

TRAVEL

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SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2003 SECTION F

TAKING STOCK

World and personal events bring a change of plans for John and Katherine Lawrence. F5



EMERALD ISLE BYWAYS

Travelling by car through Ireland allows visitors to explore less-known roads and villages. F7



MONICA ZURKOWSKI/CALGARY HERALD

Colourful houses march up the steep streets of St. John's, their bright hues shouting defiance to a rugged, invigorating climate.

A race against clime

A stop at Fairbanks means restocking with 'real food'

Kevin Vallely



ICEBIKERS

In the freezing cold of February, 1900, a young man named Ed Jesson began an amazing cycling expedition that started in Yukon Territory and ended on the west coast of Alaska. When he rode his bicycle into Nome on March 29, he carried with him copies of newspapers that he had packed at the start of his trip, bringing what was then the latest news to the residents of the community. Kevin Vallely, Andy Sterns and Frank Wolf (left to right in picture) left Dawson City, Yukon, just over four weeks ago and began following the route Jesson blazed. Here, forced off the Yukon Flats, a stroke of luck allows them to follow the Iditarod dogsled race trail from Fairbanks to the village of Tanana.

Here near the top of this wind-blasted peak I punch my arms wildly into the air trying to bring the life back into them. The climb was long so I dressed lightly for the ascent and ignored the wind as it picked up speed towards the top, but before I realized it my damp clothes had frozen to my body and I'd lost feeling in both my arms.

Relishing life on The Rock

St. John's is the oldest city in the Western Hemisphere

STORIES BY JAY BERMAN, SPECIAL TO THE SUN

The capital of Canada's easternmost province is the sort of place where O'Reilly's Irish Newfoundland Pub truly is owned by O'Reilly, not by a partnership

No other region in North America looks quite like Newfoundland. Separated from mainland Canada by the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Strait of Belle Isle, it juts into the North Atlantic as though daring the sea to bring on the storms. It is rocky and craggy and — during the winter — unpleas-

Newfoundland and Labrador — even has its own time zone, a half-hour ahead of Canada's other Atlantic provinces — Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia — and 90 minutes ahead of the U.S. East Coast. It is, not counting mainland Labrador, about the same size and even roughly the same shape as Ohio.

With a population of 175,000, St. John's won't be mistaken for Paris or London, but that's a plus for visitors, because it means they won't be fighting their way through Paris-sized crowds or waiting in

attorneys and their tax accountant, who happened to like the name.
 In fact, a great number of businesses in St. John's are owned by people named O'Reilly, Maloney, O'Brien and McCarthy, because Irish immigration gave the city — the whole province, really — the feel that it maintains today. George Street, part of the city's colourful downtown, is lined with places like O'Reilly's, offering Irish music every night, and they're not just doing it for the tourists.

But it is beautiful, and the people are remarkably friendly, perhaps thanking tourists for dropping by instead of going to more mainstream destinations.
 St. John's is the oldest city in the Western Hemisphere — older than Boston or Mexico City or San Juan or anyplace else — and it is farther east than any other city on the continent. It is, locals point out, closer to the Irish coast than to western Ontario. Newfoundland — now officially called

London-sized lines, Newfoundland had 439,000 visitors in 2002, with 81 per cent coming from other parts of Canada and 13 per cent from the U.S.
 There is no shortage of things to see, either in St. John's or the rest of Newfoundland. For those who venture out throughout the province, it is still a good idea to use St. John's as a base. It's on the Avalon Peninsula, site of such other attractions as Ferryland,

See MAJESTIC ICEBERGS F3



Icebergs off the Newfoundland coast — some sit as high in the water as five-storey buildings.

JAY BERMAN/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

In the steps of the Vikings, 1,000 years later

A trip to L'Anse aux Meadows is a trip to Canada's early history



JAY BERMAN/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Parks Canada has re-created the ancient Norse village at L'Anse aux Meadows; above, the interior of a dwelling.

If today's sports terminology were applied to yesterday's explorers, Christopher Columbus would be looking for a wild card spot in the playoffs.

The verse taught in schools for so many years, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue" brings the man from Genoa to North American shores about 500 years too late to compete with the Vikings.

It had been considered myth that Viking sailors might have reached the Atlantic Coast of Canada before Columbus, but archaeological work done by Norwegian scientists Helge and Anne Ingstad in the last half of the 20th century proved without question that Vikings from Greenland, most likely headed by Leif Eriksson, reached what is now northeastern Newfoundland about 1000 AD.

The site is L'Anse aux Meadows, at the northern tip of Newfoundland. The location is remote — although it is much easier to get to than it was for the Vikings — but it is well worth the trip.

As it is yet the only authenticated Norse settlement in North America and provides

the first evidence of Europeans on this continent, it is, by definition, unique.

Visitors can fly to St. Anthony, the nearest town, from St. John's, Newfoundland's capital. But Debbie Anderson, Parks Canada's supervisor for the site, suggests instead that they fly to Deer Lake, about 500 km south of L'Anse aux Meadows, and drive north on what is called the Viking Trail. The five-hour drive takes visitors through Gros Morne National Park, where they are likely to see caribou and moose, and — especially in the spring — huge icebergs as they float down the Strait of Belle Isle, which separates Quebec from northern Newfoundland.

