



Visiting Cupids Cove



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Stuart Forster visits Cupids Cove Plantation in Newfoundland and Labrador, the first permanent English settlement in Canada

Did you hear the whales out there this morning?" asks yet another of the guests entering the breakfast room of the Doctor's House Inn and Spa at Green's Harbour in Newfoundland and Labrador. I shake my head for a third time and stare deep into my sizeable bowl of freshly made granola: maybe munching on the crunchy cereal will mask my sulking at being the only person in the room not to have seen or heard a humpback before coming down from my bedroom. Perhaps I'll spot one from the road, as we loop around the coastline of the Avalon Peninsula on the way to Cupids Cove Plantation, the oldest permanent English settlement north of the Carolinas.

We drove here yesterday from St John's, the provincial capital, dipping around Conception Bay along a 112-kilometre route that included an impromptu photo stop by a green sign bearing the name of the fishing village Dildo. Seeing

it prompted immature laughter. Larry, our personable tour guide, had clearly witnessed plenty of similar photo requests during his career and stoically pulled to the roadside to allow his sniggering party of British travellers to snap their selfies. As we scanned a map of the locality, it was not the only place name along the 240-kilometre long Baccalieu Trail to prompt comment. Heart's Delight, Heart's Desire and Heart's Content all lie along the shore of Trinity Bay. The *SS Great Eastern*, the famous iron-hulled steamship designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, cast anchor off Heart's Content on 27 July 1866 while landing an underwater cable that enabled telegraph communications to cut the time taken to convey transatlantic messages to a matter of minutes - previously they had taken 10 days in optimal weather.

As we approach Cupids, its name sparks an enthusiastic debate. "Shouldn't it have an

Above: The Town of Cupid

Left: A team of archaeologists excavating at Cupids Cove Plantation (Image: © Stuart Forster)



apostrophe before the 's'?" asks a voice from the back of the minibus. The debate is one of those that only punctuation pedants ever truly enjoy. Larry eventually glances into his rear-view mirror and explains how the settlement we're about to visit was known as Cupert's Cove on the first English map of the region. "Over time it's been known as Cubitts and even Cuperres Cove," he says, spelling out each of their names. "It's been written without an apostrophe ever since 1612, so you'd have to go back a very long way to correct that error," he adds, nodding emphatically.

Yet again, Larry has impressed me with his knowledge of the history and heritage of Newfoundland. I ask about John Cabot's role on the settlement of the province. "It rhymes with 'understand,'" he says, correcting my British pronunciation of the island's name, giving me a smile and a wink to show that it's good natured banter. After making his point Larry explains that

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Left, top: A replica of the *Matthew* in Bristol

Left, bottom: A statue of John Cabot gazing across Bonavista Bay from Cape Bonavista, the place where, according to tradition, he first sighted land

Right, top: The Cupids Legacy Centre (Image: © Stuart Forster)

Right, Interior of the Cupids Legacy Centre (Image: Cupid Legacy Centre)



Origin of the names Newfoundland and Labrador

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador is one of the ten provinces and three territories that make up Canada. Newfoundland is one of four Atlantic provinces in Canada.

The names of the provinces reflect the influence of early Portuguese exploration: Newfoundland is a translation of the Portuguese *Terra Nova*, which literally means *new land* and the name of Labrador is thought to derive from the surname of the Portuguese navigator João Fernandes Lavrador, who explored the coast of Greenland.

References to 'lavrador's land' evolved into the area's name, Labrador. The term was first applied to a section of the coast of Greenland, but the area of Labrador now includes all the northern islands in the region.

Previously called only Newfoundland, the province officially became Newfoundland and Labrador in December 2001, when an amendment was made to the Constitution of Canada.



fishermen from Brittany, Portugal and England's west country had been fishing in the region since the late 15th century. Despite some scholars questioning the details of Cabot's voyage, it's generally accepted he Cabot set off from Bristol aboard the ship *Matthew* in 1497. That's often given as St John's year of foundation. "The fishing was seasonal. The fishermen would dry their cod and return home each autumn, leaving their huts. Cupids here was the first permanent settlement north of Jamestown, which dates from 1607, but the French had already settled a couple of places in what we now today as Canada," explains Larry.

Suddenly, I see the connection. In Portugal dried, salted cod is, of course, known as bacalhau. Traditionally, it is regarded as a stock ingredient in the Portuguese national diet. Surely it can't be coincidence that we're following the Baccalieu Trail?

