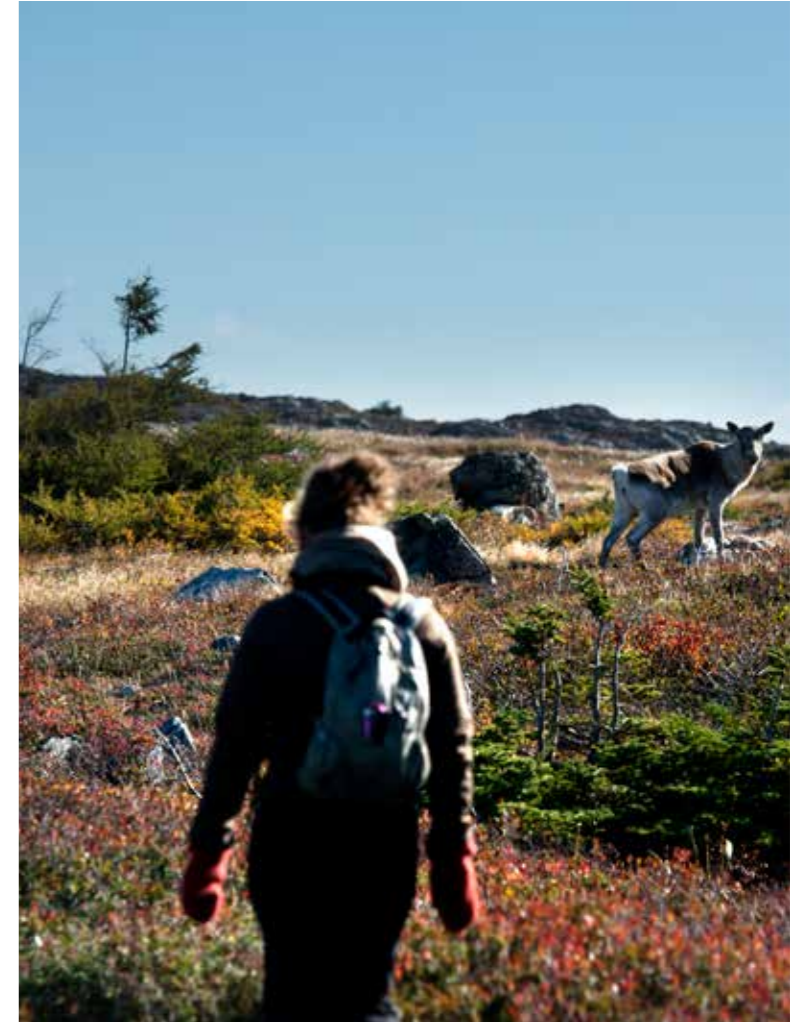


THE SPIRIT OF THE NORTH

A photograph of a modern, illuminated cabin on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean at sunset. The cabin is a simple, rectangular structure with a gabled roof, and its interior lights are on, casting a warm glow. The ocean is visible in the background, with a sunset sky transitioning from orange to blue. The foreground shows the dark, rocky terrain of the cliff.

Overlooking the North Atlantic, on Canada's remote eastern tip, lies the windswept idyll of Fogo Island. Celebrating traditional crafts, wild foods, socially conscious ideals, and clean, modern architecture - the rocky, sub-arctic outcropping bears a remarkable similarity with the Nordic region.

TEXT BY LINDA BROWNE
PHOTOGRAPHY ALEX FRADKIN AND RENÉ SYNNEVÅG



Fogo Island isn't the kind of place in which one arrives by accident. It takes intention and planning to get here. First, you must find your way to Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada's most easterly province. With its own time zone and an English dialect so distinct that it has its own dictionary, Newfoundland's colourful reputation seems well deserved. A place that Irish writer Tim Pat Coogan once famously opined as being the most Irish place in the world outside Ireland, the province is a curious patchwork of culture, history and folklore.

Mysterious Viking longhouses were discovered at Newfoundland's northernmost point, L'Anse aux Meadows, in 1960, by the Norwegian husband and wife archaeologist team, Dr. Anne Stine Ingstad and Dr. Helge Ingstad. They traced the island's Viking heritage back to the 11th century - surprising evidence that the first Europeans in North America had actually been Scandinavian. Irish and English settlers arrived during the 16th century, and today you can still hear a gentle Irish lilt in the voices of Newfoundlanders.

Once you land on Fogo Island, it doesn't take long to realize you're somewhere a little bit, different. Fogo seems a place out of time. With a population of 2,500 people inhabiting its 10 small communities, there are no malls nor identical subdivisions that seem to

sprout like weeds around Canada's larger centres. This is a place that values conversation over commerce, where neighbours look out for one another and where locking your doors is an oddity.

