

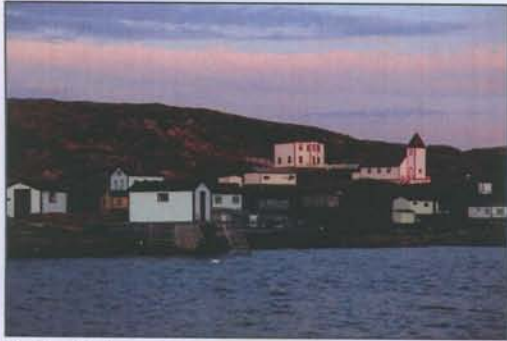
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Labrador Experience: Storied area allows visitors to experience outport life and nature in a remote, coastal setting.

Lloyd Corkum



White clapboard structures with red roofs and red trim greet visitors to Battle Harbour.

For Ingo Vollmer and his group of German visitors, the southeast area of coastal Labrador stretching from Red Bay to Mary's Harbour is the perfect setting for a great adventure. No bustling streetscapes or crowds, but nature in all of its raw, rugged beauty: windswept seascapes, treeless barrens and crystal-clear waters teeming with marine life and dotted with ice bergs.

"Most of our guests are from large cities and lead very busy modern lifestyles, so for them Henley Harbour, Battle Harbour and this entire area is like something out of a book," explains Ingo Vollmer, the owner/operator of Marlin Diving Enterprises and organizer of this trip. Ingo has been offering his Labrador Experience for several years now, an experience that never grows tired. "It's an opportunity to experience nature and simple living at its best, without refinements, but with great hospitality. As scuba divers, it's also the opportunity to explore a pristine underwater world filled with marine life, spectacular flora and fauna and numerous shipwrecks. Imagine witnessing thousands of sea birds at their nesting grounds or exploring a submerged wreck dating back centuries. Every time I come here, I witness something new. It's really spectacular."

A Storied Past

This area of coastal Labrador has a long association with the sea. At the first stop, Red Bay, what was once a bustling whaling station is now a national historic site complete with scale models, reproductions, artifacts and photographs. Back in the 16th century, Basque fishermen came to these shores to fish for whales, whose oil was a rare and valued commodity. It was harvested and shipped back to Europe where it was used in the manufacture of soap and as an energy source, as it burned brighter than the more common vegetable oils of the day. Exploring the site and nearby Saddle Island is interesting, but for the divers, the bay offers the opportunity for under water exploration, specifically the chance to explore the wreck of a Spanish galleon, believed to be the San Juan.

At nearby Henley Harbour, a village of what once was, it's as if time stood still. Houses and buildings long ago boarded up just as they were, waiting for their owners to return, and set against dramatic landscapes. Henley Harbour, like many communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, was a victim of the provincial government's 1960s resettlement program that forced families to abandon their homes and their communities and relocate to larger centres. There's something haunting about these abandoned communities. You know there's no one here, but at any moment you expect to see men working at wharves that are still intact, women hanging wash on the line to dry and children playing. You know there are stories here longing to be told, but all you hear is the wind.

The next stop is Battle Harbour, which for centuries served as the gateway to the Labrador fishery. Documents detail how fish merchant John Slade and Company of England first established a commercial saltfish operation here in the early 1770s. Stepping onto the wharf at Battle Harbour, located on Battle Island and separated from the mainland by the St. Lewis Inlet, is like stepping back in time. It stands in marked contrast to the loneliness of Henley Harbour as the once thriving fishing community has been brought back to life in the form of a 19th-century summer fishing station. White clapboard buildings, walkways, wharves and work areas have been carefully restored, complete with artifacts of the Labrador fishery and everyday outport life. Many of the buildings are registered heritage properties and provide excellent examples of outport architecture – buildings designed for practical use and



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situated close to water's edge. The Issac Smith House, for example, is lit by oil lamp and heated by a wood stove.

That a visit to Battle Harbour is even possible is thanks to the tremendous efforts of the Battle Harbour Historic Trust. When the site was donated to the trust, the members of the not-for-profit charity took it upon themselves to recreate the fishing station as it once was, but adding modern amenities such as plumbing. The restored buildings are adorned with period furniture and fixtures, allowing visitors to experience life in a remote, coastal village. Guests can choose accommodation options that come with fully equipped kitchens - supplies can be bought at the General Store - or they can order from the Dining Hall menu, which varies day-to-day and week-to-week. Fresh fish is obviously a menu favourite and there's fresh produce from the organic kitchen garden. Pleasure craft are welcome at the wharf, which offers a safe and sheltered anchorage. Dockage fees apply. Facilities include hook-up, showers and a coin-operated laundry.

The road less travelled

A trip to the southeast coast of Labrador is not for the faint of heart. For the German adventurers, it's akin to travelling to the ends of the earth. Since their arrival at the Halifax airport, they enjoyed some time in Cape Breton - Marlin Diving is based on Janvrin's Island - before heading to North Sydney to catch the ferry to Newfoundland. Once in Port aux Basques, it was a 560-kilometre trek up the Great Northern Peninsula to St. Barbe and the ferry to Blanc Sablon, Quebec. From there it's an 80-kilometre drive to Red Bay, where paved roads end. Then it was another 90 kilometres over a gravel highway to Mary's Harbour. The group was able to easily access and explore the many harbours, bays and inlets along the coast as they towed their own boat, a rigged inflatable, along with all of their scuba gear. It may be a trek, but ask any member of this group and they'll tell you it's a trip well worth the time and effort. The Labrador coastal route serves as portal into another time, where history and heritage have been preserved in a spectacular natural setting.

For more information on the southeast coast of Labrador, visit labradorcoastaldrive.com. For more information on Marlin Diving and their Labrador diving expeditions, visit vipilodge.com/diving.

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