



ROCK OUT

By Martin Connelly

NEWFOUNDLAND AND
LABRADOR IS WHERE
CORPORATE TEAMS
GO OUTSIDE TO PLAY.

BRIAN GRUCHY recalls the Riverfront Chalets as being “some of the most beautiful I’ve ever stayed in.” But he wasn’t 20 km west of Grand Falls-Windsor to enjoy the room. He was there to go rafting. “I’ll be honest, I had some reservations. It’s like jeez, what are we doing? What’s this going to be all about? But I must say, when I left there I thought, when are we going back again?”

Brian Gruchy is an advisor with Sun Life insurance. Rafting on the Exploits River was a fun thing for the company staff to do, but the organizers had an ulterior motive. Sun Life has two offices in Newfoundland, one in Corner Brook and one in St. John’s, but representatives are spread out across the island. Since they are classified as self-employed, on some level they are competing with each other.

Corner Brook manager Geraldine St. Croix says they’re always on the lookout for activities to build rapport. “Typically you’re not the best of friends with your competitor, but we try to instill in people the idea that ‘while you might be in business for yourself, everyone can help each other grow.’”

Paul and Joy Rose have been running river trips on the Exploits for 13 years, and they haven’t gone after corporate business, it has come to them. “I can’t think of anything that would be better team building than rafting,” says Paul. “I mean, you’re all sitting there, working together as a team. The river is fast moving, with a couple of good sized rapids.”

Sun Life tried bowling and golfing. They had family days with lawn games. But the rafting trip was perfect. They got to stay at four-and-a-half star

Photo: Skerwink Trail, Newfoundland, Canada

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chalets, and the trip down the river presented just the right mix of difficulty and fun.

This is the business of outdoor team building.

Across the island a newer company, My Newfoundland Adventures, has made a name in the last six years selling more involved adventure packages. The company runs summer camps, certification classes, and small group trips, but it has also devoted considerable energy to attracting corporate clients.

They offer pre-packaged or custom-tailored trips, from dog sledding to white water kayaking and ice climbing to snorkeling with the migrating salmon, but almost everything focuses on creating camaraderie in the face of physical challenges. Unlike Riverfront Chalets, almost all of their corporate business comes from away, sometimes, from far way.

Operations manager Martin Hanazlek was kind enough to give a 'for instance': "So let's say we have a drug company out in California. One of the guys is the head of sales. The other guy in the group is the chief medical officer. And somehow they're butting heads. And these are high level executives who need to be able to work together. So we package a program where they don't even know where they're going. They meet in LA in the airport, we give them a couple of parkas (because they have no idea where they're going) and we pick them up at the airport in Newfoundland. Then we put them in situations where they need to work together, say dog sledding or a snowmobile expedition trip. Ideally, when it's over, they can go back to the work place and find that their productivity and relationship have improved."

It's not always about fixing dysfunctional relationships with cloak and parka intrigue, but that story is pretty much the idea behind the My Newfoundland Adventure's corporate packages; People work better together when they've had to take care of each other (to some extent) in the wilderness.

"We get these people all together and we build custom team building programs to suit their needs. We work on tearing down the



group a little bit, and then we build them up through experiential outdoor adventure programs,” said Hanzalek.

Riverfront Chalets and My Newfoundland Adventures have both grown in their respective niches, but not everyone wants to play outside.

Mark McCarthy has owned McCarthy's Party Ltd., a destination management company, since 1982. He sells a good number of individual tours, but meetings, conventions and incentive travel is a substantial part of his livelihood. “[Companies] are coming to Newfoundland because it's a reward program. They generally pick locations that are perceived to be exotic, and Newfoundland is a destination that's largely just becoming discovered by the rest of

Canada. Plus it's a place that a lot of people aren't going to get to on their own right away. So, when the company says 'this year we're going to Newfoundland', the people working there get excited about it.”

McCarthy offers groups a standard array of East Coast outdoor activities, like GPS hiking on the East Coast Trail (which follows traditional coastal trails along the Avalon Peninsula), or sea kayaking with a 'boil up' on the beach. One of McCarthy's most predictably popular events is the 'Rally in the Alley', a four-stop pub crawl on St. John's infamous George Street. The pub crawl features dancing, trivia, and (naturally) a Screech-In.

“We needed to have something for everyone to enjoy, y'know?” says Debbie

Patton, a conference and event planner with London Life in Ontario. “Rally in the Alley was like that, and they had it (organized) down to the minute.”

“It really depends on what they want to accomplish as a group. Sometimes they want something really strenuous, a real challenge,” says McCarthy, “and sometimes they want something that's just pure fun.” Music and beer aren't exactly a hard sell, but it's more than that. The pub crawl is a good time but it's also focused on giving outsiders a look at (one version at least) Newfoundland's fun-loving culture.

If McCarthy's Party and My Newfoundland Adventures are doing well with their very different product offerings, then someone offering both cultural and

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Western Brook Pond Fjord in Newfoundland Canada. Tourist boats sit at the pier waiting for tourists. These boats had to be brought in by helicopter in pieces and welded together in the fjord as there is no outlet. This fjord is in Gros Morne National Park.

outdoor experiences would seem to be ideally positioned in the marketplace.

At least, that's what Todd Whyte, manager of the Ocean View Hotel, is hoping. The Ocean View is located inside Gros Morne National Park (a UNESCO World Heritage site), and Whyte has just begun to offer team building packages. Instead of trying to serve those packages inhouse, he has worked with local operators to establish a diverse array of choices, everything from outdoor activity in the Park, to food and music-focused events. "If they (meeting and convention planners) are looking to come for three or four days and we can offer an add-on that gets them outside and active, or doing something they wouldn't normally do, that makes the trip more attractive and expands the business," said Whyte.

Corporate excursions have a healthy history, and the bonding properties of outdoor adventure have been a given since, well, business moved inside. But taking corporate groups outside is something relatively new to the game, and Newfoundland seems poised to be a go-to destination in the growing industry. The infrastructure is here, the outdoors is not only enormous but accessible, and the island is at a unique geographic center point between London, Toronto and New York. It may not be known as a golf vacation, but in a world where business people buy Gore-Tex™ coats that would have made well known explorer Louis Jolliet drool, outdoor team building in Newfoundland and Labrador seems like a hole in one. | **ABM**