

LABRADOR

A tall, precarious stack of dark, mossy rocks is the central focus, built on a rocky outcrop. The stack consists of several large, flat, and irregularly shaped stones, some of which are covered in green moss. The background shows a vast, green, hilly landscape under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is a natural, rugged landscape.

**GETTING ALONG IN
THE BIG LAND!**

Winston C. White

Labrador

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By Winston C. White

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Foreword

Nain, Labrador, NL.

September 2, 2003

For many years, all kinds of travellers and adventurers have been coming to Labrador. Some of those who came to live and work here have written good accounts of their life experiences. Others who came as adventurers, tourists or workers have also recorded their experiences. Many of the accounts are rare or difficult to find.

You may be curious as to why I have written this guide to working, living or just visiting our awesome land. Every now and then over the past twenty years or so, invariably someone would remark that they wished they had more information on what to expect or prepare for when they arrive in this great territory. With that in mind, I decided to put together a little guide book. It started with the intention of a small booklet of about 15 to 20 pages, but when I got going, I had trouble stopping. Realizing that there is so much more to add and also realizing the rapid changes that take place as one writes something like this, it seems best to have an option of updating this work with other editions in the future.

My experience of travel is like many local-born people of my generation who strapped on their snowshoes, lashed up their “komatiks” or sledges and harnessed their Labrador Husky dogs, pulled on the oars to paddle the “punt,” sculled or sailed small boats, took the coastal steamer from one place to another or stepped aboard different types of aircraft. The information and tips in this guide come not just from my experiences but from many other Labrador men and women, many of whom are living today and others who have left us with accounts of their great and challenging experiences.

Although some of the events described here are horrific or have sad endings, my hope is that these will not deter people from coming to experience and enjoy the beauty this Big Land has in store. This is intended to help you as a visitor to this land, whether you are a construction worker, tourist, a professional or even one of our own residents. My hope is that it will enhance and add to the other travel information already available in print and other forms. I hope it will help make your stay a safe, enjoyable and memorable treasure in your life.

With best wishes, Winston White.

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ONE

Labrador – “The Big Land!”

Sitting between Hudson Strait and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Labrador covers nearly 300,000 square kilometres of spectacular scenery. In the north is found Arctic tundra, or the Barren Lands as many of the local residents call it. But barren is just a word applied to an area where there are no trees. In many respects it is a misnomer. Everyone who has had the treat of striding across some of this area and seen the myriad of flowers blooming in our brief summer, or been startled by a nesting ptarmigan, or seen the magnificent king caribou, agrees that the land is by no means barren. The awesome Torngat Mountains, the Kiglaipait and Kamajet group protect this area from the direct fury of the North Atlantic Ocean and the restless Labrador Sea.

Running at a right-angle to our coast, the Mealy Mountains can be seen from Happy Valley-Goose Bay or Cartwright. Another, smaller range of beautiful land lies between Makkovik and Rigolet – the Benedict Mountains. Inland, northeast of Churchill Falls, we can see the Red Wine Mountains, where a small herd of caribou has become known as the “Red Wine herd.” The Torngat and Mealy ranges will someday be national park areas.

South of the Barren Lands lie the inland tundra and taiga plains of string bogs, wetlands, marshes and black spruce forests. The pale

green shade of the caribou moss lichen is Labrador's own "lawn" and is the natural blanket of this immense land. Integral to the mixture are the pristine blue waters of sparkling lake and mighty rivers. Seventy-five percent of Labrador is covered in fresh water.

Sandy beaches, rocky outcrops, eskers and boulder-strewn valleys and hillsides are some of the footprints left from the last ice age 10,000 years ago. Nearly a thousand miles, or 1,600 kilometres of coastline is carved into hundreds of beautiful bays and long, deep fjords whose walls tower overhead two and three thousand feet!

Off the outer ring of islands along the coast, gigantic icebergs are grounded on the ocean floor. They are too big to continue their trip south. Here they stay and wait for the sun to melt them down by several hundred thousand tons so that they can float and move on. This is why our Labrador Sea is also called "Iceberg Alley."

