



Hard to Get To, Harder to Leave

NEWFOUNDLAND'S ICE CLIMBING IS
AWESOME, ONLY PARTIALLY DEVELOPED,
AND A LONG, LONG WAY FROM ANYWHERE

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“Moose,” Dustin Cormier says, pointing his mitten toward a rocky buttness half-covered in fog. I take a second, lift my goggles off my face, squint. I’d been holding on to Dustin on the back of a snowmobile for an hour. My ass is freezing. My face is numb. We were happy to get off the snowmobile and switch to snowshoes.

Two days ago, we were in northern New Hampshire. After a solid day of driving, an overnight ferry ride, a ten-mile skidoo, and now a half-mile of plodding through marsh and frozen streams on snowshoes (skis are worthless in thick fir and spruce traps), we’ve reached the throat of Western Brook Gulch in Newfoundland, Canada. The gulch lies on the eastern side of Parson’s Pond, but that’s a misnomer, as it’s really a ten-mile long lake. Here the water unfolds in a labyrinth of smaller ponds, fjords, and gulches. On the western side of Parson’s, perched on a sliver of land separating the freshwater from the Atlantic Ocean, sits the *town* of Parson’s Pond, population three hundred forty-five. Today, we’re scouting ice climbs and packing down the skidoo track for future visits, but Dustin’s lived in the woods his whole life and spotting mammals is in his DNA.

“Moose,” he says again.

“What? Where?” I ask, confused.

He points one last time and then moves forward, breaking trail. My eyes adjust, find the black dot struggling in the maritime snowpack. It’s hard to see anything in Newfoundland in the winter, because water in every form—waves, snow, fog, sleet, spindrift, chunks of ice—is often in the way. It doesn’t matter if you’re in a truck or on foot or on a snowmobile or skiing or cowering underneath a dripping pillar of ice on a climb: You will get wet.

The animal holds my attention for a minute, but then my eyes are drawn to the contours of the buttness, deeper in Western Brook Gulch, until the rock wall disappears under a shifting, low-lying cloud. But in between the curtains of mist, and in between the cobbled black rock, tongues of blue ice glitter upward for four hundred feet before vanishing into the gloom. Half of these ice formations have been climbed, but many have yet to be touched. The biggest are about a thousand feet long. These

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unclimbed routes would be classics anywhere else, their descriptions filling guidebooks, but here they haven’t even been attempted. I can’t quite believe it.

The third member of our party, Ryan Stefiuk, shouts, “Wait until you see the rest of it!” Snowmobile helmet still on, visor up, his blue eyes gleam.

“There’s more?” I am gobsmacked.

Guides exist for areas such as the Canadian Rockies, Hyalite, and Northern Quebec, but Newfoundland’s winter routes aren’t well known, kept quiet by tight lips and the place’s inaccessibility and ever-rugged weather. Getting to the biggest climbs is a logistical comedy of errors: trucks, ferries, snowmobiles, skis, snowshoes, float planes, airboats, and rubber dinghies have all been employed with varying degrees of success. A climber can be in Peru’s Cordillera Blanca or Alaska’s Ruth Gorge faster than they can get to Parson’s Pond. Storms thrash the island all winter. While most of the Newfoundland’s biggest gems have been plucked, the fifty-mile stretch of coastline between Gros Morne National Park and Parson’s Pond hides many more, from moderate WI3 romps to traditional mixed horror-shows. For ice climbers, turning the corner in a fjord in Newfoundland feels like trespassing in a world you’d never dare dream into existence.

The next day, the three of us are lashed to a belay halfway up a route called the ‘Arding Slot, which has been climbed just twice before. The grade isn’t crazy by modern standards (WI5 and a pitch of M6) but it’s remote and sporting, with brittle, friable ice. Ryan has just led us through the narrow squeeze that gives the route its name. Climbing through the slot—a chimney barely wide enough for us to squeeze through—is a game of inhaling and exhaling, chocking your torso into the tight constriction and wriggling your way out onto the ice above. Even at one hundred sixty pounds, I barely fit, and the thing gets narrower the deeper I burrow.

