

# The Trans-Labrador Highway is the perfect road trip for right now

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disappearing up around a broad-shouldered headland. On the other side? So much. Sunken galleons and postcard-perfect lighthouses and some of the best Basque cooking you'll find on this side of the Atlantic. All of it in one of the least-explored corners of Atlantic Canada – now, finally, connected with the rest of the country by smooth, paved highway

Just this summer, workers completed the project of fully paving the Trans-Labrador Highway (TLH), which took a quarter-century, and cost almost \$1-billion. Stretching some 1,100 kilometres, it means that motorists can now enjoy a hassle-free drive all the way up from the Quebec border (or from the Newfoundland ferry, in the east), and across this wild territory.

Labrador forms the mainland part of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. More than twice the size of England, it's home to fewer than 30,000 people, but maintains a distinct identity, even from the rest of the province. The flag, a blue, white and green tricolour with a sprig of spruce on the canton, hangs everywhere. People sing their unofficial anthem, *Ode to Labrador*.

The TLH mostly traverses massive, wide-open spaces. But I'll see just a small portion of it, in a part of Labrador known as The Straits. Across the Strait of Belle Isle from Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula, the road passes through small villages, such as L'Anse-au-Loup and West Sainte Modeste, named by French and Basque whalers and fishermen who began plying these waters more than five centuries ago. By the time I check into my hotel in Forteau, the wind is whistling off the water.

"Labrador is so huge, and so harsh, but we have a delicate side, too," says Chef Ange Dumaresque, as she serves up an eight-course Basque meal in the warm dining room at the Florian. Outside big windows, the cliffs and hills and Forteau beach begin to fade in the last



garlic and onion and smoked paprika, plus a combination of local spices such as dill, fennel, and smoked Atlantic sea salt. She tells me that she draws on the local environment for both ideas and ingredients, foraging for fireweed and alexanders – a wild flowering plant that tastes a bit like a combination of celery and asparagus. “I’ll walk the beach, or up to the lighthouse, and think, ‘What inspires me today?’”

I feel a little inspired, too, when I spend an afternoon at the nearby Point Amour Lighthouse, postcard-perfect, perched 33 metres atop limestone cliffs. Inside, interpreters explain that it opened in 1858, built from hand-hewn stoned transported by horse and buggy. Its light still helps guide ships through a busy shipping lane to Europe, and, after huffing and puffing up the spiral staircase, I marvel at the views from the lantern room, 360 degrees of glass.

Back on the TLH, I drive an hour and descend into Red Bay, a tiny, charming fishing village of fewer than 200. Here, bright houses climb up a green hill, away from a calm harbour. But Phillip Bridle, a guide with Parks Canada, says that its sleepiness today belies the dynamism of this place in the 16th century. Called Gran Baya by the Basque, UNESCO has noted that this is the earliest and most complete testimony to European whaling, and the site includes the remains of ovens, wharves, living quarters and cooperages used to produce oil, as well as a cemetery. The bay is the permanent resting place for at least seven shipwrecks.

“When you think about it, it just blows you away,” says Bridle. “This work fed the economy of the whole world. The oil from here lit the lamps of Europe.” I tour the on-site museum and a new replica of a *chalupa*, a small, fast craft used for hunting. After a lunch of the legendary cod and chips next door (made with a secret recipe the owners will never divulge), it was back to the TLH.

Isaac Smith cottage (built between 1830 and 1850, a traditional biscuit box house), eating meals in a dining room that was once the town's salmon storehouse, and mixing with the local residents, who maintain small summer homes here. Over the next few days, I went cod fishing, baked bread, and drank and danced in the small, second-floor pub called the Loft. Hang around long enough, and the older guys will tell you about when they had to chop the wood to heat their homes and transport it by dog sled, not so long ago.

Too soon, I'm turning around on the TLH, headed back to the Newfoundland ferry. I had only driven a few hundred kilometres of this road, and it left me wanting more. A good thing, really. Because it means I will be back, ready to slide behind the wheel, and tour the remaining vastness of the Trans-Labrador Highway.



you'll reach it via Quebec provincial highway 389, which runs north from the St. Lawrence River at Baie-Comeau.

**Eat:** Enjoy fresh, local cuisine, from Basque meals to local favourites at the [Florian Hotel](#) in Forteau. Seafood is a strong point, and you can stay the night in their comfortable rooms, which include luxuries like bathrobes and spa pillows. [theflorianhotel.com](http://theflorianhotel.com)

**Stay:** Set on a small island, Battle Harbour feels like a world away. Wooden walkways connect the historic buildings and lead down to the waterfront, where fishing boats and pleasure craft arrive and depart. Activities here are simple, and wonderful, from berry-picking to hikes and fishing trips. Rates are inclusive of meals, which are eaten at set times in the dining room – dishes include moose stew, halibut, and other local delicacies. [battleharbour.com](http://battleharbour.com)

*The writer travelled as a guest of Tourism Newfoundland and Labrador, which did not review or approve this article.*

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