



Story **Jennifer Kabat** Photographs **Adrian Gaut**

# AN ISLAND REBORN

A windswept speck in the stormy North Atlantic, Fogo Island has emerged from the bones of a dying fishing industry and been transformed into a vibrant artists' colony, all thanks to the vision of a former resident





**On a remote island off Newfoundland** in the North Atlantic, four strikingly modern artists' studios appear on the landscape. One clings perilously to rocks; another tumbles down a hill and nearly into the ocean. When seas are high, waves break onto the side, and now snow crawls up the windows. A tower rises up, twisting over the shore, and a fourth plunges over an isolated inland pond, the glacial rocks around it scrubbed with wind.

The studios are unexpected, as if they've been photoshopped onto the barren coast. Their appearance here seems almost a mystery. There are no roads nearby. Approaching them requires twisting footpaths past grasses and caribou moss. Artists clamber over rocks, and in winter you need crampons to reach some of the studios. All the materials to build them had to be carried in plank by plank, board by board. One of the workers said the job wasn't construction but craft. They were designed by the Norway-based architect Todd Saunders, who himself grew up just a short ferry ride away and quotes from the traditional local architecture. When the buildings first appeared, some here were so nonplussed they thought the studios were nothing new. "Others said, 'What is that thing growing out of the landscape?'" lifelong resident Sandra Cull explains. "But now they're becoming part of us."

Fogo Island is an island off an island. It's rocks on rock, stark and beautiful. The sea is a constant, and the wind not a mere breeze but something physical that can literally make you cry as it whips at your face. Here, small communities cluster along the shore. For years there were no roads, and the only mode of travel was the sea. In winter the ocean is clogged with pack ice, and in spring the Labrador Current carries icebergs from Greenland. There's a local saying, "Every year half of Greenland breaks up and comes down on us." The land itself inspires a kind of poetry. People not from the island are "from away," and anywhere not by the sea is "inland," words that conjure a mythic fairytale place, like the villages' names: Seldom-Come-By, Tilting, Joe Batt's Arm, Little Seldom. Even the ferry departs the mainland from Farewell.

The landscape looks much as it did 20 years ago or 50. Buildings hunker low to hide from the wind, and stages – fishing sheds – perch half on, half off the water. They look ready to fall in but some have stood for two hundred years. The island owes its existence – and near demise – to cod. In 1497 John Cabot sailed to Newfoundland on behalf of King Henry VII and wrote back, "Sire, the codfish are so plentiful they stay the progress of my ship. The fish is enough to feed this kingdom until the end of time." So prevalent were cod that the word "fish" only means cod here. Any other species – herring, haddock, crab, or lobster, say – is known by its name. And cod have worked their way into the local vernacular.

Instead of "you're kidding," people say "you're codding me" because the fish is so tricky, and thanks to its voracious appetite, there's "greedy as a cod." Cod was, as Cabot said, to last forever. That is until forever hit the 1950s, when factory trawlers from Spain and Portugal, France, Russia, and Japan transformed how the fish were caught. By the 1980s supplies were depleted and come 1992, Canada imposed a moratorium on cod fishing. On Fogo Island a way of life looked to be lost. Now 20 years later this is where those artists' studios come in, thanks to one woman, Zita Cobb.


From Fogo Island, she was raised in a saltbox house with no running water, and her parents couldn't read. She left to become one of Canada's most successful C.F.O.s, returning in 2004 to establish a charity, Shorefast (named for how cod nets are secured), to help diversify the island's economy and continue its heritage. One of the first projects was to preserve traditional boatbuilding techniques. The charity's business trust is also opening a small luxury inn where almost everything inside, from furniture to quilts, has been made by local craftspeople, the inn itself designed to tell the island's story.