I met Ryan when I was twenty-two years old, during my first year climbing in the Northeast. Finding good partners in the guarded world of New England ice climbing was a struggle, but Ryan—older, wiser, and better—was always game. His excitement flares in the winter, animated by a drive I only feel occasionally. Over the past ten years he’s made the pilgrimage to Newfoundland as often as his work schedule will allow (he’s a nurse). If I’m a grumbling, sometimes-reluctant winter climber, Ryan remains a zealot.





When he pops out of the chimney he's grinning from ear to ear, excited to have fit through it.

From above, the two of us belay Dustin, still in the chimney, taking the downtime to catch up. But whenever one of us starts to speak, another round of wind-driven spindrift unleashes from the plateau above. Ryan is reaching into his pack to grab a snack when a particularly huge sheet of white wallops us. I count the time we're submerged, straining my neck against the flow. When it finally subsides, ten eternal seconds later, my hood, Ryan's pack, and everything else is caked with wet snow.

"That felt more like an avalanche," says Ryan.

"That felt more like an avalanche," I nod.

Dustin, still wedged in the chimney, grunts.

"Did you guys set that off?"

Dustin embodies the traditional spirit of the Northeast. He only complains if he thinks it'll make you laugh. He's a big guy, so strong he once deadlifted the rear end of a Ford Focus that had parked him in. Tree-trunk legs spill out of his rubber farm boots, but they don't stop him from climbing hard or hiking fast. His fiancée Leanne Smith raced giant slalom in two Olympics; Dusty's not so bad on planks himself, though he'd never say so. When he pops out of the chimney he's grinning from ear to ear, excited to have fit through it.

I lead the next pitch, which is relatively straightforward grade five ice, but the hissing spindrift and brittle, bulletproof conditions slow me down. *More Alaskan than Alaska*, I mutter to myself. After one more pitch, we retreat, despite being just two hundred feet from the top. Night is coming, the gray daylight waning as we rappel. Zipping across the pond on snowmobiles in the pitch-black, we lose our bearings every once in a while, but soon the lights of Parson's Pond twinkle across the frozen land-

scape and we've snowmobiled right to the door of our cabin, perched on the edge of the Atlantic.

"You can't get there from here," goes the classic Northeast refrain, and in Newfoundland's case it's almost true. Driving from New England takes about twelve hours if a gale isn't heaving the Atlantic over the Canso Causeway or a nor'easter isn't dumping snow on all of Nova Scotia. The ferry onto the island adds another eight hours, but this can stretch into twenty-four if the swells roar up and the boats can't dock. Ferry goers—mostly bleary-eyed truckers or Newfoundlanders coming home from their two-week shifts in Alberta's oilfields—jostle into Port Aux Basques, little more than a few twisted streets and a lighthouse, abutted by some modern amenities like a Tim Horton's restaurant, which fills so quickly with the truckers off the redeye ferry it might as well be an official weigh station.

But Newfoundland's desolation is countered by the ruddy warmth of its inhabitants. Since the fishing industry dried up, the island's population has aged and now is disappearing. "We always felt like we were going back fifty years in the U.S., with how hospitable people were," Joe Terravecchia, who's been climbing on the island for nearly thirty years, tells me. Despite the locals' universal kindness, it takes a day or two to get the linguistic sea-legs under you enough to comprehend the Scots-Irish-British accent through layers of snowmobile gear. "B'ys," you find out after a few hours in Newfoundland, means the lads, and more often than not, the b'ys are out skidoing around the back of the pond, fishing or cracking open another Dark Horse beer in one of the many little hunting shacks nestled miles out in the woods.

