

THE *island* THAT TIME *forgot*

Just off the coast of Labrador, on historic and beautiful Battle Island, Jennifer Bain indulges in some soul-warming bread rolls



PHOTOGRAPHY, BATTLE HARBOUR HISTORIC TRUST

The view of the Battle Harbour community as you arrive by boat. Opposite: A wooden walkway bordered with fireweed leads to one of the few private houses on the island.



Like three generations of women before her, Daphne Smith presides over a kitchen in Battle Harbour and makes magic with the simplest of ingredients. Nothing, though, is more beloved than her dinner rolls. For those, she stirs yeast with sugar and lukewarm water. Then she whisks together more sugar with warm milk, eggs, salt and oil before adding flour and kneading the mixture into a soft dough. Finally, she applies TLC and patience and lets the dough rise somewhere warm before baking.

Battle Harbour's heavenly rolls are delivered to guests at every lunch and every dinner, nestled in tea towel-lined baskets. Smith makes up to eight dozen a day and never tires of the pleasure they bring people. She loves everything that comes out of a hot oven and so suspects others must, too. Of course, lavishing the slightly sweet bread ▶



Above: Daphne Smith with her dinner rolls, warm from the oven. **Right:** Battle Island is on Iceberg Alley, May through June is peak viewing time.



Clockwise from above: Part of the two-kilometre footpath that circumnavigates the island; photograph of Victor Croucher taken in 1903, remarkable for the size of the codfish; a pair of resident Arctic fox kits



with salted butter doesn't hurt.

Smith has been cooking here on Battle Island off southeastern Labrador for 17 summers. Not only does she handle meals, she also shares her baking tricks in a bun-making class. "My picture's gone all over the world and I don't mind," she says with pride.

On this tiny car-free island that time forgot, people come for a night or two to slow down and feel what life was like in simpler times.

Run by a historic trust, Battle Harbour is a restored 19th-century outpost fishing community that was once the salt fish capital of the world. It's part of the Battle Harbour Historic District National Historic Site and one of the few places in Canada where you can sleep in a national historic site (if you choose the Bunkhouse or Isaac Smith Cottage and not the inn or other options).

Just like the world-famous (and significantly more expensive) Fogo Island Inn off the north coast of Newfoundland, getting here is an adventure. My family flies from Toronto to Deer Lake and explores Gros Morne National Park before taking a ferry from St. Barbe, N.L., to Blanc Sablon, Que., on the Labrador border. Then it's a two-hour drive north on the Trans-Labrador Highway to Mary's Harbour to park our rental car and catch a passenger ferry to Battle Harbour.

Unlike Fogo Island, which is home to 2,200 people and multiple communities, Battle Harbour has a seasonal population of about 20. Our stay comes as a package that includes the ferry and meals served three



times a day in a communal dining room.

We dawdle by a couple of astounding icebergs before Peter Bull, Battle Harbour's executive director, greets us at the wharf and ushers us to a beef pot pie lunch. But it's the warm and welcoming buttered rolls that make the biggest impression. It's not impolite to ask for seconds.

After lunch, Janice Hardy Walsh takes all the new arrivals on a historical tour. She patiently walks us through refurbished

mercantile buildings and transports us back to the 1770s when John Slade and Co. of Poole, England, established fishing premises here. Battle Harbour quickly became a major fishing and trading centre for cod, seal, herring and salmon.

"You realize just how hard those initial people must have had to try and make a life here," Hardy Walsh muses. Like almost everyone who works here, she has an intimate connection with the island. Her father was the manager for one of the merchant owners of Battle Island. Her photo is on a storyboard in the Salt Store (a building that once housed mountains of salt used to process cod) because she was aboard the SS *Burgeo* when it shipwrecked in 1962. She was just five weeks old and returning to the island with her mother and siblings to join her father for the summer (during the winter they lived in Carbonear and her mother would take them over as soon as school was out). "This is a place of comfort and closure for me," admits Hardy Walsh. "Everywhere I go, I'm in the past."

We read the exhibits and study artifacts. We hear how medical missionary Sir Wilfred Grenfell set up Labrador's first hospital here, and how American explorer

Robert Peary transmitted a story from the Marconi wireless station to the *New York Times* in 1909 claiming he had reached the North Pole. We visit the 1857 St. James the Apostle Anglican Church to admire fishing-themed stained glass windows. It's the last remaining example of noted British architect William Grey's Gothic Revival style.