Our rocks are among the oldest on earth. In the Nain area, geologists have dated them back to thirteen hundred million years ago, and



With your foot firmly planted on a high ridge the landscape and view unfolds as far as the eye can see.

in the immediate area of the community of Hopedale, the rocks are nearly twice as old...in excess of twenty-five hundred million years!

Characteristic of Labrador is Labradorite, a beautiful stone that displays magnificent shades of greens, blues, orange, bronze, or yellow. The magic of Labradorite is best viewed when you dip the stone in water, and let light rays reflect off thin layers to intensify the colours. I have always been told that the Northern Lights come from Labradorite.

There is an old, true legend that says that Northern Lights were once imprisoned in our rocks. A powerful Inuk shaman wandered over the lights reflecting from the stone and with a mighty blow of his spear he freed the lights. Some of the lights didn't make it out of the stone, which is why we have Labradorite today. Labradorite is thirteen hundred million years old.

Another of our resident rocks, called Ramah chert is around 2,000 million years old. Ramah chert is another marvellous stone. We have



Labradorite quarry at Ten Mile Bay, near Nain. Photo courtesy of Leroy Metcalfe.

used it for thousands of years for arrow and spear tips as well as cutting tools. It is very strong and does not crack easily like other stones. Other native tribes learned about its qualities and chert was traded far beyond the Labrador Peninsula. It has been uncovered as far south as the eastern seaboard of the United States. I once read in *National Geographic* about a surgeon in the USA who has been using a scalpel made of Ramah chert. Under a microscope, the edge of the blade made of Ramah chert is smooth while the cutting edge of today's finest stainless steel is pitted and jagged.

When you hike along our shores or over boulder fields you may see soapstone and serpentine for our artists and carvers to shape, and, like Harry Martin says in a song, "release the spirits locked inside." They are the stones used by ancient and modern-day First Nations peoples of this land.

There's another story that says that the Great Creator made this earth in six days and spent the seventh day tossing rocks at the area



Young people, like Jake White and Matt Thompson, love to dig for clams in our clean beaches and cold salt waters.

where we are today. If that's true, a pretty good job was done for us. Among the rocks we have found iron ore, nickel, graphite, dolomite, and rare earth minerals. There are gemstones like sapphires and pretty soon someone is going to stumble over a diamond or strike gold. Mother Nature keeps them hidden in those valleys, hills and beyond the limit of the eye.

Then there are other industries like hydroelectric power, timber harvesting, fishing, and tourism. In "Iceberg Alley" our offshore crab, shrimp, and scallop resources are a bright hope in a changing fishery. Since the king cod stock of Labrador was wiped away from our shores, we continue to live on sea-run trout and Arctic char. Swimming in our cold, clear ocean waters, these fish provide us with a healthy wild food that entices visitors to come back for more.

Other species like clams, whelks, and mussels lie on a seabed floor above deposits of natural gas. Our storehouse of natural resources and the stunning beauty of this land are attracting other people into our once-remote region. But our greatest resource is our people and all you have to do is ask any person for help or direction. You can be sure you will be treated kindly and in a very friendly manner. You will be safe in this region.

TWO

The Original Caretakers

The Innu (pronounced e-noo) and Inuit (e-noo-weet) made the first human footprints on this land. Inuit were until recent years referred to by white people as Eskimo and Innu have been called Naskaupi and Montagnais Indians. Labrador Inuit speak Inuttut, (pronounced e-noot-tut) their ancestral language. It is also called Inuktitut (pronounced e-noot-tee-tue). Innu speak Innu-eimun* (pronounced e-noo e-moone).

Archaeologists and local people with a good eye are constantly finding signatures of our cultures that date from recent times back to five thousand years or more. It is not absolutely clear which of the two First Nations was the first to arrive in Labrador. It may have been the Innu through traces of people whom archaeologists have designated as Maritime Archaic.