Now international artists across disciplines from sculpture to writing and installation come to the island for up to six months each for residencies. With the rain slashing down outside, Cobb

**Previous page:** approached by a narrow wooden boardwalk over a boggy landscape of cloudberry plants and lichen-clad rocks, the twisted Tower Studio is topped with a triangular skylight flooding the interior with light. **Left:** the whitewashed Bridge Studio is connected

to the hillside by a 16ft bridge and overlooks a sheltered inland pond, its sloping angle echoing Newfoundland's traditional fishing huts or "stages." **Above:** the town of Fogo, seen from Brimstone Head, considered to be one of the four corners of the Earth by the Flat Earth Society





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The striking Squish Studio (previous pages) gets its name from its asymmetrical shape; in fact, the high back and (squished) low front is designed to deflect the harsh Atlantic winds. These pages: perched on the rocky coastline on stilts

with spectacular views of the ocean, the Long Studio is the largest building in Todd Saunders' series. It is organized into three areas: an entrance porch, courtyard, and enclosed studio space, representing spring, summer, and winter

waits in the lineup for the ferry ("the lineup" is another Fogo Island phrase) and talks about the program, explaining why bringing in contemporary art was one of her first ideas.

Not that she had a specific goal in mind; nothing was fixed, but she says, "Art is about a way of knowing. We're being flattened by mass media, and instead art asks questions of us and offers up different ways of perceiving. In a rural place that's been removed from much consumerism and media, I thought it was important to ask questions now before it's too late." She, like many from the island, speaks in an accent spiked with Irish inflections, though her family has been here for centuries. Cobb wasn't interested in the arts for any prescriptive reasons and scoffs at the way companies now partner with artists for marketing and P.R.

"That's so narrow," she says. "We want it to be looser, to throw it out there and see where it goes. It's the openness that's the benefit," she explains. "Not every artist will get something out of being on Fogo Island – or will produce something of benefit to the island. It's not that reductive." This understanding of the arts' potential has led the director of Canada's National Gallery, Marc Mayer, to call Cobb his hero, and say, "What Shorefast is doing on Fogo Island is the most intelligent cultural project in Canada right now. It's also an exciting social project for that matter."

Crafts have always been crucial to the island's life, but international artists are something new. Still, the openness that they bring and that Cobb champions are not. In the 1960s the Canadian government planned forced resettlement of Newfoundland's outport communities, including Fogo Island. The National Film Board of Canada came in with an experiment. They sent camera crews to film residents' lives and capture what they thought important. No constraints. It all came with a promise too: if the

residents didn't like any of the footage, it wouldn't be used. The nearly 30 resulting films came to be known as the Fogo Process and were groundbreaking for documentaries but also for the island. People didn't have to leave, and the films led to the first non-denominational island-wide school, which contributed to the end of sectarian strife between the segregated Catholic and Protestant villages. The series also led to a co-op fishery, which in turn helped islanders navigate the changes after the cod moratorium. All this is part of why Cobb knows better than to set out with a goal in mind.

Rory Middleton was on the island for a three-month residency through the winter of 2011-2012. His walk to his studio every day with the harsh weather, ice, frozen seas, and snow got him to thinking about the islanders and their lives and, as he puts it, "their direct relationship with the land and sea. I wanted to offer a depiction of the island through the eyes of someone from away, but someone who really looked at and appreciated the island's way of life."

He filmed a sunset from the island's highest point and then projected it onto a screen of pond ice. He started working on his own but was soon joined by former fisherman Cyril Lynch. The two became fast friends, and now sitting in a small saltbox house as dark presses in, Lynch says in his typically humble way, "We're all local people and new to this," this being art. "But Rory's project really stood out. To see something like this built on a pond... People at first thought he was wasting his money."

Soon though, Middleton says, supplies of food and rum and coffee started appearing while they worked. When his sunset was projected, just after dark over an inland pond, 70 to 80 people came to watch. One of them, P.J. Decker, who helped drill through the pond to get water for the screen, said, "Seeing it was beautiful, just beautiful."

Lynch says the installation, *Steady Water*, got people to see anew. He adds by way of explanation, "There was one piece on the island with a truck pulling a sign that said 'progress' behind it. Seeing it as it went, what was clear is the idea that we are going ahead instead of backwards." ❖

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