

Exotic Canada NL: Style by the sea on Fogo Island



By Elisa Birnbaum

It's late May and I'm shivering as I follow Zita Cobb up a rocky incline. There's a damp chill in the air and wind is picking up speed as it swirls across the shoreline. Bundled in four layers, I search for my gloves and yank at my hood. This is a place where you are allowed to dream of parkas in the spring. We've come to the town of Tilting, Fogo Island on a tour of the latest addition to its landscape: the Squish studio. One of four artist residencies in the region, it's a project of the innovative Shorefast Foundation, which Cobb designed to help revitalize the economically depressed island.

The bold structure is perched in what appears to be a precarious position overlooking the edge of a large, rocky cliff, with waves lapping at its door. Strikingly beautiful, it seems at once magnificent and vulnerable. We pull ourselves up onto the ledge of the white-washed exterior and peer through the large windows; the equally modern interior is a striking contrast to its natural setting.

The studio was completed a week ago, while Cobb was out of town, so this is the first time she has seen it finished. She exhales, smiles and gazes at the horizon and tumultuous waters. “Maybe we’ve made it too close to the cliff,” she jokes. As we make our way back to the car, Cobb reflects more seriously. “It’s exquisite.”

That it is. And, along with other Shorefast initiatives, it’s generating a lot of excitement. Thanks in large part to Cobb and her creative team, this prototypical Newfoundland outpost is becoming an hot destination. (The New York Times recently ranked the island a must-visit place.)

The otherwise unassuming location off the northeast coast of Newfoundland has a population of 2,700, spread over 11 distinct communities, its 110 square miles surrounded by magnificent craggy rock in shades of gray, brown, ruddy and black.

Traditional saltbox homes in a variety of coloured siding appear to have been dropped haphazardly, with proximity to water their only concern.

And it’s no wonder. Fogo Island was historically rich in cod. In these parts, if you say “fish,” there’s only one kind it can be. Punts — traditional wooden boats — were once as popular as cod were plentiful, red wooden stages and flakes dotted the coastal shores. Fishing was a way of life, of sustenance, of pride until the cod-fishing moratorium was enacted in 1992. To be sure, it’s still a fishing town. Drive the vast rugged expanse today and the outpost mythology is ever-present. But the moratorium spurred waves of emigration, leaving homes deserted in various stages of disrepair and a community at a loss.

The staggering beauty of the place, however, along with residents’ unyielding pride, remains. “Fogo” means fire in Portuguese, and true to its namesake, the island is in the process of reignition led by social entrepreneur Cobb.

Born and bred here, Cobb spent 30-odd years in the U.S. before returning to her hometown five years ago to start the Shorefast Foundation, an organization tasked with revitalizing the local economy. Guided by the belief that the arts are a powerful force for change, the plans are extensive. (Funding comes from a \$16-million investment — \$5-million each from the provincial and federal governments and \$6-million from Cobb herself.)

An artist residency program invites international contemporary artists to live and work in a cultural exchange, with conferences and art projects on the agenda, too. And let’s not forget those artist residencies. Contemporary works of art in their own right, four of six are already standing, completely off-the-grid and uniquely designed with breathtaking views

and a minimalist approach. (Tours are available, but bring good shoes; each studio is strategically located a good walk from town.)

And by this time next year, a 29-room world-class inn will be open on the island. Positioned to attract the tourist with a penchant for adventure and the finer things (rooms will be priced at over \$400), it will feature a spa, heritage library, conference centre, art gallery and e-cinema. Sure, challenges abound, but Cobb's vision is clear. "We need to benchmark ourselves internationally," she says. "Mediocrity has no place here."

Visitors will soon see for themselves. Once here, they can enjoy spectacular trails, including Brimstone Head — one of the four corners of the Earth — or relax at Sandy Cove Beach.

As if its rugged, picture-perfect beauty weren't enough of a draw, Fogo Island's redevelopment is giving it a new lease on life. Some may call the plans risky, even fantastical. But those people haven't spent a day with Zita Cobb.

If You Go

Getting here:

- From St. John's, it's a five-hour drive to Farewell. From there, it's a 50-minute ferry ride to Fogo Island. Gander gets you closer, at an hour's drive to Farewell.

To do:

- Arrange a tour of the artist residences by visiting artscorpfogoisland.ca. Three new structures will open on June 23, and all are welcome to the launch event.
- If you visit in July, you can catch The Great Fogo Island Punt Race To There And Back, which celebrates the boat used here for 300 years of transport and industry. This year's boatstravaganza is on July 26.

fogoislandregatta.com

Where to eat:

- Nicole's Café is a cozy spot for traditional fare and a delicious cup of Joe. Try the "Cod Pot Cod," the heavenly partridgeberry scone or berry-infused ice cream down the street at Growlers.

Where to stay:

- Your best bed in Fogo is the B&Bs. Try Peg's (709) 266-2392; Penny's Vacation Home (709) 627-3358; or Foley's Place (709) 658-7244.
 - The Fogo Island Inn is scheduled to open in 2012.
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