Inuit have also inhabited Labrador for a long time. Small oval sod hut remains that Inuit used as their houses have been unearthed. The dwellings had a floor set about a foot deep with flat stone lower walls. A whalebone and driftwood roof frame was covered with a combination of materials such as whale baleen and sod. Heating and cooking stones were set near the entrance and an elevated sleeping and resting platform was situated at the rear and around part of the sides.



This Innu Man, his wife and two youth arrive from the land at my father's trading post at Voisey's Bay. Dad took this photo in 1930. The man has his gun barrel reeved through his snowshoes. The boy carries the axe and snowshoes and the lady has her snowshoes on the toboggan behind her.

For travel in drifting snow, fog or reduced visibility, Inuit erected Inuksuit. Inuksuit (plural of Inuksuk) are made of stones and some resemble a person standing on the land. The word means “thing that can act in the place of a human being.” They have helped save the lives of many hunters and travelling families in bad weather. They showed the way to travellers a long way from home. They showed where food was stored on the land in a cache nearby. The Inuksuk also alerted people of a dangerous place or indicated where a significant thing happened so that people should act respectfully in that area. Sometimes Inuksuit would be placed in a row, which would lead caribou to a place more accessible to the hunters.

Every Inuksuk is a strong connection to the land. It is built on the land, it tells about the land, and is made of the land. Inuksuit built with sighting holes in their middle are used for navigation. Each one points to another one farther along the route. By peeking through the small opening toward the next Inuksuk, a traveller is guided in the correct direction. These large Inuksuit can be seen on the distant



This stone cairn protected stored food from foxes and wolves.

ridge and smaller ones are set up in between so that one can keep in contact with them in severe and blinding snow.

New Inuksuit can be built to mark our presence today but the old ones should never be touched. Every Inuksuk is different and unique. It can be small or large, a single rock put in place, several rocks balanced on each other, flat stones stacked, or boulders placed in a pile. The type of Inuksuk depends on the type of stones available close to the site of building.

Inuit are to be respectful of Inuksuit. There is a traditional law my mother spoke about that forbids damaging or destroying Inuksuit in any way. She said there is an old belief that any one who destroys an Inuksuk would be certain to have his or her life cut shorter.

The Innu used similar piles of stone to serve as markers and as they tended to camp where there were trees they also marked tree-tops. Both cultures lived and gathered food from the land and sea around the islands and bays of this northern land. Innu used and lived on the land where Labrador City and Wabush are today.

Historians and archaeologists claim that Norse people were the first strangers to visit Inuit and Innu people. It is also said that the first Europeans to actually settle in Labrador may have been around the early 1700's. In his book "Labrador Missionary" Rev. Armenius Young recalls that he was told by people in the Rigolet area that the first two Europeans to settle in the Groswater Bay area may have been a Mr. Phippard and Mr. Newhook.



This Inuksuk stands in front of our old homestead at Kauk Harbour, near Nain where my father had one of his two trading posts. His first trading post was established at Voisey's Bay in 1913.

From then on, the occasional servant of the Hudson's Bay Company or of some other trading company stationed in Labrador would decide to stay here and become independent fur traders and businessmen. Other workers married local women and took up trapping and fishing as their livelihood, and by the early 1800's there was a slow but steady increase of Europeans settling along our coast and inland bays. It is from these enterprising and hardworking people came the Labrador trapper who traversed the land and into the far western reaches of the height of land where Churchill Falls, Wabush and Labrador City are located today. Starting as young as twelve or thirteen, these hardy souls went through ice, snow, rain, and winds, venturing up to 500 miles and more from their homes on the coast.

These Labrador trappers turned to the great rivers like the Eagle, Sandhill, Alexis, Pinware, St. Paul, Nascaupi, Grand, Kanairatok, Adlatok, and Kenamau as their highways. From their little home-

steads they paddled canoes over the waters of the Ashwanipi, Atakonak, Lac Joseph, Ossokmanuan, Michikamau, Sandgrit, Lobstick and Flour lakes until cold weather froze the waters. Then they transferred their loads to sleds and toboggans and on hand-fashioned snowshoes they trapped valuable furs to sell at trading posts. The animals of the land and the fish provided a source of income on which they supported and raised their families. They were a remarkable breed of men who learned the ways of survival from the Inuit and Innu.



