

The naughty names of Newfoundland

At first sign one might wonder whether Sri Lanka and Newfoundland had much in common, but they do; at least three points of similarity. For a start both are islands to the eastern tip of major land masses. They have both suffered tsunamis, one in 2004 and one in 1929 and their clocks are each one half hour out of sync. with their big neighbours; a doom-merchant in a city in eastern Canada might be seen with a poster which proclaims "The World will end at noon (12.30 Newfoundland)". Now, here is where the contrasts diverge. Sri Lanka with only 58% of the area is home to a population that is forty two times larger. The one is warm while the other can be very cold and is frequently blanketed in fog. This is the result of the warm waters of the Gulf Stream colliding with the cold Labrador current before heading eastward across the Atlantic to keep western Europe warmer than it might otherwise be. For centuries the water to the south, the Grand Banks was home to vast numbers of cod until, within living memory, they were wiped out by over-fishing and their stocks have never recovered. Today the major industry is oil, with most of the rigs situated offshore. However, they face a major hazard. They are immovable objects but they lie slap-bang in the middle of an iceberg highway. The local authorities have become so good at predicting the paths of these floating beasts that they can, if required attach some lines and 'tow' them (the icebergs) out of the way. Thus with two or three tugs pulling hard on the side of a berg they can manage to have it miss an oil platform 300km away by a just few hundred metres.

Talking of large objects, the locals are particularly proud of the following exchange which is reputed to have taken place between the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln and Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October, 1995.

"Canadians: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the South to avoid collision.

Americans: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Canadians: No, I say again, you divert YOUR course.

Americans: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES' ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH--I SAY AGAIN, THAT'S ONE FIVE DEGREES NORTH--OR COUNTER-MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call."

One of the noticeable things about eastern Canada is the presence of French. In some parts, it is so dominant that French is the second official language of Canada. But, I might hear you ask - Did not Britain destroy French control of North America? Think again. Take a look at a map of Newfoundland. In particular, look along the 'Southern Shore' that runs east-west to the Gulf of St

Lawrence. There you will see some islands, St Pierre and the Miquelons and they are still part of France.

Now that you are looking at a map, let's take a tour. Nearby you will see Placentia Bay, the scene of a very important meeting between Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt in August 1941, four months before the United States entered the Second World War. In case you think that the reproductive reference was a one off, you should take a look to the north of the Avalon Peninsula. Yes, there it is - Conception Bay. Let's go a step further and look at some of the towns. How about *Hearts' Content*, *Hearts' Desire*, *Hearts' Delight*, *Harbour Grace*, *Come by Chance* and of course, *Dildo*.

One of the extraordinary things for a visitor to Newfoundland or *NōōFūnLāand* as the natives pronounce it is the accent. Underneath the Canadian drawl one can discern clearly identifiable regional Irish accents. Traditionally, the island was populated by people from the West Country of England (Devon, Cornwall, Somerset), but there were significant numbers of Irish in the fishing fleets that visited the Grand Banks. For a long time there were laws prohibiting the Irish from landing, but they did and became a very large part of the population. It is also easy to forget that Newfoundland was not part of Canada until 1949. Prior to that it was a Crown Colony, so that fact that its development was quite different to that of the rest of Canada should not come as a surprise. Maybe the names which were adopted by lovelorn fishermen are just part of this apartheid.

The capital, St Johns is on the same latitude as Paris, and yet, on account of the climate, the whole country feels as if it is located much further north. It has a Parliament Building which is based on Westminster with one small difference; the Government sits on the other side of the floor in relation to the speaker. The reason for this is simple. When the building was constructed there was only one fireplace and there was no way that the opposition were going to get to warm their bums at the expense of the Government.

St Johns also has an extraordinary, semi-enclosed harbour, completely strategic from a military viewpoint. This was an assembly point for Atlantic convoys during the Second World War. On the north side of the harbour is Signal Hill where in 1905 Marconi is reputed to have received wireless signals from Poldhu in Cornwall, UK. Now I have stood on Signal Hill in March 1985. The temperature was -18°C and there was a force 8 gale. It was cold! I am convinced that Marconi did not hear the letters PD (dit-dah-dah-dit dah-dit-dit) coming over the ether. Rather, I suspect, it was the chattering of his, or his assistant's teeth.

Further north along the coast of the Avalon Peninsula we have places like Cuckold's cove; the sexual theme continues. It is true that the names of some towns have been changed. *Famish Gut* became *Fair Haven*. *Gayside* was renamed *Baytona*, but when there was a vote for a change of name it was defeated by the inhabitants of *Dildo*. Unkind comments suggest that they couldn't come up with a suitable alternative. A more astute view might be that tourists spotting the road-sign for the town might be tempted to turn off the trans-Canada Highway just to take a look. It's all good for trade. Who says dat de Newfies are stoopid?

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