

FARAWAY LAND

When thousands of travellers were stranded on this wild island, locals opened their hearts and homes... and a classic tale of newfound friendship was created.

STORY: Jocelyn Pride MAIN PHOTO: Shawn Hudson





Even the word Newfoundland conjures up mystique and intrigue. Together with Labrador, this rugged island forms Canada's easternmost province. Along its shores cling old fishing villages with brightly coloured cottages. Its dense forests teem with wildlife and its vast tracts of ancient granite have earned it the nickname "The Rock", also a fitting metaphor for its hardy people.

Newfoundlanders share a gritty mix of indigenous, French, English, Scottish and Irish heritage. European settlement dates back to 1497 when Italian-born explorer John Cabot claimed the land for King Henry VII of England. With the promise of plentiful cod, a steady flow of immigrants



While you're in Gander

Take a tour with the locals to learn all about the inspiration behind the Come from Away musical. The three-hour showcase takes in the airport and the North Atlantic Aviation Museum. The aptly named Beyond Words Tours run from May to September.



You can also become an honorary Newfoundlander by being 'screeched in', a local custom that involves drinking a shot of rum, kissing a cod and other fun stuff.

Hare Bay Adventures offers hiking, fishing and rowing adventures. Itineraries can be customised to take in locations linked to Come From Away. Less intrepid fans of the musical can Meet the Flynn's, on a tour that lets you relax in the home of real-life Come from Away characters Diane and Derm Flynn.

followed. Cod was to Newfoundland as gold was to Victoria.

Many years on, a new wave of strangers would arrive by air. On September 11 2001, as the terror attacks on the US unfolded, thousands of US-bound aircraft were forced to find alternative destinations. Among them were nearly 7000 passengers and crew aboard 38 planes who suddenly found themselves in a small town in Newfoundland. As fate would have it, they were in rock-solid hands.

"When the word terrorism came across the air-to-air traffic radio it sent a chill through the cockpit," says Captain Beverley Bass, an American Airlines pilot on duty that day. "Then the call came that all US airspace was closed and I was ordered to land in Gander."

For Captain Bass and her fellow pilots, this remote town was a telling destination. "It's one of the emergency airports we have to study for international crossings between the USA and Europe," she says. "Most pilots will spend their entire career never landing there."

Yet Gander exists because of that airport. Established in 1936, it was once the biggest airport on the planet. It ferried aircraft to Britain during World War II and was the main testing site for Concorde.



A GANDER AT... GANDER

Hospitality, bleak beauty and cod au gratin.



WHERE

Gander is a small town on the Newfoundland Island in Canada. St John's is the provincial capital, famed for its colourful houses, pubs and music scene. It's a four-hour drive from Gander.



HOW

Air Canada has regular flights to Gander via Halifax or Toronto. Flights from London go via St John's or Toronto. Once on the ground, hiring a car is highly recommended.



WHEN TO GO

Late May to mid September. Early in the season is the best time to see 'Iceberg Alley'.

STAY

The Comfort Inn lives up to Newfoundland hospitality and is where the pilots and crews of the 38 planes stayed.



EAT

Cod is king. The atmospheric Thingamajiggers Pub and Eatery serves a mean cod au gratin, and Bistro on Roe is the locals' haunt. Don't miss the craft beer at Scudrunner Brewery.

So while there was room for the 38 planes on the town's runway, there was nowhere near enough room for passengers and crew in a town with only 500 hotel beds.

In no time the Ganderites, together with locals from the surrounding villages, opened their hearts and homes to the stranded passengers from 93 countries, who quickly became known as the "plane people". A state of emergency was declared and every school, gymnasium and community centre was transformed into makeshift accommodation.

"There was a lot of confusion because we didn't know how long the planes would be here," recalls Gander resident Beulah



Cooper. In her loungeroom we pore over photo albums, thank-you cards and letters from that tumultuous time. "We knew the people would need food, so I started making sandwiches. There's a saying here in Newfoundland – we feed you when you're sad, we feed you when you're happy."

With the "plane people" unable to take their luggage for security reasons, donations flooded in. Shop owners let the new arrivals take what they needed, and the residents welcomed strangers in to shower and even sleep. They treated them to sightseeing tours, barbecues, music, games and anything else that might help them feel at home. ➤



“What people needed most was reassurance,” says Oz Fudge, the town’s former policeman. “We wanted to go to each person and put our arms around them and say: ‘You’re safe, you’re okay, ’cos we’ve got you.’”

It wasn’t only people who needed help. “When the planes first landed I called the airport and was told there were no animals on the planes,” says Gander’s animal welfare manager Bonnie Harris. “I knew they were wrong.” With a colleague, Bonnie crawled through the hold of each plane to rescue 11 dogs and eight cats. “There was also a pair of bonobo monkeys heading to a zoo in Ohio.”

For locals and visitors alike, that week in Gander was life changing. Now their story has been shared worldwide in the form of a hit musical, *Come from Away*, by husband-and-wife writing team David Hein and Irene Sankoff.

“It was on the 10th anniversary when



this cute young couple came to Gander to chat with people who were here for 9/11,” says local teacher Diane Davis. Like many of the real people depicted in the show, Diane didn’t think it would be possible to make a musical from something as horrific as 9/11.

“But this is a 9/12 story,” she says.

“And why it’s so authentic is because they didn’t mess with it. No one did anything extraordinary. It’s just how we

are as Newfoundlanders. Comforting and nurturing is just what we do.”

The musical is now a movement. With 12 actors playing 78 characters and telling thousands of stories, it’s a story of hope and humanity. It’s also a story of old-fashioned hospitality, which has helped put the island firmly on the map.

For more information visit newfoundlandlabrador.com/comefromaway.com.au

Book a 12-day escorted tour in Newfoundland and Labrador, with an overnight stay in Gander, from \$3353pp, twinshare. Members save 5 per cent. Go to racv.com.au/cruisesandtours or call 1300 850 884.

Right: Fogo Island Inn.
Above: The Broadway musical *Come From Away* comes to Melbourne in July.

SIDE TRIP

FOGO ISLAND



Gander is the gateway to Fogo Island. With a history dating back 400 years, the story of this ‘island off an island’ is as deep as the surrounding ocean.

Once the centre of cod fishing, it’s now home to

a daring social enterprise project: the Fogo Island Inn. Built on the rocks with dramatic views across the ocean, the inn is an architectural masterpiece and a textbook lesson in giving back. Fogo Islanders

are the inn’s shareholders and where possible, everything about the inn has been sourced on the island.

Fogo is reached via ferry from Farewell (about an hour from Gander). There are also several B&Bs on the island

and a thriving foodie culture.

Fogo Island is on ‘Iceberg Alley’, where massive chunks of ice break from Arctic glaciers and float south. The best time to see the bergs is from May to June, which is also whale-watching season.