a small fishing community very much in recession but to our surprise holding a 50s plus dance that night. By 2200 we were enjoying great company and sharing the dance floor with what appeared to be the whole village – and definitely not just the over 50s. It turned out that due to covid this was their first dance for two years so everyone was determined to enjoy it.

The next leg, 80nm, saw us on our way at dawn with a sunny sky and following wind as we headed for Beach Point Harbour. The harbour had been resettled several years ago but was full of small fishing boats with almost no room for us. But, having slipped through a very narrow entrance and negotiated the shallow inner pool we found a berth alongside the outer breakwater and were greeted by three local families visiting the harbour on a fishing trip. It was our lucky evening as, judging from their feverish activity, the mackerel were biting, and the wharf soon saw fresh fish flapping about as they were quickly despatched and lines recast. Supper was fish that were only minutes out of the sea – delicious.

The following few days we cruised up the coast with comfortable day sails, normally no more than 35nm. We called in at the Allen Cove marina at

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Cornerbrook, only the second marina we used, to pick up a spare part sent out from England. Thankfully the part arrived the day after we did. Some of our stops were in beautiful, isolated anchorages, such as Wood Island in the Bay of Islands, while others were on government wharfs where we often had power and water at hand. We called in at Rocky Harbour as we had heard that they were having a 'Come Home' music festival. Sadly, the music was mostly modern and by the evening a strong westerly had picked up threatening to both pin us to the wharf and batter us rather dangerously against it. After an interesting exit from the wharf, we motored to the more sheltered Norris Cove, a charming wharf where we found a local pub with local music – definitely a win/win situation.

The west coast was proving to be far more hospitable and musical than we had expected. Our arrival in Cowhead coincided perfectly with a folk music concert at the splendid new venue of Gros Morne theatre featuring Jim Payne who wrote the famous Newfoundland song: 'The Thing About Fish'. After brief stops at Port aux Choix and St John's Island, we finished our journey up the coast to Belle Isle Straits at Flower Cove, so aptly named given the profusion of wildflowers along the roadside.

Although late in the sailing season we decided to sail up part of southern Labrador, at least, before returning to Lewisporte by early September when the weather typically deteriorates.

So, on a foggy morning, we slipped out of Flowers Harbour to cross to Labrador. The straits are only 10nm wide at this point and within an hour we were through the coastal fog bank and caught our first sight of the Labrador coast - L'Amour Lighthouse, gleaming white on the far shore. We were heading for Red Bay and as we closed with the coast we were once more amazed at the varied geology of the whole area. The landscape had changed dramatically in nature across this small stretch of water with lower, more rounded rocky hills covered in small shrubs, lichen and bare rock compared to the forested hills we associated with the fjords and mountains of Newfoundland.

After a good downwind sail along the coast with the wind gradually increasing to SW6 we had just finished tying up to the short government wharf at Red Bay when we were asked to move because a cruise ship was due the next morning. Thankfully, there is an excellent anchorage close by and we were soon relaxing in the inner basin only to be joined by a minke whale; its regular surfacing and fishing near the boat was a sight worthy of a David Attenborough film. On our first evening we were treated to a spectacular event when the water within 20m of the boat suddenly erupted in an explosion of fish followed by the breaching minke. We were mesmerised by the sight and the memory will last for a long time.

The following day we visited the excellent whaling interpretive centre before an early morning start gave us another memorable marine encounter just after leaving Red Bay in a flat calm at 0700. This proved to be Stephanie's 'Watch of the Century' as she bragged in the log. She pointed out a major disturbance in

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the water about 100m behind us. This quickly developed into a major display of spectacular fishing behaviour by a large pod of dolphins which had corralled, and were feeding on, a large shoal of fish, probably herring. The display lasted for over ten minutes, often with two or more dolphins in the air at the same time as they leapt and splashed down with a clear thump to stun and herd the fish while their accomplices feasted. If that was not enough, within minutes there was another disturbance close by breaking the glass like surface. This time it was a humpback slowly cruising straight towards us before slipping beneath our stern. It was an exhilarating 'wildlife watch', which was finished off by a minke whale cruising close alongside. All that before 0800. The wind soon filled in and we had a good downwind sail towards Battle Harbour which we reached the following day after a night in Pleasure Harbour where we were greeted by the owners of the only cabin there with a gift of freshly caught and filleted cod – another great supper.



