

HIDDEN DEPTHS

Beneath the handsome lighthouses, sweet fishing villages and multicoloured forests of Atlantic Canada lies a wild history of pirates, ghosts and shipwrecks. In the 100th anniversary year of its most notorious sinking – the *Titanic* – we explore the region's turbulent past

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The idyllic lighthouse setting of Peggy's Cove belies a dramatic past of shipwrecks and heroism on the high seas



‘The *Titanic* was in trouble out on the frigid North Atlantic waters’

THE headland of Cape Race juts out into the Atlantic like a determined chin. Giant waves hurl themselves at its black volcanic sides, spraying water hundreds of feet in the air.

A stocky, red-topped lighthouse stoically rotates its lamp, showing a subtle glimmer in the daylight. It is a scene of desolate beauty, a green-topped spit of land standing fast against the shearing ocean winds.

This cape on the far southeastern edge of Newfoundland is a forgotten corner of the world, home to just two lighthouse keepers and an itinerant family of harbour seals. Yet less than 100 years ago, this was one of the most important places in the Western world, where the famous Cape Race telegraph station relayed breaking news and messages between Europe and New York via an ingenious system of undersea cables. It was a vital hub of communications in an age when the staccato bleeping of Morse code was the very cutting edge of technology.

On the evening of 14 April 1912, the station received a radio transmission that would, for a short time, make Cape Race a household name. It was 10.25pm, and the message was ‘CQD MGY’.

The international distress call of CQD was, at the time, being phased out in favour of the new SOS, but the radio operators at Cape Race knew its significance. A ship was in serious trouble out on the frigid North Atlantic waters, and there was no mistaking which one – MGY was the unique call sign of the magnificent *RMS Titanic*.

John Myrick’s finger taps out Morse code with extraordinary accuracy and speed. A 73-year-old former radio operator, he’s holed up in the cosy, red-painted Cape Race radio hut, which no longer houses a relay station but is now a small museum devoted to the history of telegraphy.

‘It was a closely guarded secret at the time, but it’s become generally known that my great uncle Jim was the one who received the *Titanic* distress call,’ says John. ‘He was an apprentice operator and he rushed out to get the officer in charge. Afterwards, he was sworn to secrecy and could never tell that he had been left alone there even for a moment. He was 14 years old.’

Despite the furious work of the radio operators, the *Titanic*’s situation was hopeless. Several ships steamed to its rescue but the nearest, the *Carpathia*, did not arrive for more than four hours. By that time, the

world’s largest and most luxurious liner had sunk into the freezing water, taking with it the lives of those who could not fit into its few lifeboats – 1,517 passengers and crew.

The tragic sinking has resonated down the years, but while the *Titanic* was the most famous vessel to founder off the Newfoundland coast, this area – with its sharp rocks, treacherous icebergs and heavy seas that can tear a ship apart – is known as ‘the Graveyard of the Atlantic’. Thousands of sunken vessels litter the seabeds of the whole region, stretching across to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick – evidence of an extraordinary history of maritime disasters, filled with tales of brave fishermen, wily smugglers and bloodstained privateers.

John drives west from Cape Race on the rough unpaved road that runs along the coast of the Avalon Peninsula – a series of rocky bluffs interspersed with sheltered coves, each with a cluster of fine white houses. These are old fishing villages, where settlers were once drawn to the stupendous shoals of fish that lived off the coast – cod so thick in the water that, in the words of the explorer John Cabot in 1496, one could ‘walk across their backs’. Generations of enthusiastic overfishing have seen these ▶

MAP ILLUSTRATION: STUART KOLAKOVIC



The jagged rocks of the Newfoundland coast can tear a ship apart. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP The windswept Cape Race; David Myrick, last in a long family line of telegraphers

‘A rush of 100 billion tonnes of water floods in – enough to overflow the Grand Canyon’

stocks critically reduced, but back in the 16th and 17th centuries, rich fishing vessels plied these waters, attracting the attention of prize-hungry buccaneers.

Trepassey is now a quiet seaside town where holidaymakers come to paddle in the dark aquamarine water, and it's unlikely that those walking along its black, stony foreshore would know of its place in pirating lore. In 1729, the dread pirate Black Bart, known for his natty clothes and plumed scarlet hat, arrived in the bay here, plundering and burning 21 merchant ships in the village harbour before setting sail for the West Indies.

Bloodthirsty brigands such as William Kidd and Henry Morgan are also known to have terrorised ships on these waters, and may have left a greater legacy than a few sunken shipwrecks. ‘There was a man called Myrick who was part of Morgan’s crew, so I might have some pirate blood,’ John says with an infectious cackle. ‘But the story is that he turned traitor and sold out Morgan to the British, so ancestor or not, I’d have made him walk the plank.’