The thought that Vikings might have predated Columbus surfaced in the 19th century with the discovery and translation of medieval Icelandic manuscripts which contained what came to be called the Vinland sagas. From the descriptions and the maps in the manuscripts, some began to wonder if the stories weren't more than

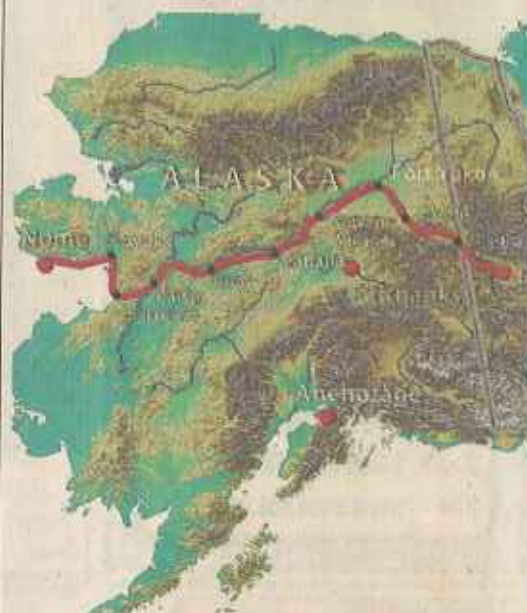
See NORSE RELICS F3

At 1,123 metres, Eagle Summit is not a particularly large mountain, but situated just shy of the Arctic Circle it is well above tree line and is at the complete mercy of whatever Mother Nature throws at it. Hurricane force winds scour and pummel its surface, leaving nothing but a barren landscape of snow and ice. The small prefabricated two-metre-square plastic cube that acts as an emergency shelter on the peak sits off the road and is a welcome sight, considering the circumstances.

Being forced around the Yukon Flats due to dangerous ice and a nonexistent trail, we are making our way along this desolate ice-covered road that links the community of Circle to the interior of Alaska. Our speed has improved since leaving the river, but conditions have deteriorated with snow falling. The light powdery blanket doesn't impede us much, however, and we make excellent progress during the next few days.

Our route takes us past the outskirts of Fairbanks where we re-supply and get good food. We've been craving "real" food for weeks, as our diet has left us wanting, and we chow down with enthusiasm, knowing we won't be seeing anything fresh again until Nome. Our trail menu starts off normal enough each morning with oatmeal and hot coffee, but quickly spirals into nutritional hell as we

See JUNK FOOD F4



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FLIGHT CENTRE



Kevin Valley faces the elements on the trail through Alaska. Being able to follow the Iditarod dogsled trail has made the last part of the trip less difficult.

Junk food fuels riders along Iditarod trail

From Ft

begin riding. Chocolate bars, Pop Tarts, Ritz bits, granola bars, Chex-mix, Rice Krispie squares, crackers, peanuts, cookies and fudge brownies are only some of the items we eat daily trying to keep fatigue at bay.

Frank and I seem to eat about equivalent amounts, but Andy has proven to be an eating machine. Vapourizing food like a wood chipper devours branches, a single long day has seen him eat 18 Cliff Bars, three packages of Ritz crackers with cheese, a dozen Oreo cookies and a big fudge brownie. Our days close out with a double portion of freeze-dried food, hot drinks and more snacks. The daily caloric intake is staggering, but unbelievably we still loose weight.

The Iditarod sled dog race was rerouted this year due to poor ice and snow conditions in the south and was started in Fairbanks for the first time in its history.

This is a stroke of luck for us, since the trail created by the race, although over three weeks old, will help our riding. Ed Jesson and Max Hirschberg succeeded on their bicycle journeys from Dawson to Nome only because they followed a beaten down track formed by thousands of stamperders who travelled by dog team before them. Without it their rides would have been impossible.

The same holds true today. The Tanana River leads us out of central Alaska and takes us westwards to its confluence with the Yukon River.

Moving on and off the river for the next several hundred kilometres we follow a trail that snakes us down narrow sloughs lined with black spruce, that rolls us over hills of birch and cotton-

wood and takes us over acres of glare ice that is so eerily clear that it feels like we are floating in space.

Skimming across the enormous frozen surface of Fish Lake we see the tell-tale lights of snow mobiles approaching from the West.

We are greeted by Joe Redington Jr. and three Canadian sprint mushers who are each towing their entire dog team in sleds behind them. Within moments we are surrounded by more than 30 dogs yapping and wagging, glad for the stop.

Joe is a famous musher in his own right, but his father is a legend.

Recently deceased, Joe Redington Sr. created the Iditarod sled dog race to celebrate the relay that brought diphtheria serum to stricken residents of Nome in 1925. Carrying serum from village to village, dog teams were used to hurry medicine across the state where no other means was possible.

In 1973, Joe held the first Iditarod to commemorate the journey and, thanks to him, the race has become an event of historical importance and international renown.

We arrived in the village of Tanana and are happy to be back on the Yukon River. Two hundred km of seldom-used river trail lies between us and the community of Ruby to the west.

We've heard rumours of horrific sections of impassable overflow ahead, but talk like this has been ringing in our ears ever since we left Dawson City. We'll just keep keep moving and see what the trail brings.

For more information on this adventure, visit www.icebikes.com.

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