It was the deterioration of this church that prompted locals to raise the alarm. In 1990, the Battle Harbour Historic Trust was founded to protect, restore, interpret and promote the significant heritage resources here. After Earle Freighting Service donated the entire mercantile premises to the trust, the church was the first thing to be restored. When the infamous cod moratorium hit in 1992 – putting about 30,000 people in the province out of work and ending a way of life – local fishermen and plant workers reinvented themselves here as restoration carpenters.

Battle Harbour is now considered the last and most complete example of a traditional fishing mercantile premise in Newfoundland and Labrador.

This island is "nine miles from normal," as the trust likes to say. A few private summer homes remain. There's

no cell service. Electricity comes from a generator. My family of four stays in Spearing Cottage, a former light-keeper's residence from a nearby island that was dismantled and rebuilt here in 1949 and once housed 13 people. It's cold in these lovely old houses – even in July – and so we must make a fire and keep it going.

"Everything out here rusts and rots so it's constant maintenance," Bull confesses. When Battle Harbour opened to guests in 1996, there was also no real business plan. By 2013, it switched gears to become a four-star tourist destination with a national historic district designation. The trust now relies on seasonal guests to bring in the money needed for ongoing restorations.

There's a modest bar and lounge above a building called the General Store where you check in when you arrive and from there we were then walked over to our house and a cheerful wood fire was started for us. The General Store has movies and music at night, plus the only Wi-Fi.

There is one dining room located in the Salmon Store where meals are served at communal tables. Breakfast is at 8 a.m., lunch at 12:30 p.m., dinner at 6 p.m. There's typically just one option, but if you travel with a fussy 10-year-old who considers macaroni and cheese too flavourful, Smith will gladly simplify meals.

"When we were growing up, we didn't have a cookbook," she confides when we meet in the dining room for a private roll-making session. "I grew up here in Battle Harbour. We lived here all year round and we grew up with no electricity – we just had oil and a wood stove and you scrubbed your clothes on the scrubbing board."

Smith's bread-making talents were passed from her great-grandmother, who was born here, and had it "really, really tough, so ate a lot of bread, of course," and lived to 105. Smith continues the tradition of blessing the ►

PHOTOGRAPHY, JENNIFER BAIN (ROLLS AND CHALKBOARD); BATTLE HARBOUR HISTORIC TRUST

bread, a ritual she has shared with her own daughters and granddaughters. “If you just put a cross on it, that’s still blessing your bread. But my great-grandmother went the whole nine yards – God, Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Amen.”

The roll recipe has naturally evolved. Smith uses Costco muffin pans, two-per-cent milk and canola oil. Her mom used evaporated milk and tub margarine. “We would watch and see everything my mom would do,” she remembers. “A bit of this, a bit of that. If you think it’s too dry, put in more liquid. If you think it’s too runny, put in more flour.”

The main trick is to keep the dough warm once it has been portioned into small balls and put into greased muffin tins for a final rise. That means covering the pan with a clean tea towel and wrapping it in a blanket. The rolls, cooked until golden on top, are brushed with melted butter as soon as they come out of the oven.

“Do you want me to sign your recipe?” Smith asks when our class wraps up. “A lot of people like for me to sign their recipe.”

There is, of course, more to Battle Harbour than just food. The Labrador Sea is too cold for swimming but you can look for icebergs, Arctic foxes and berries. The island, just a kilometre long and about half a kilometre wide, has a walking trail that passes the “old cemetery” (circa 1780) and “new cemetery” (circa 1900), the memorial for a 1976 float plane crash that killed two pilots and one government inspector, and the 1904 Marconi wireless tower.

Sometimes you can even go cod fishing. Alas, that doesn’t happen for us because the fish haven’t arrived in the area yet, but we do learn how untold volumes of cod were once cleaned, dried and salted here to be shipped around the world.

It’s only after our final halibut dinner and egg tartlet breakfast that I suddenly realize we haven’t even tried salt cod during our stay.

Smith immediately pulls cooked fish cakes from the freezer, puts them in a takeout tub, and presents this precious gift to us in front of an iconic photograph of a boy named Victor Croucher standing between two massive codfish at Battle Harbour. The 1903 image is considered “a poignant symbol of the once almighty cod fishery.” One fish apparently measured five-foot-five and weighed 60 pounds.

Our bellies full, our bodies rested, our souls at ease, we are ready for the long journey, first to mainland Labrador and then back over to the island of Newfoundland.

“Have you got all your rolls?” Smith fusses like an anxious mom. We have indeed picked up a dozen, plus a few pats of butter, for the road. We have tucked Battle Harbour aprons and an autographed dinner-roll recipe into our suitcases.

“If you do make the rolls, send me a picture,” Smith asks before a final farewell. “Let me know how everything turns out.”



Sunset over St. Lewis Bay, with lights glowing from the historic cookhouse

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