Outside of the state-of-the-art Cupids Legacy Centre I pause to read a polished, grey stone plaque. The inscription commemorates the visit of the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall on

3 November 2009, ahead of the quadricentennial celebrations for the founding of Cupids. It mentions that in 1610 Governor John Guy led 38 colonists on a voyage sponsored by the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol.

It's hard to imagine crossing the Atlantic Ocean in an 81-tonne wooden vessel like Guy's *Fleming*. The ship is reputed to have been just 65-feet in length. The colonists crossed the ocean hopeful that the 'fruitfulness of the soil and largeness of the trees' would be able to sustain them over their first winter. A second group of settlers followed in 1612, including 16 women. On 27 March, following an exceptionally harsh winter in which eight of the settlers died of scurvy, the wife of Nicholas Guy bore a son, the first English child to be born in the colony.

At the museum within the legacy centre we learn that Cupids was the site of both the first English-built fort and stone house in Canada. The exhibits include clay pipes found by archaeologists. As tobacco from Virginia became cheaper the size of pipes' bowls grew. It's thought that pretty much



everyone in the settlement smoked, including the children. Trading beads, made of blue glass and more expensive amber, are also on show. So too is a silver four penny coin, dating from 1561, the oldest found in Canada. The centre informs visitors how the Jacobean settlement encompassed a blacksmith's workshop, a cemetery, domestic dwellings plus a defensive wall that would have been seven to eight feet high. Pirates were a potential threat during the colony's formative years.

Outside we meet Bill Gilbert, who is wearing an orange T-shirt, a baseball cap and a pair of knee-length shorts. As we stroll the short distance to the ongoing dig at Cupids Cove Plantation he introduces himself as the chief archaeologist. "We came in 1995 but people didn't know exactly where the settlement was," he explains. Descriptions in letters, sent back to England, mentioned its distance, in paces, from a stream. That gave Bill a good idea of where to dig an exploratory trench. Impressively, that led to the discovery of a dwelling house and a 17th-century wharf.

Over the centuries since Cupids was founded the harbour has silted up. The original settlement measured just 90 by 120 feet but soon expanded to three times that area. We look on at a group of students busily at work, excavating under the summer sunshine. Bill states, "All that's left is what

Above: A wooden frame provides a 3D impression of a storehouse at the colony.

Left: Excavations have revealed the stone walls of settlers' dwellings (Images: © Stuart Forster)



Above, right: The white wooden house at the entrance to the excavation site

Above, top left: A recreation of the decorated wooden façade of a 17th-century building

Above, bottom left: Excavated graves at the graveyard at Cupids Cove Plantation (All images: © Stuart Forster)

wasn't scavenged away. In other words, the stone that was underground."

We walk across the archaeological site, which is still very much a work-in-progress. Bill points out the ditch where his team found a rich haul of 17th-century artefacts, including pottery dating from prior to 1630 and a pewter button. Strings are pulled taught over the red earth. The wooden frame of a building is a volumetric reconstruction of a storehouse.

"This site is one of four in eastern North America that mark the beginning of permanent English settlement," says Bill. The colony helped secure the once-rich fishing grounds of Newfoundland and Labrador.

After showing us a wood-framed riddle, through which soil is sifted while looking for finds, Bill says, "15 November 2007 was a beautiful day. Under leaves, half-rotten wood and an old mesh gate we found a headstone." Ten have subsequently been

discovered at the site's graveyard. As I look at the headstones, most of which lie horizontally, one inscription suggests - rather harshly - that the man below it died of 'laziness' on 13 April 1613.

Current thinking suggests that Cupids was abandoned for a time. Following a French attack, led by Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville in 1696, the site may have stood uninhabited until around 1760. In the wake of the destruction it seems that the English living at Cupids resettled at Carbonear, roughly 20 kilometres up the coast. Details as to what happened here are emerging gradually.

"We're always finding something new. The new information is adding to the understanding of the history of Newfoundland and North America," says Bill as we move to exit the provincial historic site. "I've been here more than two decades. I can't see myself ever giving up entirely: archaeologists, we end up getting buried then dug up," he adds with a chuckle as we say our goodbyes. ◉

Travel tips for visiting Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada

Flying

St John's International Airport (YYT) is the principal gateway for air travel into Newfoundland and Labrador. It is served by airlines including Air Canada, WestJet, Lufthansa, Air St Pierre and PAL Airlines.