Ancient Inuit tentring at the Iron Strand, near Ryan's Bay, northern Labrador.

With the arrival of a wage economy at the start of the Second World War and the construction of the enormous Goose Bay Air Base, many of these men gave up trapping while others maintained the tradition. By the mid-1970's there were few full-time trappers still making a living but those who had left felt the emptiness of working a wage job. Some went back trapping but most kept themselves from going insane in the nine-to-five world with the memories

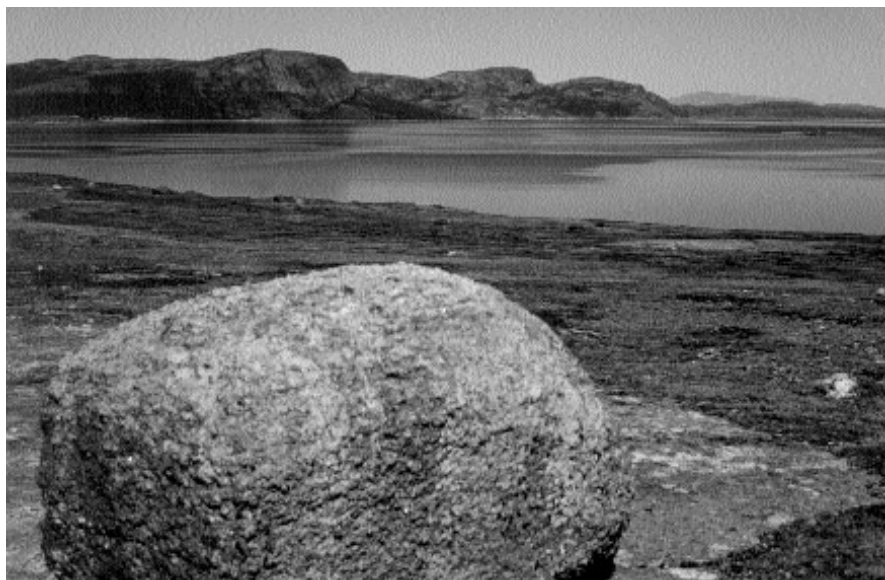
of the better times of an otherwise very hard way to make a living. You will find these men of rare breed epitomized in the songs and poems of Byron Chaulk, Leslie Pardy, Harry Martin and many other writers and recording artists.

We all used canoes, kayaks, snowshoes, and our trusty dog teams for transportation. Every Labrador family had a number of dogs that faithfully hauled the heavy loads of provision, people, and firewood to keep us alive. This amazing hauling dog is described and looked upon by those who owned and used them as an awesome creature capable of such endurance that it actually boggles the mind. Labradorians today, like Toby Anderson and Hubert Groves of Makkovik, are among our people who last used dog teams during the arrival of the snowmobile.

My father and mother, Richard and Judy Pauline White, like everyone else up to the arrival of the snowmobile, kept and totally relied upon Labrador hauling dogs all their lives. My father once described life in northern Labrador:

“Perhaps the most important among many duties of the hunter to prepare for a coming winter is the care of his team and equipment, for without his dogs the native is almost helpless. Every driver boasts of the prowess of his team, be it five dogs or a dozen and many are the arguments over the merits of the respective teams. The average team consists of eight dogs and in proportion to its size the dog’s hauling power is wonderful. Its endurance is even more so and teams have often covered eighty miles in one continuous run on a spring day of seventeen hours and after a feed and a night’s rest made the return journey in the same time.

“I have driven fifty miles a day for seven successive days, food was scarce and the dogs were on half-rations, and the last two days without any food! Male dogs are preferred for team owing to non-interruption of their work by breeding. Bitches are also the cause of desperate fights among the team dogs contending for their favours. A bitch, however, is often



Boulder on an island west of Nain. Summer 1999.



Innu tent along the Northwest River road, Spring 1976.



Stay well away from polar bears.



Northwest River highway.