Pleasure Harbour

Battle Harbour is a popular cruising stopover in a lovely setting, with a rich history based on its role in the whaling industry. Having arrived early we were able to explore the many sights and exhibits (including an excellent guided tour through the various whaling station exhibits) and enjoy a set meal in their restaurant before a relaxing musical evening with other island guests in The Loft, the centre's comfortable lounge bar overlooking the harbour.

We knew that our journey north would not (or should not) last too much longer. All the locals we met along the Labrador coast warned us of late August and September storms along the coast and although this was not a typical year for weather, we could not ignore such sage advice. We therefore decided that we would head north for a few more days until a weather window to head south.



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We enjoyed a good S/SW5 wind as we cruised along the coast, keeping close enough to the shore to enjoy the magnificent and ever changing geology but far enough out to avoid the many uncharted shoals and rocks the charts warn of. There had been a noticeable change in temperature since arriving in Labrador and the nights were beginning to close in. Just to remind us of this, it was as we headed for Occasional Harbour that we saw two icebergs on the same day, reminding us that our looking for 'bergy' bits had become a serious reality.

It was when we were in Occasional Harbour, and having listened to the long range forecast, that we decided it would be sensible to turn around now and spend more time exploring the parts of Notre Dame Bay we missed on our way north. So, after two peaceful nights in another beautiful, remote and safe anchorage we took advantage of a favourable northerly to cruise back down the coast. With clear skies and sunshine, we passed what must have been one of the last icebergs drifting south this season, trapped in a narrow cove. Once more we saw whales blowing and dolphins fishing in the calm sea as we enjoyed the comfortable sail south towards Mary's Harbour.

Mary's Harbour left a lasting impression on us for one reason only - the swarms of black fly and mosquitoes that greeted us on our trudge to town in search of a grocery store and tearoom. The nippers were prolific, vicious and definitely won the day. Thus, it was with a sense of relief that we headed out the following morning for an interesting navigation exercise in thick fog, winding our way through the islands to St Charles harbour for an overnight anchorage in readiness for an early morning start to cross to Newfoundland.

Fog and rain, accompanied by a helpful NE4 wind greeted us at dawn for our crossing of Belle Isle Straits and its two Traffic Separation Zones. Fortunately, there was no shipping and the fog and rain cleared by midday as we passed east of the forbidding Belle Isle with its steep to cliffs spurning any chance of safe anchorage. Despite its reputation for dangerous currents and high seas, our rounding of the impressive Cape Bauld headland favoured us with light winds for smooth motor sailing. Safely rounding the cape we were soon alongside in St Lunaire, the northernmost harbour on the east side of the Great Northern Peninsular, once more on Newfoundland soil.

For those interested in Norse history, a visit to the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows is a day well spent. The site arguably marks the end of 'The Viking Route' and the Norsemen's explorations to North America over 1,000 years ago. The settlement was only uncovered in recent years and has been sensitively recreated with replica longhouses illustrating typical activities of the era such as the weaving of woollen sails, tool making etc.

The Great Northern Peninsular was spectacular and from hereon we day sailed our way south keeping close inshore to spot whales blowing as they foraged along the shoreline while sneaking into isolated tickles. Only nature surrounded us including the occasional caribou that swam across in front of *Sandpiper* while at

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anchor. Anchorages such as Maiden's Arm and Great Harbour Deep stand out for blissful nights under the stars, with caribou and sea eagles for company; with days

spent berry picking for jam making on passage and building 'Inukshuk' stone cairns on top of small hills overlooking the anchorage. Sadly, all good cruising seasons come to an end and by late August we were leaving La Scie on our final leg to close the loop at Twillingate. The wind and sea gods smiled on us that day and we had the best sail of the entire trip with a steady SW5 wind giving us an average of 7knts and best speed of 8.2knts all the way on our 43nm crossing. A great way to end.



Maiden Arm, Newfoundland,  
with caribou for company

