

# The scenic marine commute

*The stunning coastline  
precious few get to see*

BY RANNIE GILLIS



Top left: With paint that looks a little “scruffy” after almost four months of non-stop service, the *SS Burgeo* is anchored “in the stream” at Richard’s Harbour, one of the most isolated outports on the south coast of Newfoundland. Right: The *Burgeo* at the old wharf in St. Jacques.



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**B**ack in the early 1960s, I spent four summers as the only non-Newfoundlander in the crew of a coastal boat.

Newfoundland’s south coast is a breathtaking and dramatic expanse of wild rivers and inlets, spectacular fiords and 300-foot-high cliffs, where eagles soar and white-sided dolphins rarely encounter humans.

But the scarcity of roads means that without a boat, a fixed wing float plane or a helicopter, few people get to experience it. There’s a lot being missed by a lot of people.

The once-thriving outport communities were serviced by fast coastal boats that delivered people, mail, provisions, equipment, (Sears) mail-order goods—and what have you. The history is fascinating.

In 1949 the former Dominion of Newfoundland became the 10th province in the Dominion of Canada. At that time there were fewer than 120 miles of paved road on the island portion. There was no through-road from the west coast to the east coast, and only a very few secondary roads, between nearby communities. (Newfoundland & Labrador did not become the province’s official name until 2001.)

The approximately 360,000 people who made up the population of Canada’s newest province lived either in two urban areas around St. John’s and Corner Brook, or were very thinly scattered among 1,379 small settlements strung along the nearly 11,000 miles of very rugged coastline.

Almost all of these settlements were small, isolated fishing communities: “outports” with an average community population of 233 souls. These outports hugged the coastlines of both the island portion of the province as well as on the more remote coast of Labrador.

Since the final decades of the 19th century, the coastal steamer has played a significant role in preserving the unique lifestyle and culture of these remote places.

There was no need for such services until the mid-1800s because, with the exception of parts of the Avalon Peninsula, most of Newfoundland was occupied only seasonally. However, as a resident year-round population pushed further along both the northeast and southwest coasts, the provision of essential services to these outports became increasingly challenging.

By the 1850s the government had stepped into the picture, and was providing subsidized coastal service in several bays

bankruptcy. Therefore, in 1923, the entire operation, including the coastal transportation service, was taken over by the Newfoundland government.

In 1949, under the terms of union with Canada, Canadian National Railways assumed control of the provincial railroad, coastal service, and the Gulf Ferry Service.

Built in Scotland in 1940, the *SS Burgeo* (on which I sailed) was designed specifically for the Newfoundland coastal service. She was 240 feet long, displaced 1,400 tons, and could carry more than 120 passengers, in first- and second-class cabins. When I joined her in 1963 she had been in continuous service (except during refit) for 23 years.

Newfoundland and Labrador’s south coast used to be known as “the forgotten coast” because of its remoteness and the almost complete isolation of the hardy individuals who lived in the many little communities along this rugged shore. Sailing there was a revelation, in more ways than one.

I was not prepared for the tiny outports, usually having a population of only a few hundred people, that were tucked away in the most isolated coves, inlets, and small harbours. These little population pockets were separated from one another by mile after mile of towering cliffs, glacially-scoured bays and valleys, and narrow, deeply-indented fiords. It was easy to see why the vast majority had never been connected by road to each other, or to the outside world.

In 1965, my final summer on the coastal boats, the population of Newfoundland and Labrador was 493,000. That year, more than a quarter million people were still dependent on the coastal service.

It took six days for the *Burgeo* to travel from Port aux Basques in the west to the American naval base at Argentia on the Avalon Peninsula in the east. After a rest day, during which the ship’s provisions would be restocked, and the interior fully cleaned, the vessel would then make a return trip along the coast. Weather permitting, a complete return journey (about 500 miles) would take approximately two weeks.

The ship carried passengers, freight, the odd automobile or truck (lashed down on deck), and the Royal Mail. The purser’s



Steward Lloyd Batt (bottom centre-right of frame) poses with his ship at the wharf in Gaultois. Notice the codfish drying on the wharf, and the float plane in front of the ship.



Top: Steward's Department, SS Burgeo, August, 1964. Left to right rear: Rannie Gillis; Lloyd Batt; Stewardess Mary Yarn; Chief Steward Wilfred Collis; Reg Moore; Larry Hickey. Front: Sylvanus Seward; Sheldon Hill. Above: Passenger Ann Perry, from the outpost of St. Alban's, Bay d'Espoir.

office also doubled as a post office, because most of the smaller outposts along this isolated coast did not have one. Whenever we arrived the heavy mailbags full of letters, catalogues, and parcels were usually among the first items to be sent ashore, along with departing passengers.

After all these years I still have a copy of the CN Marine coastal services timetable for 1965. It lists a total of 46 outposts for the south coast service, between Port aux Basques and Argentia. What it does not tell you is that of these 46 outposts, only 14 had road connections with the outside world. Needless to say, for the people in the other 32, the weekly visit by the coastal boat was an eagerly anticipated event.

