No cars, no phone signal: Canada's ghost island where guests still check in

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Jennifer Bain

Barrett & MacKay

Once the thriving heart of Labrador's fishing industry, Battle Harbour has found new life as an island retreat with barely a trace of modern life.

Several livyers have gathered on the wharf. Sleeves rolled up, four fishermen who "live here" on this remote Labrador island are splitting radiekien knowvere-dryrnsh into a Labrador's iconic salted cod. Behind them, suit-clad merchants and more fishers, some in waterproof oilskins, have arranged themselves for a group photo against a white clapboard building with ochre-red trim.

But our ferry approaches the wharf, something seems off. Everyone's as grey as the sky and nobody is moving.

I give my head a shake and remember that I'm arriving at a place that proudly describes itself as "nine miles from normal". So, while these fellows were alive in around 1900, when this was the saltfish capital of the world, they've since been plucked from archival photos and turned into life-sized cardboard cutouts.

"Welcome to Battle Harbour," says Peter Bull, the executive director of the Battle Harbour Historic Trust, as we scramble off the ferry on a wooden plank.

Jennifer Bain

Lifesize cardboard cutouts recreate Battle Harbour's days as a thriving fishing port (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

Bull quickly runs through the practicalities. Lunch is in half an hour at 12:30. A tour starts at 13:30. An Arctic fox family lives in the old cemetery. Two historic wireless radio towers need to be saved. There's no mobile phone service and just one communal Wi-Fi spot. Sunrise comes at 06:19. Wanda Fifield will walk me to my room.

> *It's hard to believe that this tiny, half-mile long island was once teeming with fishermen and merchants*

"This [is the] emergency system – you just turn this button on," Fifield says, stopping at a walkie talkie in the hallway near my room. "If there's a problem in the nighttime, if you're sick or hurt or anything, just press this square button. You tell them your problem. You tell them that you're staying at the Merchant Building because they'll need to know what cottage to go to."

With restored wooden houses, weathered fishing stages where catches were once processed and 16 private summer residences, Battle Harbour looks remarkably well preserved. But it has been more than half a century since anyone lived here year-round, and even longer since it was the unofficial capital of Labrador.

I've got two nights to step back in time.

Battle Harbour Historic Trust

Battle Harbour has 16 private summer residences but no permanent population (Credit: Battle Harbour Historic Trust)

Getting to Battle Harbour is an adventure in itself. First, you fly to the delightfully named Happy Valley-Goose Bay in mainland Labrador, then drive for five hours along the forest-flanked Expedition 51° highway, hoping to spot a moose and yearning for an outhouse. There are no services for most of the journey.

From the wharf in Mary's Harbour, you then catch the daily passenger "ferry" for guests – a lofty name for a boat so small your luggage may be stacked in the bathroom.

Plan your trip:

When to visit: Battle Harbour is only open from June to early September. Confirm seasonal dates before booking.

Getting there: Fly to Happy Valley-Goose Bay, then drive five hours to Mary's Harbour. A passenger ferry (for overnight guests only) departs at 11:00 each day and returns at 09:00 each morning. The journey takes 60 to 75 minutes.

Staying overnight: Accommodation is in restored cottages and historic inn rooms. Two-night packages start at C$1,570 (£835; $1,106) for two people, including accommodation, return ferry transfers, meals and a guided historical tour. Taxes and gratuities are extra.

Day trips: Separate day trips are also available during the summer season. Check with the operator for current schedules and prices.

For 14.5km (9 miles), the boat winds past craggy coastline and near-shore islands, which look otherworldly if it's foggy and desolate if it's grey. Gulls, kittiwakes and gannets may soar alongside the boat and sometimes you'll spot icebergs, humpback whales and minkes.

When Battle Island's buildings finally come into view, it's hard to believe that this tiny, half-mile long island was once teeming with fishermen and merchants.

In the 1770s, English merchant John Slade established a trading operation on this tiny island that became a gateway to Labrador's rich fishing grounds. Salt cod was processed here and exported to Europe, the Caribbean and beyond. At its peak, there was a hospital, school, church and wireless station, and a permanent population of around 300. Thousands more seasonal fishermen passed through, including floaters who lived on schooners and stationers who built temporary shacks on land.

But Battle Harbour's fortunes eventually faded. A devastating fire in 1930, declining fish stocks and a provincial resettlement programme in the 1960s gradually emptied the island. By the 1970s, its last year-round residents had gone.

