



A Gravel Odyssey: Riding Labrador

By Geoff Stevenson
(First of three instalments)

We've all caught a bunch of ferries. Heck, what could be easier? We ride/drive to Swartz Bay, pay for our ticket, line up and are generally on our way in short order.

But this ferry would be different. First off, I was booking it in March for an August trip. Second, we were to board it about 6,500km from Victoria.

And, it involved big bucks: We'd pay about \$750 each (including our bikes). Most challenging, it sailed just once a week: At 1500 on Wednesdays.

Some careful planning was clearly called for. And, so began Ernie and Geoff's Great Trip to Labrador.

But let's start at the beginning (more on that 44-hour ferry ride later).

Ernie Lalonde and I had talked about riding



The elegant 140-foot German ketch Asgard was an imposing sight at the Goose Bay government dock.

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Next Breakfast/Brunch

Saturday, November 4



WHERE:

Spitfire Bar & Grill
9681 Willingdon Road
by Victoria Airport
North Saanich, BC

WHEN:

9:30 am at the restaurant



Gravel was the goal for these explorers



In North West Harbor, not far from Goose Bay, the old Hudsons Bay fort has been turned into a museum.

Labrador for years, but things kept getting in the way. Eventually, as we kept researching the subject, it became clear that the Labrador Highway would soon be all paved. With no gravel left to challenge us, what would be the point of even going?

We knew that, for the summer of 2017, there would still be about 300km of gravel remaining in Labrador itself. But there was more: Since, the only way in or out is through Quebec, there would be an additional 150km of gravel in that province, too.

With almost 500km of dirt road remaining, we reckoned it was now or never. So I took to my computer screen for several days last spring and started booking motels in Newfoundland, Labrador and Quebec. And, of course, that ferry.

After that, we were able to relax for a few months (fitting in a two-week ride on some of Idaho's gravel roads – as a sort of practice session for Labrador).

We left for Labrador July 31 and figured to be away for a month. I'd take my 2014 Honda CRF250L and

Ernie would be aboard his Suzuki DR650. Of course, actually riding there on a 250 (with a small sheet of plywood masquerading as a seat) was unrealistic, so we loaded both bikes in the box of my trusty Ford Ranger.

After five days and about 5,000km, we parked the truck at Ernie's brother-in-law's cottage in St Roch de Richelieu, about 60km northeast of Montreal. Now the two-wheel adventure could begin!

Mind you, we were still a long way from Labrador. The closest point of



Ferry ride saw bikes loaded by crane



Houses like these in Churchill Falls rent for \$65/month (including utilities) – so long as you work for the power company.

approach would have been to ride to Baie Comeau, QC., then head north on Quebec Highway 389 to the Labrador border, a trip of around 1,200km.

However, we'd decided to cross Labrador from the east – which is where that expensive ferry ride comes in.

From St. Roch, we rode about 1,600km to Natashquan, the end of the pavement on Highway 138, which runs along the North Shore of the St Lawrence. (This highway continues as a gravel road to Kegaska, some 50km farther on, and while there are a number of ports with some short roads of their own, there's no road link between Kegaska and Blanc Sablon, in the

southeast corner of Quebec)

Riding to Natashquan turned out to be a good shakedown for the more serious riding in Labrador, as we stayed in Sainte Anne de Beupre, Baie Comeau and Havre St Pierre before reaching Natashquan on Aug. 8, ready to board the ferry the next day.

The Bella Desgagnes, a state-of-the-art ship a little smaller than a big BC ferry, pulled into Natashquan right on schedule next morning and we rode our bikes into a container on the dock. All freight on the Bella went on and off in containers: Two motorbikes or one car/light truck in each steel box.

A German-built crane on the Bella (115-foot arm, 40 tons safe working

load) handled dozens of containers with ease. The operator's skill was impressive as he stacked the containers higher and higher on the aft deck at each port we visited, all the while somehow keeping track of what was to be unloaded at the next port and not blocking those containers in.

The Bella was built in Croatia and launched in 2013. Her steel hull can break some ice (although she doesn't normally sail for about three months in the winter). She's 330 feet long and can carry 381 passengers and 39 crew.

We had a cabin for two, with plenty of storage space for riding suits, helmets and boots, and our own bathroom/shower.

Our tickets included seven meals; I thought the food was good value (with three choices for a main course at most meals), linen tablecloths and attentive service. (We could have paid less and bought individual meals in the ship's cafeteria, but the dining room food was both better and healthier).

The weather was perfect for our sea journey. Although we were still technically in the Gulf of St Lawrence, the river was now roughly 300km wide – and we may as well have been in the open ocean.

There was a swell of perhaps 6-8 feet for most of our trip – essentially flat calm in these waters.



Economy hard hit in fishing industry

We felt virtually none of it, as the Bella steamed serenely east.

In addition to its passengers in their cozy cabins, the Bella is also a workboat. We stopped at six ports before reaching Blanc Sablon, QC., two days east of Natashquan, and we had time to go ashore several times (we docked at two ports in the dead of night; there, we sensibly stayed in bed).

Harrington Harbour, on an island about 200km from Natashquan, had been on my bucket list for years – although I’ve no idea why. It didn’t disappoint, either.

We docked in brilliant sunshine and were free to walk around for close to two hours. There are no roads in Harrington Harbor, just a series of boardwalks that accommodate quads for most of the year and snowmobiles in the winter.

As the name suggests, this is really a corner of English Canada in deepest Quebec. The town (population now 255) was founded in 1871 by fishermen from Newfoundland (then a British colony).

Like just about every other region in this part of the world, its glory days are long gone. While fishermen were plundering the cod, there was serious money in Harrington Harbor; today, alas, the commercial cod fishery is no more, although there are tightly



Rain greeted us as we rode into Labrador – and as we left. This is the welcome/farewell sign on the Labrador-Quebec border.

regulated fisheries for lobster, crab and shrimp.

Later in the trip, we spent an entertaining hour with a fishboat owner in Port aux Choix, Nfld. He’d buried his 83-year-old father that morning and was anxious to talk.

We asked how the local economy could possibly work, given the limited fishing these days. He introduced us to the 10-42 lifestyle: You work for 10 weeks, then collect Unemployment Insurance for the remaining 42.

(Fisherman Larry also asked our



The giant Manic Cinq dam north of Baie Comeau is a concrete buttress design.

advice about his financial future. He reckoned his 55-foot boat was worth perhaps \$250,000 and his shrimp licence another million. Ernie and I agreed that he should sell both ASAP, while they still had some value. What's the future of fishing in Newfoundland: Who knows?) (The 10-42 lifestyle seemed to be

common in the places we visited in rural Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador. On Quebec's North Shore, for example, we rode through dozens of small villages. They were universally neat with well-maintained houses – but little evidence of jobs for the locals.)

To be continued

FOR SALE

Factory rider's handbooks for BMW K bikes

Both are around a hundred pages. One for K100/K100RT, the other for K100RS and the rare K1. \$20 each, \$35 for the pair. Never used; in perfect condition.

**Call Geoff Stevenson
250-652-9127.**

Club 2017 Event Schedule

Date	Event	Location
Saturday, November 4, 2017	Monthly Gathering	Spitfire Bar & Grill
Sunday, December 3, 2017	Monthly Gathering	1550 Fifteen Fifty's Restaurant
Monday, January 1, 2018	TROC	Island View Beach & Bob's House
Saturday, January 6, 2018	Monthly Gathering	Cherries Breakfast Bistro