Sprinkled all around Fogo Island are wharves lined with crab pots and lobster traps. Fishing stages, with their red ochre sheds, jut out into the water. Some cling desperately to the barren rock, refusing to let go, while others seem to drunkenly balance on wooden stilts. They are so common that they've almost become synonymous with the place. Many of them have a single white dot painted upon the door, which traditionally acted as a beacon, helping fisherman to navigate their way in the dark.

Cod was once king here. It is the very foundation upon which Fogo was built and sustained generations for centuries. But by the 1960s, years of overfishing had finally started to catch up and in 1992, a moratorium on cod fishing was called. The populations of outport communities like Fogo (which had a population of about 5,500 prior to the ban) have been dwindling ever since. But Fogo, unlike so many other former fishing communities in Newfoundland, has reason to be hopeful in recent years, thanks to one woman.

Zita Cobb, 58, grew up in the small Fogo village, Joe Batt's Arm, with her parents and six brothers. There was no running water, electricity

or paved roads, and at the time, Fogo was divided along community and religious lines. Kind, eloquent, and as down to earth as they come, Cobb says that she grew up “exceptionally local”, not even venturing into nearby village Tilting (just five kilometres away) until she was 13. She left her home at 16 and studied business in Ottawa, eventually working her way up in the technology industry in the US and Europe. When she retired at 42, she had made millions and spent the next four years sailing around the world.

Although she could have gone anywhere, Cobb decided to move home to try and reverse Fogo’s fortune. In 2003, with her brothers Tony and Alan, she founded the Shorefast Foundation, a charitable organization that’s using a unique blend of social entrepreneurship and the arts to revive Fogo’s economy, while helping to preserve its heritage and culture. Profits from all of the organisations projects are reinvested back into the community. The Shorefast Foundation takes its name from the line and mooring that attaches a cod trap to the

up to Brimstone Head, which pushes up through the earth like a giant grey fist. And it’s a good day for it - Newfoundland’s infamous RDF (rain, drizzle and fog) is nowhere to be seen.

Near the base of the hill is a lone berry picker, clutching a white plastic jug while crouching down amongst the swaying yellow and green grasses. “No blueberries the year,” she says, which in Newfoundland means they are neither big nor plentiful enough to be counted. “The partridgeberries aren’t ripe yet. I’m not really out to pick berries,” she adds, “just out for a stroll.”

The syrupy smell of the surrounding marshes is earthy and sweet. Roots twist and turn throughout the soil like a circulatory system that binds the people to this place. I make my way to the top of the hill, as another group comes down. “It’s not windy at all up there,” one of them jokes with a grin, but it’s soon clear that the astounding views are well worth the gale force winds.

The syrupy smell of the surrounding marshes is earthy and sweet. Roots twist and turn throughout the soil like a circulatory system that binds the people to this place.

shore - a perfect metaphor for the bond between people and place that is so evident here.

The crown jewel of this island is the Fogo Island Inn, the brainchild of Cobb. Perched atop the lichen-covered rocks, the striking X-shaped building stands boldly at the ocean’s edge, so close you can almost taste the salty sea spray.

The inn, which opening in 2013, is designed by renowned architect Todd Saunders, who grew up in nearby in Gander, Newfoundland. For the past 20 years, he has lived and worked in Bergen, Norway, where his firm, Saunders Architects, is based. He is steadily building up a reputation for his work, largely because of his projects for Fogo island, The Huffington Post called him one of the “5 Greatest Architects Under 50”, alongside Bjarne Ingels and Joshua Prince-Ramus.

Saunders incorporated the skills and knowledge of local carpenters and craftspeople into his design of the Fogo Island Inn, using locally-sourced material like black spruce. The inn’s structure symbolises a harmonious dance between contemporary and traditional design traditions. One end of the Inn stands on stilts, harkening back to those iconic fishing stages that are peppered around the island, but the stilts are also an attempt not to damage to the delicate coastal ecosystem.

Just a stone’s throw away from the Inn, blueberries grow amongst the caribou moss on the otherwise barren rocks. Life thrives everywhere here, even in places where it seems it shouldn’t. At the northwest corner of the island, I take the short but steep hike

Fogo Island Arts is a residency-based program started by Cobb and run by the Shorefast Foundation. Here, artists from around the world come to the wilds of Fogo to live, work and be inspired. And if the view wasn’t enough, the four studios, also designed by Saunders, are well worth the long journey to the island. Artists are given the keys to both a saltbox house, traditional of the Newfoundland fishermen, as well as an artists’ studio. These stand out in Fogo’s subarctic, windswept landscape, like otherworldly puzzle pieces that help tell the story of this place. Saunders has not let a single detail slip. Each studio is completely off the grid and fills with light during the day, while a wood-burning stove brings an element of coziness to the long winter nights.