Lamont Thornhill, who maintains the cozy cabins we're staying in, goes to mainland Canada to work for up to months at a time, but Parson's Pond is home. Like many of the other residents who keep swinging by to catch up with Ryan and Dustin, (both have been to Parson's previously) he warns us which spots on the pond to avoid,



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what snowmobile trails are cut and what aren't. When we head out to climb, Lamont and a few other friends see us off in the early, tentative light of the morning, then check up on us each night before they go to bed, making sure we're back. I register a genuine concern and interest in everyone's eyes, a sentiment seldom encountered in other climbing destinations: They *want* the climbers to be here. This tight-knit community is a big part of why Joe Terravecchia keeps coming back. At first glance, Joe looks like any number of woodworkers from Maine's seacoast, until you watch him on sight 5.12 rock climbs at the gym or you hear about his exploits in Alaska or Yosemite or, of course, Newfoundland, where he's put up more new routes than anyone. (The 'Arding Slot is one.)

"There's the climbing," he tells me, "and then there's all the friendships we've developed over the years. You feel special when you're there—they know you love their home as much as they do. I look forward to seeing everyone as much as going climbing each year."

Terravecchia, his wife Karin, and their friend Casey Shaw first began rock climbing on Newfoundland's south-west coast in the early 1990s and fell in love with the place. They soon realized the western side of the island might hide massive ice climbs. In 1997, Shaw and Terravecchia landed in Port Aux Basques, armed with a tourist brochure swiped from the overnight ferry as their guidebook. The pamphlet's summertime photograph of Pissing Mare Falls in Western Brook Pond—Newfoundland's largest fjord—caught their eye. That first winter, the fjord was frozen and so were the falls, and the pair landed the first ascent of the twelve-hundred-foot Pissing Mare. For the past twenty-three years, the two have kept Newfoundland ice close enough to the vest to pluck firsts on many of the island's biggest, wildest ice formations, along with a cadre of close friends. Visits to the island from ice climbers are rare; perhaps two or three climbing parties a year.

With climate change, though, the "real Newfoundland winters," as Joe calls them, don't happen as often. The sea ice and ponds freeze less, especially Western Brook. Conditions and access have become more difficult. In 2017, twenty years after climbing Pissing Mare, Shaw and Terravecchia camped on top of Western Brook Pond, waiting for a route they'd spied to the right of Pissing Mare to form. The delicate climb consisted of little more than spray from the falls, frozen in place in overhanging, meringue-like splotches. Conditions would have to be perfect—too warm and the thing would just fall down.

Too cold and the ice would crack and break or not form at all. When Shaw had to leave to return to work just as weather and conditions aligned, Terravecchia called two professional ice climbers also on the island, Will Mayo and Anna Pfaff, to try the route. Twelve hundred feet later, the trio topped out the climb, Newfoundland's wildest to date, a twelve-hundred-foot WI6+ they called *Dreamline*. "The climb had been the obsession of Joe and Casey for two decades," Mayo wrote for *Rock and Ice* magazine, concluding that "the three of us can agree this was the most satisfying and adventuresome ice climb of our careers."

On our second day of climbing in Western Brook Gulch, we break trail to an unclimbed route and start up, connecting big blobs of turf and frozen-together rock, hoping to reach a sheet of ice we'd seen glinting in the sun earlier in the trip.

It's rare to unearth new routes in the East, as seemingly all the climbable terrain was ferreted out years ago. But here, I find myself staring at possibilities of first ascents that might last a lifetime. This place is hard to reach, the weather is perpetually fierce. Weighing the miles traveled versus time spent climbing would make the endeavor appear that much more absurd, but Newfoundland—its people and its potential—gets under your skin.

By the afternoon, we've reached the ice we spied from below, but it's detached from the rock, baked from the sun: scary. Ryan takes the lead, as he has done most of the morning. "I might fall here," he says, which is something ice climbers never want to hear.

Somehow, the ice holds and he's through, out of sight and out of earshot. The rope tugs taught and Dustin and I start climbing. Another few hundred feet and we're racing the dark again, rappeling down the 'Arding Slot, trying to keep all those puzzle-pieces of ice from hitting one another in the tight chimney. By the time we find our track at the base of the climb, we're out of calories, running instead on the elation of having gotten away with something uncertain, with more uncertainty still to come. **1**

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