Trails I've Hiked: Gros Morne's Green Gardens

By Jennifer Bain
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On Green Gardens Trail in Newfoundland and Labrador's popular Gros Morne National Park, there are 88 steps down to the North Atlantic Ocean at Old Man Cove.Jennifer Bain

I almost psyched myself out of doing one of the most diverse hikes in Gros Morne National Park because I was worried about the climb between its coastal headland and ocean beach — and the seemingly daunting uphill return. That climb turned out to be an easy 88 steps. The return was a mostly pleasurable zigzag through the forest.

Now I get why people love this half-day hike in western Newfoundland and Labrador that provides a taste of serpentine barrens and boreal forest before giving way to a spectacular coastline of green meadows, cliffs, sea stacks and sea caves.

The nuts and bolts:



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There is no chance you'll get lost on the well-marked Green Gardens out-and-back trail.Jennifer Bain

Distance: 9.5 km return (5.9 miles).

Terrain: Gently rolling with steep sections.

Elevation gain: 305 metres (1,000 feet) or 415 m (1,362 feet) depending on which Parks Canada sign you believe.

Time: 3 to 4 hours.

Trail rating: Moderate.

The trailhead: The Green Gardens parking lot, with an outhouse, is along Route 431 between Woody Point and Trout River in the south end of the park.

The serpentine barrens:



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For the first 20 minutes of the Green Gardens Trail, you'll walk over rusty-orange and olive-like Tablelands rocks, aka peridotites.Jennifer Bain

You'll start out crossing the serpentine barrens of the Tablelands and walking on an exposed portion of the Earth's mantle. Just like the nearby and perennially popular Tablelands Trail, this delightfully alien landscape is full of rust-colored peridotite and orangish-tan serpentinite rocks that are normally found far below the Earth's crust. The ancient volcanic rocks here help provide important geological evidence that contributes to Gros Morne's UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for its illustration of plate tectonics.

The boreal forest:



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Just as the forest gives way to coast, you'll spot waterfalls in the distance off the left side of the path. A log will keep you from going too close to the edge of the cliff here.Jennifer Bain

After about 20 mostly flat minutes on the barrens, you'll start descending into a boreal forest valley through a series of switchbacks, stepping over small creeks and crossing one short bridge. Closer to the coast, look for wind-swept, stunted evergreens that the locals call luckomes. This is a great place for birding — woodpeckers and warblers the day I hiked — and admiring wildflowers and carnivorous pitcher plants. Picnic tables and a pit toilet are hidden in the forest, along with primitive campsites you must have a permit to use. Once you spot a distant waterfall in the forest, you're steps from the ocean.

Old Man Cove:



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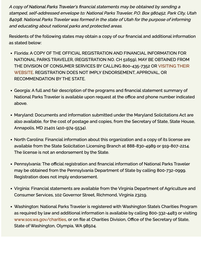
Look for one of Parks Canada's red chairs once you spot the Old Man Cove beach. Explorations are best done at low tide.Jennifer Bain

Don't let the lure of sea stacks, coves and beaches along the fertile volcanic sea coast draw you too close to the edge. As you finally leave the forest and arrive at a lush cliff-top meadow, a Green Gardens welcome sign suggests you take the stairs down to the Old Man Cove beach or keep walking to Steve's Cove.

"Strange, bulbous, black rock make the headland to the right of the stairs to the beach," the sign explains. "These are pillow basalts and were extruded underwater by a massive volcanic ooze 500 million years ago as a new (but long-gone) ocean was being birthed. Pillow basalts still form today underwater in places like the Red Sea and Hawaii."

I didn't spend much time exploring the shoreline on my own, but apparently if you wish south for 10 minutes to a brook you can scramble up/down to a series of small waterfalls. At low tide, you can walk north around the headland to a sea cave. Beware of slippery rocks, rocks falling from cliffs and rising tides.

Steve's Cove:



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A popular selfie spot at the end of Green Gardens Trail is at Steve's Cove.Jennifer Bain

Don't stop yet. Follow an extra bit of trail north along the headland and through coastal meadows for 10 final minutes to Steve's Cove. Standing on windswept cliffs, you'll get to ogle sea stacks and the park's southern coastline. This is the official end of the trail since a section to Wallace Brook closed in 2017 because erosion made it dangerous.

The return:



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The return trip on Green Gardens Trail is mostly uphill, but it's a gentle and meandering uphill.Jennifer Bain

Do you have enough daylight to get back to the parking lot? Parks Canada signs will remind you that it's a two-hour walk back from the shore if I'm not a particularly fast hiker but did it in 80 minutes). Since this is an out-and-back trail, you'll have to return the way you came, going uphill most of the way. I'll admit the last half hour of switchbacks was a tad tedious, but all was forgiven once I left the forest behind, crested a hill and caught sight of those rusty orange barrens (and the parking lot) once more.

By the way, some hikers delight in spotting grazing sheep in the meadows along this trail. All I saw was a few tufts of wool snagged in low-lying trees, but I sidestepped plenty of dung.

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Signs of the local sheep that graze along Green Gardens Trail.Jennifer Bain

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