

Riding the Rock

BACKCOUNTRY SNOWMOBILING ON THE GREAT NORTHERN PENINSULA

I landed in Deer Lake for a week of snowmobiling on Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula. For reasons known only to the secret order of travel agents, I'd flown Toronto-Halifax, where my companions deplaned for their direct flight to Deer Lake. Meanwhile, I was routed St. John's, there to double back the length of one very large province to arrive at that same final destination hours later. Adding insult to injury, my baggage shared the direct flight. I would have done better to ship myself as cargo too.

I had journeyed to the island for a meeting of the Canadian Council of Snowmobile Organizations (CCSO), and afterwards, to join about 40 other attendees for a snowmobiling adventure. I also wanted to check out recent developments: by all accounts, Newfoundland was at the brink of a major snowmobiling boom, spearheaded by a \$5.9 million provincial investment in trail infrastructure. This trip would allow me to compare their starting point with whatever progress was to be made. Whatever the case, we "Come-From-Aways", as our friendly Newfie hosts succinctly dubbed us, climbed aboard a van bound for Maynard's Torrent River Inn, about three hours further north in Hawke's Bay, our base for the week.

We traveled up Highway 430, popularly known by its tourism-inspired moniker, "The Viking Trail". It hugs the shore along the Gulf of St. Lawrence, with a distant view on a clear day, of Labrador far off to the west. The highway ends at St. Anthony, near L'Anse Aux Meadows, site of the first authenticated Norse settlement in North America. Hence, that Viking Trail thing.

My impressions on that first dark night's drive were of a long, lonely ribbon of asphalt. It was tenuously squeezed between squat mountains hunkered on my right, and a dark, encroaching sea to the left. The lights of numerous isolated fishing villages twinkled like jeweled oases. So did the eyes of the ubiquitous caribou and moose that appeared frequently and suddenly, like ghostly apparitions, often cutting across the road in front. I caught a brief glimpse of a sign tallying the current fatalities in these mammalian encounters. Those with four legs were winning.

Hawke's Bay is located on the western side of the Long Range Mountains. They are yet another extrusion of the Appalachian chain that lends rugged topography to parts of southern Québec, northern New Brunswick, and Cape Breton too. The mountains



of Western Newfoundland dominate the horizon, tapering off into the broad, central plateau that slopes eastward to the far off capitol, St. John's. While the island peaks are neither as towering nor as precipitous as the Rockies, there can be little doubt why this rugged land is nicknamed "The Rock".

Mountains to the lee of water general-

assured: the local club had recently taken delivery of its first major piece of industrial grooming equipment. Friday morning, I was in the first group to gas up at the lone station in town. Our guides led us to a freshly groomed access road, covered in the white stuff from snowmobiling dreams.

Our mainlander group comprised the

about the abundance of snow had been laid to rest on the way in, so I chafed at the bit on that frozen lake, comforting myself by snacking on the bait — fresher shrimp than back home. If only I'd packed seafood sauce!

When one of our hosts revved up for a return to Hawkes Bay, to guide in our second group, I quickly seized the oppor-



ly cause snowfall. This part of the island is known for its snow depth and longevity. However, it had actually rained the week prior — a rare happenstance even for late March. So while Deer Lake had snow on the ground, my alarm bells went off when it diminished progressively the further north we drove. Only my driver's repeated assurances that the mountains had lots of snow kept me from despair. At least I think that's what he was saying: with his thick Newfoundland accent and staccato delivery, he could have been describing the sex life of a moose, for all I knew. But like my wife, I heard what I wanted to hear.

At this point, you might well be asking, why Hawkes Bay? The Northern Peninsula was prime snowmobiling country; Hawke's Bay was an excellent staging point for many exciting day trips. Snow cover in Hawkes Bay itself was sparse, barely enough to lube the sliders for travel from town to trail.

