

The Vage Flagon

Awarded for the most meritorious voyage by a Club Member

Diamond Days – Exploring Newfoundland’s South-west Coast by Peter Hoggins **Yacht “VMG” a Catana 42 Catamaran**

A dark, wet, cold night was slowly yielding to a grey, wet, cold dawn. The first casts of daylight were struggling through holes in the murk torn by the freshening north-easterly breeze. Inside at the navcentre the chartplotter’s brightly coloured display painted a far more reassuring picture: looking like a small black beetle, its feelers reaching out for the coast, the black dot showing our position crept northwards over a cheery blue sea. We were tantalisingly close but with the wind backing and increasing since midnight we were now butting into some unpleasant head seas.

‘We’ll never make Little Garia Bay with this wind; let’s go for plan B and bear away for Isle aux Morts - it’s only seven miles’. The voice of Louise, my wife and navigator.

‘The Isle of the Dead...’ I replied ‘What’s the entrance like?’

‘I wanted to go there last year; it’s tricky but should be lovely inside’

An hour later and the fog had some darker more solid looking lumps – land. Cautiously we threaded our way among rocky islets to a small protected bay. The anchor went down with a splash, we gave it a reassuring tug and put the kettle on. A cup of tea, tension and tiredness slowly fizzed away. We’d arrived once more on the rugged coast of Newfoundland.

We had left Cape Breton Island the previous day on VMG our Catana 42 catamaran who has carried us over 20,000 miles since we had her built in 2014. She is one of the latest generation of performance cruising cats; fast, seaworthy and a comfortable home (hence her name). Despite the relatively short distance the Cabot Strait separating Cape Breton Island from Newfoundland is a challenging stretch of water. The St Lawrence River empties through the ninety miles creating strong and unpredictable currents. The weather can change rapidly and often for the worse. Like a visit to the dentist it is an experience to get over quickly and with as little pain as possible.

We fell under the spell of Newfoundland on our cruise in 2016 and had decided that once was not enough. Doug and Dale Bruce, the editors of The Cruising Club of America’s Newfoundland pilot asked us if we would research updates for a new edition. We arrived in mid-July with a plan to sail slowly eastwards along the south west coast before heading back to the USA in early September. Very few boats cruise here, we only saw one in 2016, and looked forward to having it all to ourselves.



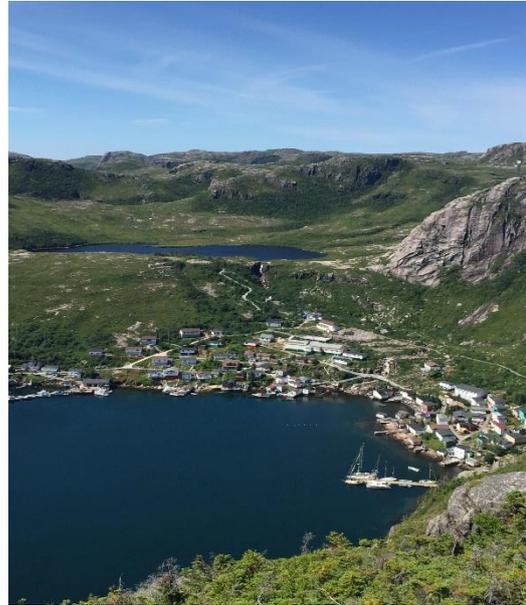
Westcountry men and women have been coming to Newfoundland for centuries. As far back as 1497 Europeans discovered the rich cod fisheries of the Grand Banks to the south east and over the following centuries came to settle. Today’s ‘Newfies’ are a potent genetic cocktail of

their Westcountry, Irish, Breton and Basque forebears and are possibly the kindest, friendliest people on earth. Sadly the glory days of the cod fishery have long gone. Over-fishing drove the once seemingly inexhaustible stocks to near-extinction forcing the Canadian government to introduce a controversial moratorium in 1994 which is still in place. The industry collapsed, people left in droves to seek a better life and Newfoundland was left to ponder an uncertain future.