TO the west of Newfoundland is New Brunswick, where great forests of maples, poplars and larches are busy turning bright shades of red, gold and fuchsia in the chilling air. On the province’s eastern flank, a broad river – the mighty Miramichi – empties into the sea, and it’s here that US presidents, visiting dignitaries and Hollywood stars like Jack Nicholson regularly come for a bit of peace and quiet. They stand up to their thighs in water and cast rods in the tree-dappled sunlight, hoping to catch one of the salmon that the river is famous for – so large, locals say, that the fish will gobble up squirrels that fall into the water.

The river flows into the broad, flat Miramichi Bay, which is sheltered from the wider Gulf of Saint Lawrence by a string of low-lying islands. Water laps gently against the shore; there is barely a breeze. It’s a far cry from the foggy, wild coasts of Newfoundland, but even here, stories of man’s struggle with the sea pervade. This area bears the legacy of one of Canada’s worst maritime disasters when, in 1959, a hurricane swept in and destroyed much of the local salmon-fishing fleet.

Theodore Williston has been fishing these waters since the age of five, when his uncle first taught him how to set a net. Now 80

years old, he still heads out in his boat every day, bringing in mostly rock crab and small fish called smelts. He settles into a seat in a wood-panelled restaurant overlooking the water and recalls in a strong, clear voice his experience of that night.

‘The weather report was bad, but the fishermen went out anyway,’ he says. ‘I was one of them. The storm came up late in the evening and it was the roughest I ever saw. Hundred-mile-an-hour winds. I can’t tell you exactly how high the waves were because I might be lying, but about 30 feet. Boats were tossed over, upside down.’

His sentences are short and direct, as if scripted by Hemingway. He pauses as his breakfast arrives – a hearty plate of eggs and fried potatoes – before continuing his story. Theodore and his crew worked to rescue men from the stricken boats, but 22 vessels sank and 35 men were drowned.

‘I was lucky,’ he says. ‘A lot of the guys that drowned were experienced fishermen. There was no rhyme or reason. The largest boat was lost, the smallest lost. A 13-year-old boy, a 75-year-old captain.’ He shakes his head, silent for a moment. ‘I don’t know why I survived. Maybe it was as my mother believed – everything is pre-planned. Who knows?’ He shrugs and gives a sudden smile, gesturing out over the water, where a lone bald eagle can be seen trailing lazy circles against a clear blue sky.

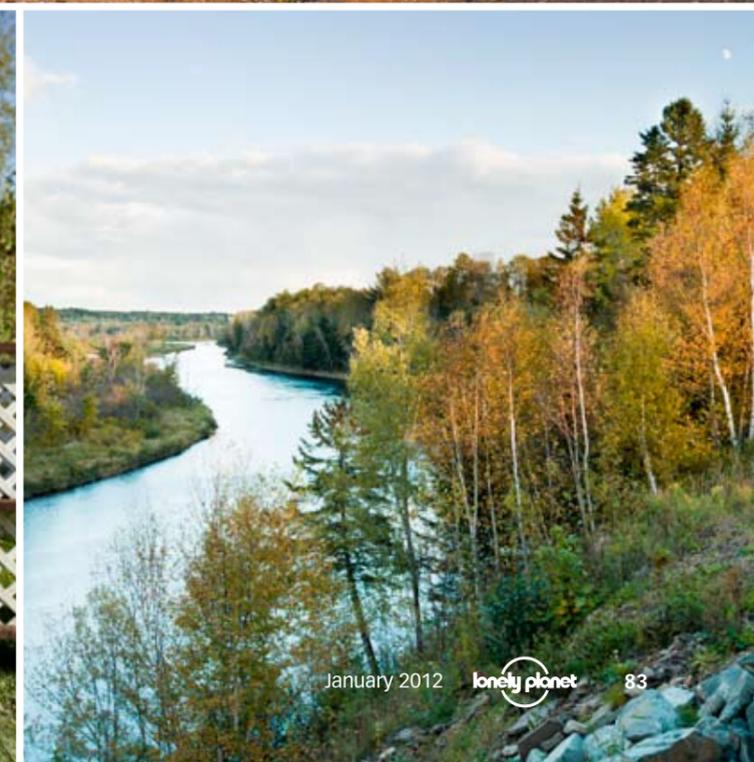
Folk say the conditions that occurred that night are rare – ‘Won’t happen again in a lifetime,’ according to Theodore – but 100 miles or so to the south, where the lower edge of New Brunswick meets the Bay of Fundy, the colossal power of these seas is demonstrated as regular as clockwork.

Groups of chatty walkers make a clanging noise as they descend the metal stairs to reach Hopewell Rocks, a motley collection of sandstone outcrops on a muddy beach against a high, green-fringed cliff. These have each been sculpted into shape over aeons by a twice-daily rush of 100 billion tonnes of water flooding into the bay – enough to overflow the Grand Canyon.