A fleet of about 40 sleds awaited us. Better yet, our riding comfort was

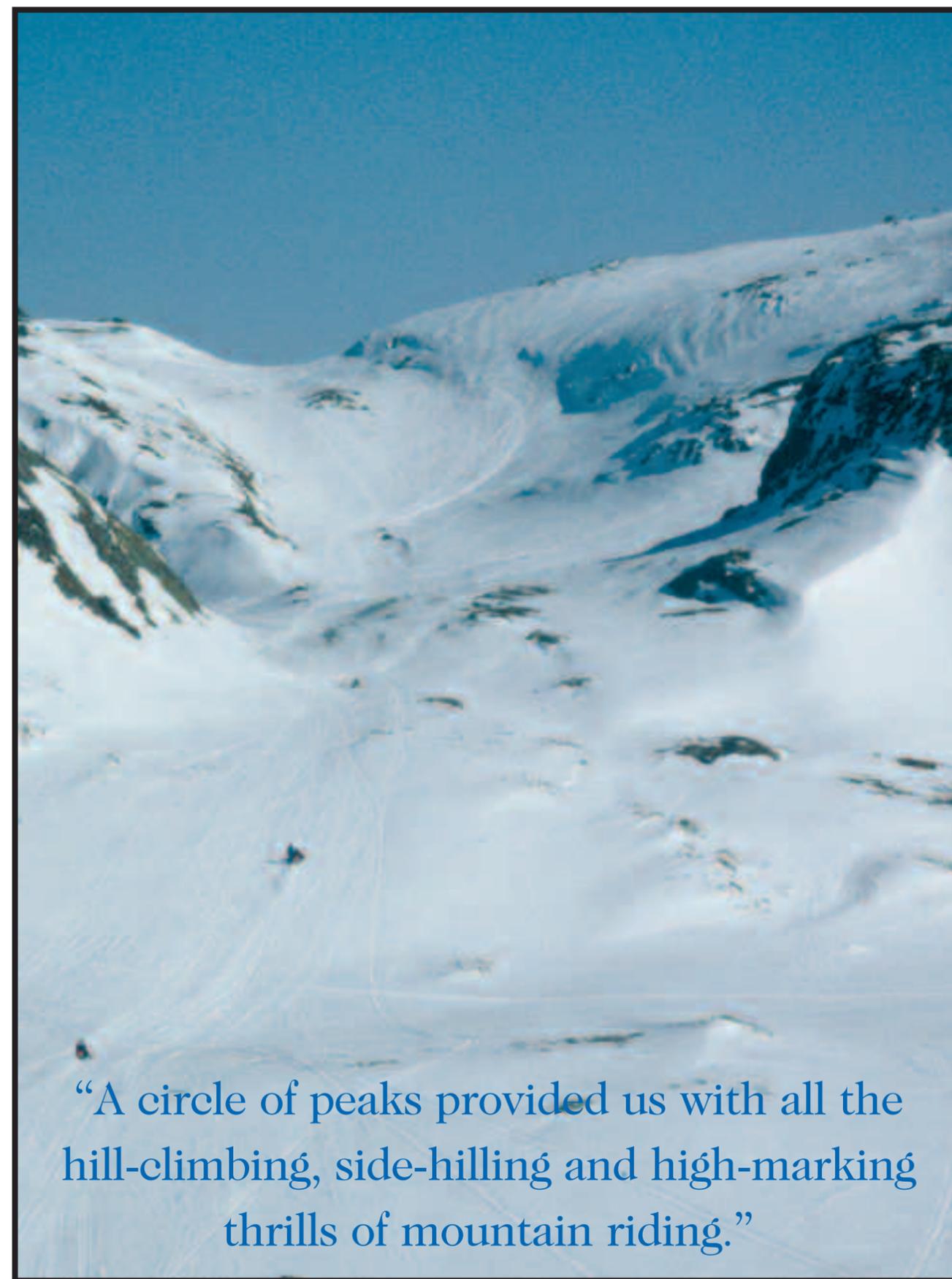
leaders of Canada's provincial and territorial snowmobile associations. Experienced and avid riders all, the majority had been brought up on trail riding, destination touring and long distances in the saddle. Our hosts, though equally enthusiastic proponents, had honed their skills in other ways, groomed trails being a brand new and developing product. In fact, as late as 1998, Newfoundland counted only 150 kilometres of groomed snowmobile trails. Traditionally, snowmobiling in Newfoundland meant backcountry playing or a utilitarian means to do something else. Like hunting, traveling to the camp, getting wood, or trout. And that's what the plan was for Friday...

Trout. Normally, I wouldn't cross the street to go ice fishing. Now it looked as if I had crossed half of Canada to spend my first morning on the Rock doing just that. We snowmobiled about 20 miles on a well-groomed trail to a lake where an advance crew had cut holes and set out fishing lines. Any doubts

to rack up a few more clicks by tagging along. But not before pocketing a couple of shrimp for a trail snack!

At noon, the combined groups enjoyed an authentic Newfie lunch at an abandoned logging camp now serving as the recreational retreat for several local families. The feast consisted of chili, beans, bread and thickly sliced fried bologna. Afterwards, our guides led the way by groomed trail further into the hinterlands, where snow was even more prevalent. Unfortunately, our progress up into the mountains was soon thwarted by poor visibility from a low, cloudy ceiling. With enough miles under our belts and snow under our tracks to whet our anticipation for more, we returned to Maynard's for a spectacular buffet dinner. By bedtime, ice fishing had been all but obliterated from my memory by all the other fun and good times. But my mouth still waters for that shrimp!