Toronto-based, Canadian-Iranian artist, Abbas Akhavan, is a rising star in the Canadian art world. He first came to Fogo in 2013 and has now returned for the second part of his residency. The island, he says, ticks on its own time.

“I was scared,” he says, remembering his first time in Fogo, three years ago. “I had never been to a rural place like this, at least not with a two-month commitment. I was taken aback by the isolation.”

That fear soon gave way to a newfound sense of freedom. “Last time I was here, I had a really intense experience of serenity. I was smiling a lot by myself, sitting alone, and being like, ‘I don’t know if I’ve found it or I’ve lost it. But I’m definitely in something that I’ve never experienced.’ I’m just happy for no reason and I feel this calmness,” he says.



Akhavan knows of several other visiting artists who have since made Fogo their permanent home. He too, would like to return. "I keep talking about this place having a different kind of gravity. And it really is palpable, but only once you spend enough time here," he says.

"The landscape is gentle, but exciting, because it changes really rapidly. The boulders are different colours - so there's a visual element that's unlike anywhere else I've seen," he adds. "It really is a recalibrating experience to be here."

When I arrive at the Fogo Island Inn, the rain is falling so softly it almost looks like snow. If there's one thing that's consistent about Newfoundland, it's the inconsistency of the weather. Staff give me

our culture is a response to that place," she says. "The way we are as Newfoundlanders, we celebrate survival, not success. Because it's been a friggin' hard go to survive out here, clinging to these rocks," she adds emphatically, her Newfoundland accent slipping in. For Cobb, globalization has given rise to a rootlessness that is leading more people to seek a sense of a place.

As part of her efforts to counteract that disconnection, Cobb's Shorefast Foundation works with locals to weave the very fabric and history of the island into the quilts, hooked mats and knitted cushions that are found throughout the Inn. Over the past six years, Cobb has also invited outside artists and designers to collaborate with Fogo artisans. The result has been well-designed

"The way we are as Newfoundlanders, we celebrate survival, not success. Because it's been a friggin' hard go to survive out here, clinging to these rocks."

a hot cup of tea and advise me to go warm up by the crackling wood-burning stove. A colourful, cotton crochet mat adorns the floor. I feel as though I'm visiting my grandmother's house rather than a five-star inn. It's this legendary local hospitality that Cobb wants to share with each guest that comes through the door.

The view from the inn's floor-to-ceiling dining room windows, immediately commands attention. It feels like I am on a ship in the middle of the ocean. Staring straight ahead, all I can see is water and sky. If you're here in spring, you may see humpbacks breaching right in front of the inn, or icebergs as they are carried south from Greenland by the Labrador current.

"Tonight, you're going to find out what Fogo island tastes like," says chef Ian Sheridan, who is part of a four-person-strong kitchen brigade. They take turns presenting dishes, each one more delicious than the last. "We like to have those who make the food, serve the food," Sheridan says. My plate is adorned with local wild berries and filled with fresh vegetables from local farms, as well as chanterelle mushrooms that were foraged that very morning. They try to keep the food as local as possible, Sheridan explains, "but when we have to go away from home, we try to stay as close as we can." The whole grain sourdough, is accompanied by cold-pressed canola oil from Prince Edward Island and apple cider vinegar from Nova Scotia, which are Newfoundland's neighboring coastal provinces.

When Cobb joins me at the inn afterwards, she elaborates on her connection to her home. "We are formed by the land that we're from, and

textiles and pieces of furniture, each informed by an aspect of the island's past.

Just down the road at the Fogo Island Shop, housed in the old Society of United Fisherman's Hall, the smell of wood hangs heavy in the air and the sound of whirring blades ring out like a discordant orchestra. Head of design and development at Shorefast, Kingman Brewster (a Vermont native who now calls Fogo home), gestures towards a punt chair - perhaps one of the inn's most popular pieces and a nod to the island's boat building heritage. Designed by Montreal-based Éline Fortin, the chair takes its name from the small wooden boats that are a symbol of outport Newfoundland. Makers employ the same traditional boat building techniques in its construction, using naturally curved pieces of wood from juniper and spruce trees that grow in the surrounding bog.

"That's a very old way of building boats that got replaced in most parts of the world with steam bending," Brewster says. "But here, it lasted a lot longer. I think there are a lot of ways of making things that are very specific to Fogo island, because of the isolation."

On my final morning, I awaken to a symphony of screeching seagulls and the gentle murmur of the sea. If there's one thing that Cobb wants visitors to take away from here, it's "the feeling like they have been given back to themselves" she tells me. As I leave the island, driving past the saltbox houses and old boats lying in the grass like the bleached bones of whales, I remember Cobb's words and I feel myself smiling, as a wave of calm washes over me.

