

An island for every day of the year

Island-hopping on Newfoundland's
southwestern coast

Story and photography by Janet Wallace



A boat moored at the end of the yard is a common sight in both Burgeo and Ramea. Right: The best way to explore the area is by boat—particularly if driven by a local such as the late Eugene Ball.



I spot a huge creature in the water just a couple feet away from the ferry. It looks almost mythical. It takes me a few seconds to realize I'm seeing a swordfish. Moments later, a basking shark swims by, its rotund body just inches below the water's surface. Gannets plummet into the turquoise water where dolphins leap—a sign that a school of fish is at hand. This isn't a whale-watching cruise...it's the \$4 ferry ride between Burgeo and Ramea, two outposts off the southwestern coast of Newfoundland.

While planning my trip to Burgeo, I contacted local photographer Eugene Ball. With the generosity that Newfoundlanders are known for, Eugene didn't just answer my questions about places to visit; he offered to take me for a day of island-hopping.

An island for every day of the year, boast the locals. There are, apparently, 365 islands within five miles of Burgeo including Eclipse Island, named by Captain James Cook who experienced a solar eclipse there in 1756.

The vista is utterly spectacular. We steer into a fjord where bald eagles swoop overhead. On open water, puffins swim past us. At times, Eugene turns off the boat's motor and we hear the clicking and splashing of dolphins dancing in the water around us.

Some islands are just lichen-covered rocks; a few have long white sand beaches. One has a resident caribou; like a cottager, he summers on the island and goes to the mainland every winter. Other islands host breeding colonies of seabirds, including puffins, gannets, murres and eiders.

Eugene points out remnants of old shacks and cemeteries—abandoned when their islands were “resettled” into Burgeo. We drop in for tea with (of course!) tinned milk at a cabin of Eugene's ‘buddies.’

Tragically, Eugene died a few months after that trip. Next time I go, I'll rent a kayak in Burgeo or Ramea and visit more islands; or maybe I'll take an easier path. From Burgeo, I can take a ferry to Ramea and the more isolated outposts of Grey River and Francois and rent a tourist home.

Getting there

Burgeo is a 2.5-hour drive from Stephenville, midway between Deer Lake Airport and Channel-Port aux Basques (where the ferry from North Sydney, Nova Scotia, docks).

If you prefer to travel an eight-lane highway with fast food outlets, this trip may not be your cup of tea. But if you, like me, are captivated by mountains, wide rivers, moose and wilderness, you might love the trip on the 146-km-long, two-lane Caribou Highway. The best part of the journey is the change in landscape. It starts with mountains and forests and ends with the barrens. In this bizarre and well-named landscape, boulders are among the tallest objects. Small ponds are interspersed among rolling hills covered with bushes and berry plants. Sometimes there are arrays of round boulders, like the scene of a prehistoric lawn bowling game.



From top: Wherever you go off Newfoundland's southwestern coast, you'll meet friendly islanders; wind turbines provide electricity to Ramea, along with diesel generators; (Eugene and I visited his buddies on a small island—their cabin and boatshed (shown above, left) are the only buildings on the island; (right) a fancy boathouse containing kayaks-for-rent at Burgeo; Haven; the opening to a fjord on the mainland near Burgeo.

Changes

After a while, you cross the causeway and enter Burgeo, a cluster of islands connected by bridges and causeways. For people who knew the outpost in the past, Burgeo hardly seems remote now. Until 1979, the only way to visit the town was by boat.

When my mother grew up in Burgeo, a weekly ferry run connected the community to the outside world. The ferry was a milk run and stopped at 46 outposts between Port aux Basques and Argentia. It carried freight, mail and passengers on the six-day trip.

My mother left the island at age 16 and returned for the first time about 40 years later. I see the island through my own perspective as a visitor, but also with her insight as to the changes.

I've heard it said that the island went through 150 years of changes in the 1960s and '70s. Electricity didn't come to island until 1962. There were no roads on the island—just pathways.

Then, in a few waves of resettlement, houses from nearby outposts were floated over. My mom tells me there's a house where her vegetable garden used to be. The "new" house is likely a century-old. Due to resettlement, a community may double in size without any houses being built.

Now you can go to a grocery store, use electricity and drive to your door, but many traditions remain. When invited into a stranger's house for tea (a common occurrence here, it seems), I'm invariably offered tea with tinned milk.

The people I meet share stories, everything from the whales they've seen to the ghosts rattling about. I ask a woman about the dark, rectangular bog, the size of a house. The story told to scare/educate my mother as a child was that in the house that once stood there, people played cards on a Sunday. The next day, the building and its residents were swallowed up by the mud. The woman, who is my age, laughs and says she heard the people were dancing on a Sunday.

If someone asks you about your opinion on Farley Mowat, be cautious in your answer. The town has a complicated relationship with the author. His house is mentioned as a tourist feature but many haven't forgiven the author for his portrayal of the residents in *A Whale for the Killing*, based on his experience in Burgeo. (However, in *The Outport People*, his wife, Clare Mowat, describes their five-year residence in Burgeo with affection.)

Given the nickname of Newfoundland and Labrador, I was prepared to see a lot of rock. And I do. Much of Burgeo is a rocky outcrop with houses perched wherever there is a flat piece of ground. Sandbanks Provincial Park is an incredible surprise with seven kilometres of beautiful white sand beaches and turquoise water.

When the fog rolls in on Ramea, it's like closing down the aperture of a camera. Instead of admiring a beautiful vista, I sit on one of wooden boardwalk, mesmerized by the world at my feet. The carnivorous pitcher plants and sundews are adorned with dew droplets. Tiny plants, mosses and lichens create an intricate tapestry of colours and texture.

The fog focusses sound as well. Without being able to see the coast from a distance, the crashing surf seems louder—as do the sound of cobblestones rolling back into the water with each receding wave.

Like the beach, the great meals I have were a wonderful surprise—after having heard stories of lard on bread and mushy boiled vegetables. I avoid the several dishes involving bologna, and instead go for daily specials at the restaurants. Nothing fancy, just traditional food done well. On Ramea, I have cod caught that day: fried with the lightest of batters, it's magical. In Burgeo, I have an excellent moose burger, a hearty rabbit stew and delicious fish cakes.

There are just enough services in the area to make it easy to visit but still feel untouched by tourists. Burgeo is a wonderful destination for people who, like me, love nature, the ocean and down-to-earth people. 🍷