We were raring to ride more. Our guides led us back into the hills, far from any



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groomed trails. Sometimes we broke trail, other times following the twisty paths made by previous sleds. We were a stampede of thirsty buffalo let loose at the scent of fresh water. Riders poured over hill and dale, contouring the land with tracks, spread wide like that hunted herd in the movie “Dances With Wolves”. Our unbridled exuberance made it exceptionally difficult for our hosts to keep track of everyone. They must have thought we were crazy — probably confirming what many a Newfoundlander thinks about mainlanders anyway.

Snow lay in a deep, pervasive blanket, packed by unseasonable precipitation, so that our machines skimmed easily on a covering of light powder. While the ice on lakes was very thick, snow cover was patchy there due to deterioration from wind and rain. This made crossings treacherous, because our treads would alternately grab on snow, then slide on ice, requiring a delicate steering touch to maintain control.

We passed under snow-laden evergreens. We climbed in and out of valleys. Finally, we followed our guides to a remote hunting camp called Cloud 9 Lodge. There, a hearty lunch of hot moose meat stew and sandwiches sated our hunger. Afterwards, several of us climbed a long, steep slope behind the cabin. At the summit, we were treated to a spectacular 360-degree panorama of the surrounding snowscape — and a freezing wind that pummeled our bodies, threatening to knock us off our feet. It was so strong that I couldn't steady myself enough to take a focused photograph!

On our equally rambunctious return journey to Hawke's Bay, several of us played on the hilltops and ridges, high above and parallel to the main group's line of travel. Virgin snow billowed from our tracks as we crisscrossed each other's paths, nipping through breaks between trees and playing the powder on protected hillsides. We always kept the others in sight, like Indians stalking a distant wagon train. But it wasn't until rendezvousing back at Maynard's that our hosts knew for certain that all were present and accounted for. I don't think they had anticipated such a free-spirited crew of riders!

The next day was a very ambitious undertaking. The plan was to transport about thirty sleds south by truck to a staging area near Cormack, just north of Deer Lake. Our mission: to ride cross-country through the remote wilderness back of Gros Morne National Park to view Western Brook Gorge, a unique Newfoundland fiord.



The logistics were formidable. Maynard's prepared numerous box lunches; we stocked up on juices and sport drinks to avert dehydration on what promised to be an exhilarating, but arduous, day. Meanwhile, a local transport driver loaded up 14 sleds, strapped down crossways for the trip. Five or six local pick-ups with trailers completed our caravan. Several guides from the Gros Morne Snowmobile Club met us at the trailhead.

At our suggestion, these guides wore reflective safety vests to be more visible and easily identifiable on point and sweep. We mainlanders wore sequential numbers that would allow easy counts to be taken periodically en route to determine if anyone was missing. Our guides warned that no one should ever pass the leader because of unexpected crevices and cliffs ahead.

After unloading, we divided into two groups, finally hitting the snow just before noon. Soon we had left the lone groomed trail behind, traveling across

high plateaus hemmed in by mountains. While it was impossible to keep that many riders in line formation, we arrived safely at our destination about mid-afternoon.

Western Brook Gorge was worth the effort: a spectacularly deep, steep-sided fiord, it meanders out to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, many miles away. We over-

looked it, encompassed by a circle of peaks that provided us with all the hill-climbing, side-hilling and high-marking thrills of mountain riding. Before departure, we lined up 30 abreast across the valley floor, sounding off like marines at boot camp to check for missing numbers. Our return set a brisk pace against the fading of daylight. As we descended, it became apparent that milder temperatures and a warm sun had softened the lowland snow considerably. As we loaded up to drive back to Maynard's, I prayed for a plunge in the mercury.

No such luck. Back in Hawkes Bay, it rained the next day. We spent the day like regular tourists, driving north by car to visit the L'Anse Aux Meadows World Heritage Site and the Grenfall Historic Properties in St. Anthony. Would there be any snow left to ride near Hawkes Bay?

The rain subsided by Wednesday afternoon. We saddled up for the 25-kilometre ride to a Cape Cod style bed & breakfast, the High Pond Country Inn, delight-

ed to discover that the snow on the trail had survived. It could only get better higher up.

Thursday morning, we launched on a cross-peninsula trek to Harbour Deep, a remote fishing village on the Atlantic coast. More than our previous excursions, this overland journey broke trail where few have gone before, and certainly not frequently. In fact, for several locals who had joined us for this ride, it would be their first visit to Harbour Deep, some 80 kilometres east as the crow flies.