As the sky darkens into dusk, the tide begins its advance and visitors are ushered up the stairs by a fluorescent-vested park ranger – the beach is no longer safe. The overlapping waves stream over the brown sand and begin their climb up the rock face, higher and higher, until the whole surface of the bay has risen almost to the cliff’s edge – an extraordinary 46 feet. With each tide, a hundredth of a millimetre is washed ▶



The tide-worn shapes of Hopewell Rocks. BELOW, FROM LEFT Autumn colours sweep across New Brunswick and Nova Scotia; Theodore Williston (left) with local flyfishing legend George Routledge; the mighty Miramichi River





The calm, mirror-like waters of Peggy's Cove. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP Elizabeth Jeffers serves up local favourites at The Five Fishermen restaurant; fishing remains a way of life on the coast; the grave of a *Titanic* victim at Halifax's Fairview Cemetery

'The sea is a living, breathing thing that can take revenge if you don't give it due respect'

and carved from the oddly shaped rocks, gradually changing the landscape with a constant, inexorable force that will continue until the cliffs themselves are worn away.

IT'S 7.45pm at The Five Fishermen, a high-end seafood restaurant in the city of Halifax in Nova Scotia, and a roomful of people are tucking into platefuls of lobster thermidor and seared Atlantic salmon. It is a stylish eatery, fitted out with polished wood and an eclectic range of décor – a huge British coat of arms, an antique dingy and a stained-glass window from a French nunnery – and not one of the customers seems in the slightest bit perturbed that they are dining in a room that used to store dead bodies.

This fine old building on Argyle Street has a colourful history – as Canada's first public school, then as a well-regarded art school – but its most famous incarnation was as the John Snow and Co Funeral Home. It catered to the dear departed of Halifax for decades, but is best known for its role as the site where victims of the *Titanic* disaster were brought after being recovered from the sea.

Once news had broken that the *Titanic* had been lost, three ships from Halifax Harbour were commissioned to go out into the treacherous, ice-packed waters and retrieve the bodies. Upon their return, the rigid class system practised on board the *Titanic* in life was observed in death: the wealthiest victims were embalmed and carefully stored at John Snow's, while the poorer were sent to the nearby curling rink to be refrigerated on the ice before all were buried in nearby cemeteries.

'People ask about it all the time,' says Sandra Gardner, the restaurant manager, 'asking if it's true that the *Titanic* victims were here, where all the bodies were kept, whether their spirits linger...' She pauses for dramatic effect. 'And they do.'

It turns out that working at The Five Fishermen is not for the faint-hearted. Countless tales of ghostly encounters are reported by the staff – cutlery moving on tables, taps turning themselves on and off, unexplained voices, shoulder-tappings and whisperings in the ear. Then there's the sightings – a translucent, grey-haired man in an old-fashioned frock coat on the stairs; a little girl with sad eyes in the bathroom.

When asked how many spirits were in the building, a visiting psychic reported that there were 76. 'I don't find it frightening at all,' Sandra says with a grin. 'We're all friends here, the ghosts and the staff. We

get along well. I talk to them all the time. 'How's everybody doing today?' I say.'

Halifax has always been a busy port town, and never more so than today – the industrial harbour to the city's west is a bulky congregation of tankers, container ships and cruiseliners. Yet down on the historic waterfront, people stroll along a wooden boardwalk among outdoor cafés and vintage-style huts selling fresh battered cod and chips, while new and restored classic boats bob gently in the harbour.

In the midst of the waterfront is the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, where curator Gerry Lunn is busy setting up an exhibition to commemorate the centenary of the *Titanic*'s sinking, highlighting the efforts of the crewmen who pulled the victims' bodies from the sea. A permanent display of salvaged artefacts already draws hundreds of thousands of visitors each year – a number that rose significantly after the 1997 release of James Cameron's *Titanic* movie and shows no sign of dropping.

'Any story that involves the loss of human life is compelling,' Gerry says, 'and the *Titanic* is one of the best-known disasters of that kind. But the sad fact is, it's one in a long line of tragedies in this region, and these continue to happen. Scratch the surface of families in some areas and you'll discover brothers, uncles and fathers lost in the sea.'

Along this coast is a slew of fishing villages and coves with the idyllic charm to inspire a thousand watercolour paintings – from Lunenburg, with its brightly painted houses, to the perfect lighthouse setting of Peggy's Cove – yet each has a steely core that has seen it withstand centuries of assault by seas, winds and storms. Echoing this resilience are the hardy fishermen – the 'iron men in wooden boats' of local lore – who, despite the risks, continue their traditions and head out day after day into the unforgiving waters.

'In the fishing communities, there are deep roots going back through the years – a toughness that's passed on from father to son – and there's a great feeling of pride in that,' Gerry continues. 'But there is also an underlying sense of the ocean as a living, breathing thing that can take revenge if you show hubris or don't give it due respect. It's like the old saying goes – you should never turn your back on the sea.' LP

For more stories behind the world's most famous sinking, watch *Titanic and Me*, a three-part series coming soon to BBC Two.