Air Canada flies direct to St John's from London Heathrow. The flight time is around five hours 40 minutes on the way out and just five hours on the way back.

WestJet flies direct to St John's from London Gatwick. Flights with one connection are available from Glasgow.

Visas

Canada's Electronic Travel Authorization (eTA) scheme was introduced in 2016. An eTA costs CAD\$7 and the online application process, which is mandatory for visitors from the United Kingdom who do not need a visa, can be completed in a matter of minutes.

Getting around

Hiring a rental car is an easy way of travelling around Newfoundland beyond St John's.

The presence of moose and other large mammals means that drivers need to be particularly vigilant around dawn and dusk, when wildlife is most active.

Weather

The weather in Newfoundland and Labrador is influenced by proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and consequently changeable. The summer months, from June into September, tend to be characterised by warm, sunny days, with the average temperature peaking at 22°C in August. Even in summer it makes sense to have warm, waterproof clothing available, in case the weather turns blustery or wet.

The Essentials

Time difference: GMT - 3.5

Water: Tap water is safe to drink in Canada, although bottled water is readily available.

Language: English and French are the official languages of Canada.

Politics: Canada is a parliamentary democracy with a prime minister as head of the federal government.

Electrical Current/Plugs: Plug sockets have either two flat pins or two flat pins with a round third pin. The current is 110V and 60 Hertz.

DID YOU KNOW?

The most popular dog breed in the world, the Labrador, is named after this region. Fishermen perfected a breed called the St. John's water dog, which were prodigious swimmers who could swim and haul their fishing nets back to shore. The Earl of Malmesbury brought these dogs to England to retrieve the ducks he hunted, and called them Labradors after their home country.

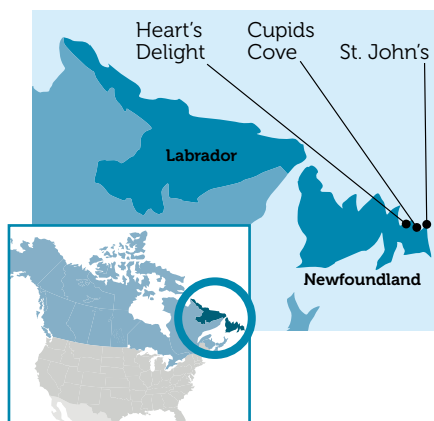
Holidays

(In 2018): July 1 (Canada Day), July 3 (Canada Day observed, due to July 1 being a Saturday), August 7 (Civic Holiday), September 4 (Labour Day), October 9 (Thanksgiving), December 25 & December 26.

Money

Currency: The currency in Canada is the Canadian dollar, where \$1 is made up of 100 cents. The one dollar coin is nicknamed the loonie, after the duck — a loon — depicted on the reverse. Notes are available in denominations of \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100.

Credit Cards: Are accepted widely. ATMs can be found almost everywhere.



Other activities

While visiting Cupids it's possible to enjoy scenic walks with fine views of Cupids Harbour and Conception Bay.

Burnt Head Trail is a circular route running for 2.7km. Spectacle Head Trail, on the north side of the harbour, offers outstanding views of the bay from the cairn known as the American Man.

The museum within Cupids Legacy Centre (www.cupidslegacycentre.ca) tells the story of the area's settlement and displays artefacts from excavations. The rooftop Faerie Garden, opened in 2010, offers fine views over the surrounding area.

The Cupids-based Perchance Theatre (www.perchancetheatre.com), which has won a reputation for performing Shakespeare plays.

At Heart's Content, a 55km drive north-west of Cupids, it's possible to visit the Hearts Content Cable Station, where the first permanent transatlantic telegraph cable was landed in 1866.

Brigus, just 3km from Cupids, was the birthplace of the Arctic explorer, Captain Bob Bartlett, who accompanied the American Robert Peary on attempts to reach the North Pole. Bartlett's house, Hawthorne Cottage, is a National Historic Site of Canada.

Newfoundland & Labrador is home to four UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Gros Morne National Park, L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, Red Bay National Historic Site and Mistaken Point.

Useful information

For information about attractions in Newfoundland and Labrador, see the province's tourism information website: www.newfoundlandlabrador.com.

The Destination Canada website is a useful source of information about things to do and see in the province: www.destinationcanada.com.

The Town of Cupids (www.townofcupids.ca) and Destination St John's (www.destinationstjohns.com) websites provide information and ideas for travellers.