I never did see any crows. Instead, we cut a squiggly, twisty path of least resistance that tallied up at least 90 kilometres one way. Climbing the western side of the mountains, we wound through the trees on tight trapper's trails, and traversed a trackless plateau of endless snow broken only by rock and scrub brush. At one point, we spotted a herd of caribou, which quickly disappeared over a hill.

Our guide picked his way unerringly through narrow valleys and around streams where melting might have seriously eroded the underlying snow. The rain had left large puddles and lots of surface slush on the slippery lakes, so rooster tails and spinouts added a new challenge for our riders.

We came off one lake and started to climb a steep, untracked hillside. Half way up, a hidden, deep drift, wind blown into the concave slope, buried three of us. Never one to exert myself unnecessarily, I put my Ski-Doo into reverse and rocked myself out, sliding backwards, free but out of control, to the bottom. Even having my heart in my throat beats digging and dragging any day!

Covered with snow, one part of this barren landscape looked like every other. As it was, I could see for miles, yet had no idea where we were or how to get to our destination. In fact, to find the right approach to Harbour Deep, our guide had to cast about at one point like a hound searching for the scent. I hoped he had a good nose.

By noon, he was leading our descent into Harbour Deep, nestled into a narrow strip of land between rock and sea on White Bay. All around, a protective

ring of highlands rose straight up from the water like immobile sentinels. Harbour Deep boasted about 300 hardy souls, whose only winter access to the outside world was by helicopter: there were no roads and the ferry only operated seasonally. Nonetheless, this remote outpost had its own school, filtration plant, rec centre and best of all, the Cochrane Lodge, where lunch was ready for a bunch of hungry Come-From-Aways. (Update: although most of Harbour Deep's population later moved elsewhere, after it became one of Newfoundland's "resettlement" communities, a few locals still reside there today.)

We arrived back at High Pond Country Inn for dinner, but I had to eat and run: my flight home departed early the Friday morning, and I still faced an hour's snowmobiling back to Hawke's Bay, then a three-hour car ride to the Deer Lake Motel, where I would overnight.

The drive back was an experience in itself. One of the locals drove, with me in the passenger seat, and another Newfie in the back. It was pitch black and beginning to snow. Due to worsening road conditions and real danger from errant moose or caribou, we drove at about 60 kph all the way. The guy in the back kept falling asleep with the window open. The driver and I would be freezing our butts up front, because the heater didn't work. Finally, the driver would yell at the guy in back to wake up and shut the window. Then the chill would abate briefly, until that window opened again and the passenger nodded off again. This routine repeated over and over until the driver was hoarse from shouting. Exhausted from a hard day's ride, I anticipated pneumonia. Our marathon drive took over four hours, and my adventure wasn't over yet...

The next morning, I awoke to a foot of fresh snow, with a storm still raging. I called the airline to make sure flights were still leaving, and fought my way to the airport by cab. But when I went to check in, I couldn't find my ticket! Thinking back, I realized it must still be in the motel room beside the phone, so I sent a cabby back to the motel for it.

Meanwhile, my luggage disappeared down the conveyer belt.

I had visions of being stranded at a snowbound Deer Lake with no ticket, and worse, no snowmobile, while my bags enjoyed another direct flight without me! Fortunately, I made the plane as the door closed, having even persuaded a sympathetic ticket agent to rebook me straight through to Toronto without going around the world first.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed riding the Rock. If you're one of those 'been there, done that' types who is in the market for bragging rights to a unique snowmobiling adventure, get there real soon, before everyone else! I'll go back one day too, because snowmobiling in Newfie will always hold a special place in my heart. After all, where else can go trout and feast on shrimp instead? ●

Who To Contact

Newfoundland & Labrador Tourism,
1-800-563-6353 or
www.gov.nf.ca/tourism

Viking Trail Tourism Association,
1-877-778-4546, (709) 454-8888 or
www.vikingtrail.org

Newfoundland & Labrador Snowmobile Federation, 1-877-635-4395,
(709) 635-4395 or
www.nlsf.org

Marine Atlantic (ferry reservations),
1-800-341-7981 or
www.marine-atlantic.ca

Where We Stayed

Maynard's Torrent River Inn, Hawke's Bay,
1-800-563-8811, (709) 248-5225 or
www.torrentriverinn.ca

High Pond Country Inn, Hawke's Bay,
(709) 861-3519 or (709) 861-7509

Tuckamore Lodge, Main Brook,
1-888-865-6361, (709) 865-6361 or
www.tuckamorelodge.com