Our visits would usually last about an hour. As soon as we tied up, the sailors would go about the business of loading and unloading freight from one or more of the three cargo holds. In this they were often assisted by local men and boys, always willing to lend a hand in whatever way they could.



At the same time, one or more of the local women would often come on board to catch up on the latest social news from up and down the coast.

There were also a few places where the ship could not tie up to a wharf because the water was not deep enough. In that case we would anchor "in the stream" and passengers and mail would go ashore in the "mail boat," which was actually one of our lifeboats.

If school was not in session, teenagers would usually flock to the wharf to check out the opposite sex, continuing the age-old ritual in this unique venue. Any unknown male (or female) would always be the centre of attention, and would often remain a topic of conversation in the community; at least until the next visit of the coastal boat.

Finally, there would be a blast from the ship's whistle, the signal for all visitors to go ashore. Off they would stream, down the gangplank, to stand and watch as the lines were let go, and the ship backed out into the harbour. As sad as they were to see it go, there was reassurance in the fact that it would return in six or seven days.

As one of five assistant stewards on board, I was a real jack-of-all-trades. We set tables, served meals, washed dishes, made beds, and looked after the general wellbeing of the passengers and crew. Four of us worked a 12-hour day (7 am to 7 pm), while the fifth assistant steward worked a night shift. In actual fact, in the Newfoundland coastal service you were never off-watch; you were always on-call.

Another aspect of the south coast that took me completely by surprise was the affable nature of life on board the *Burgeo*. Because it took six days to make one trip, up or down the coast, you often had people on board for several days. On many occasions the ship was just like one big family, with passengers and crew forming a distinct social bond.

The *Burgeo*, like other ships of her generation, had a smoking lounge outfitted with a piano. On many evenings the lounge was the site of impromptu musical sessions involving both passengers and crew and revolving around the piano.



A crew member of the MV Terra Nova dries cod fillets and cod tongues in the early morning sun.

Being a piano player myself, I was often part of these spontaneous parties, where anyone who could play a musical instrument or sing was invited to take part. It would be normal for such times to continue into the wee hours.

The *Burgeo* even had its own resident musical trio. Chief Engineer Bill Drake from St. Jacques would bring his guitar, mandolin, or accordion. The purser, Eugene Butler from Lewisport, would arrive with his guitar or banjo. I would sit in on the piano, and the music would start.

And what music! Old standards like: *I's The B'y*; *Let Me Fish off Cape St. Mary's*; and *The Squid Jigging Grounds* were interspersed with jigs and reels that usually reflected the strong Irish influence prevalent along this coast. Our repertoire was eclectic, to say the least.

Another reality of travel on the southwest coast was the printed timetable which listed the arrival times for all 46 outposts—but everyone knew that these were not much more than guidelines, and could vary considerably, depending on weather conditions and other unforeseen factors.

On one occasion the schedule went out the window when the ship got a radio call after midnight to return to English Harbour West. An elderly woman with suspected appendicitis

More than 50 years later the current ferry, MV Terra Nova, tied up at the same wharf in Gaultois. This little coastal boat provides year-round service to the outposts of Hermitage, McCallum, and Gaultois.

had to be rushed to the hospital in Harbour Breton.

I was on night watch. After waking the chief steward to inform him of the situation, I roused two other assistant stewards from sound sleep. On arrival in English Harbour West, the three of us went ashore in the mailboat and brought the ailing woman back to the ship. Since the lady in question could not walk up the gangplank, we sat with her in the mailboat, while it and its occupants were winched up the side of the ship. Once level with the main deck, she was very carefully transferred to willing hands, who proceeded to make her as comfortable as possible in the main lounge. When we arrived in Harbour Breton, a few hours later, an ambulance was waiting at the wharf; just another night on the south coast.

Today there are only eight outposts on the south coast that have no road access to the outside world. These include, from west to east: La Poile (population 85); Ramea (pop. 520); Grey River (pop. 120); Francois (pop. 105); McCallum (pop. 97); Gaultois (pop. 130); Rencontre East (pop. 136); and South East Bight (pop. 92).

In spite of this, Marine Atlantic's ferry service on the south coast has been privatized. It is very sporadic, and is certainly not intended for tourist traffic. In order to travel from Port aux Basques to the Avalon Peninsula, you would have to take five or six small ferries, and the journey would take approximately two weeks.

After 29 years of year-round faithful service (1940 to 1969) under often-terrible weather and ice conditions, the SS *Burgeo* was retired and sold for scrap. 🐻



### Postscript:

Late on the night of October 14, 1942, the Newfoundland ferry was part way across the Cabot Strait, on its regular route between North Sydney, Nova Scotia, and Port aux Basques. At approximately 3:40 am, the SS *Caribou* was torpedoed by a German submarine, and sank within five minutes. Out of 238 passengers and crew, there were only 101 survivors. For the duration of the war the SS *Burgeo* replaced the *Caribou* on the Cabot Strait crossing.