Lying east-west along 47 degrees North, the southwest coast is at approximately the same latitude as Lorient in Brittany, but lacking the warm influence of the Gulf Stream the weather is far more extreme. Winters are fierce with sea-ice and violent winds. In the summer, with continental high pressure, there can be periods of settled weather until a depression sweeps along the coast bringing a return to the prevailing southwest winds. To sail there is to experience a wild and untouched land; a place of deep fiords, rugged shores, spectacular scenery and many superb anchorages. Dotted along the coast are a few tiny settlements or 'outports' only accessible by boat – the last remnants of the once thriving inshore fishery.

By now I'm sure that you are thinking 'Well it's all so wonderful why aren't there more people cruising?' There are two simple answers. Firstly it is quite a long way (600nm approximately) from the yachting centres of the US east coast. Getting there can be quite a haul and getting back against the prevailing southwest wind even more so. Secondly it is a wild coast. Although no more challenging than northern Britany, and with much less tide, there are few places to provision and no repair facilities for hundreds of miles. The reward however is adventurous 'high latitude' exploration without, at least in the summer, the threat of ice. To top it off it's exciting to find the most recent surveys of some of the Admiralty charts were carried out in the late 1800s. WGS84? I don't think so!

To give you a flavour of the delights of cruising in Newfoundland here are two snapshots: the first is the fjord of La Hune Bay (47d 33m N: 056d 51m W) and the other is the small outport of Francois (47d 35m N: 056d 44m W).



The road ends in Burgeo and only starts again when you reach Harbour Breton, seventy-five miles along the coast to the east. About halfway between them is the deep slice of La Hune Bay, a five mile long fiord carved by ancient glaciers. Flanked on either side by towering walls of granite this is an awesome place: nature raw and untouched. Under headsail only we ran up the bay, sometimes becalmed and sometimes hit by vicious williwaws hurtling down from the cliffs. Beneath us the depths plunged over 100 metres. At the head of the bay, perched on a dead tree, a bald-eagle watched us drop the hook on an alluvial fan which gave solid holding and a secure anchorage for our week's stay. From the boat the land looked good walking country with small trees, granite outcrops and a rolling carpet of green. Once ashore there was good news and bad news. The bad news was that the enticing green was not grass but impenetrable brush. The good news was that the almost dry stream beds provided excellent trails into the interior enabling us to explore the rugged landscape. Two days of heavy rain turned them into roaring cataracts forcing us to stay on-board surrounded by the breath-taking spectacle of hundreds of waterfalls cascading a thousand feet from the cliffs, making a roar like a thunderstorm that never stopped. The days seemed timeless and the rest of the world ceased to exist as we enjoyed this magical place.

Towering above the small outport of Francois is the imposing cliff of The Friar. Clustered around its base are the brightly coloured homes of the eighty or so permanent inhabitants of one of Canada's most isolated communities. A daily ferry service to Burgeo provides the only link to the outside world. We arrived to find everyone in festive mood: it was Homecoming Weekend when family members return for fun and nostalgia. Willing hands helped us edge on to the dock; 'You've come at a good time – lunch is ready in the community centre and you'll be able to watch the dory racing this afternoon'. The sun shone, people drank beer, and had a good laugh. A community letting its hair down, coming together and for a few special hours we were part of it. As most of the young people have left, the aging population's main occupation seemed to be...talking. And talking with an accent that had more than a passing resemblance to a Westcountry burr, with an occasional 'yis boy' thrown in for good measure. We spent a glorious week in Francois walking in the hills by day and in the evening enjoying a drink with our new friends, Loretta (home from Halifax for a few weeks) serenading us on her ukulele. Francois was a hard place to leave: there was always a reason to spend another day – more blueberries to pick, more conversations to have - but there came a time when the calendar and the weather said 'it's time you were gone.'

Henry was working on his converted fishing boat on Francois dock. 'Good morning Henry, how's it going?' 'Boy... some days are diamonds, some days are stones. Today is a stone, yis boy' (unfortunately he had just dropped a vital part into the black oily depths of the bilge).

As VMG sped across the Cabot Strait under spinnaker we watched the high land slowly fade into the northern horizon and our summer cruise had come to an end. For us every day in Newfoundland had been a diamond. Yis boy.