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Across the tickle from Battle Harbour, Great Caribou Island offers hiking trails and sweeping views of the rocky Labrador coast (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

The final blow to the island came on 2 July 1992, when the federal government's cod moratorium closed the fishery and instantly threw 30,000 people across Newfoundland and Labrador out of work.

Today, Battle Harbour feels like a ghost island, its restored buildings preserving a world that has all but vanished. Run by a trust, the car-free historic site is only open to guests for around three months each summer, but for those that know it best, the island is anything but forgotten.

Bull's connection to Battle Harbour stretches back more than a century, to when his grandfather fished along the Labrador coast. He has worked here since 2013, living on the island for most of the summer and returning to his home in St John's each September with enough cod, squid, mackerel and berries like bakeapple and partridgeberry to get him through winter.

"When I die, my ashes are going to spread out where I pick partridgeberries," he confides, "and I'm going to come back as a partridgeberry."

Jennifer Bain

Peter Bull, executive director of the Battle Harbour Historic Trust, helps preserve the island's historic buildings and fishing heritage (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

Nelson Smith has his own life-long connection to Battle Harbour. He helped restore its historic buildings and has been leading tours here for nearly three decades.

"Every building is going to smell different because of the different stuff stored in them," Smith promises in his thick Labradorian accent. "If you hears me say a word you don't understand, stop me and I'll try to explain it to you."

In Newfoundland English, this cluster of musty buildings is called "the rooms", with individual "stores" named for what they once held. The Pork Store smells faintly of molasses, while the Salt Store contains the mineral still used to preserve cod.

The tour continues past more life-like cutouts: a dapper merchant, a young fisherman standing in a wooden boat, an older fisherman sitting by a cod trap.

"The best way I likes my saltfish is two years old," Smith offers, explaining how cod was cleaned, salted and dried on raised, open-air wooden platforms known as flakes.

In the Salt Store's loft, I stand where American polar explorer Robert E Peary presided over two 1909 press conferences and claimed he had reached the North Pole. He transmitted his first expedition account from the nearby Marconi station to the New York Times.

Jennifer Bain

Visitors can stay overnight in the historic structures, including the former Merchant Building (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

Visitors can even stay overnight in some of these historic structures. I'm staying in the Merchant Building's Harry Smith Room, named after an employee of the island's former general store. There are also five restored cottages and 12 other ensuite rooms.

A quilt covers my wooden bed and a space heater fights the chill that lingers in the old building, despite its restoration. There's no television, and the only sound is the quiet. Settling into a swivel armchair, I face the sea as I leaf through the guestbook.

"Best view on the island. The iceberg was framed by our window."

"Something you have to experience rather than explain."

"So much serenity."

communal dining tables – there's talk of Northern Lights, so I spend a restless first night peering out the window and stepping out onto the wrap-around deck. I have better luck at sunrise when I follow a dirt path to the old cemetery to see foxes emerge from their den on a rocky hillside.

Jennifer Bain

The Old Cemetery, one of two on the island, contains centuries-old graves (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

From the cemetery, I take the Battle Harbour Footpath for a 1.9km (1.2-mile) stroll past a newer cemetery and a memorial for three men killed in a 1976 seaplane crash. Two local boys stumbled upon the wreckage, some of which is still here. One of them was Smith.

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Towards the end of the footpath, I see the Marconi towers, the last surviving pair of their kind in North America. Built in 1906 and rebuilt in 1931 using a radio wave-based wireless telegraph system created by Italy's Guglielmo Marconi, they once guided mariners and transmitted messages.

"They're pretty special and they're an important part of the skyline here," says Bull. The trust is trying to raise C$200,000 (£106,000/$140,000) to repair them.

Jennifer Bain

Battle Harbour's historic Marconi radio station helped connect remote Labrador to the wider world (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

Strong winds scupper my plans to go cod fishing, but I manage a short boat trip to Cape St Charles to stand at the most easterly point in continental North America. Then I zip across the tickle (channel) to hike Great Caribou Island, where I find Tanya Russell, a local postmistress and amateur photographer, in a blueberry patch.

Russell tells me that she loves "the quiet, the water, the saltwater air, the birds, the foxes – just everything at Battle Harbour. And you gets to meet a lot of wonderful people."

At my final breakfast, it's time to say goodbye to fellow guests and life-size cutouts alike. I'm eating near a cutout made from an iconic black-and-white photograph shot at Battle Harbour more than a century ago: a sombre boy flanked by two enormous cod. This boy, Victor Croucher, is buried on the island, but here in the dining hall he's another ghostly presence in a place that stubbornly refuses to die.

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