

Saturday, February 25, 2006

You can tarry in Tickle Cove...

... or, if you're really daring, you can dawdle in Dildo

Only a fun-loving group of people could come up with such place names as Tickle Cove, Cupids, L'Anse Amour, Heart's Content, Conception Harbour or Dildo. Even when the settings themselves inspire such labels, it takes a bit of mischief to actually call them that. Makes you think you might want to visit sometime.

That's the aim of a tourism marketing campaign kicked off this month by Newfoundland and Labrador. In the 30- and 60-second television spots and print advertisements, which will run nationally and be aired on Air Canada, you don't see a single whale or iceberg, nor any bar patrons kissing a cod.

Rather, you are treated to creative images of dancing clotheslines set against brightly coloured houses of fishermen, or a moody clip of a white-bearded old man perched on a craggy cliff at the edge of the sea, pondering his position on what the Flat Earth Society calls one of the four corners of the Earth. Or, as the third ad in the campaign depicts, a collection of remote rural communities that do not take themselves at all seriously.

The campaign, created by Target Marketing & Communications of St. John's, is intended to create "an emotional pull" for travellers, Danny Williams, the premier, says. "We wanted to go right to our core strengths," he explains in his distinctive Newfoundland accent. "And that's the face of our people, the individual beauty and creativity, and the mystique."

By making a break from traditional picture-postcard scenes, Williams hopes to send home another message about Newfoundland: "We are Canada's youngest, coolest, hippest province."

Indeed, that message has been getting out. Ever since *The Shipping News*, Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel set on the island (in 2001 made into a movie starring Gordon Pinsent, Kevin Spacey, Dame Judi Dench and Julianne Moore), Newfoundland and Labrador has been one of the hottest Canadian destinations. With the decline of the province's fishing industry, the rise of tourism could not have come at a better time. Tourism now brings in \$800 million annually and supports 26,000 direct and indirect jobs.

It says something about the importance of the industry that the premier himself is the spokesman behind the new campaign. That duty is usually left to the department of tourism. And Williams is clearly enamoured of the role. "Today's sophisticated traveller wants to go someplace different, and with this campaign we are differentiating ourselves from the pack."

He is only partly right. The approach is not unique – provocative "emotional" ads that allude to a destination's heart and soul are the new trend in tourism marketing.

The Canadian Tourism Commission is trying this with its "Keep Exploring" branding campaign launched internationally in November. These ads also depart from the usual moose, mountains and Mounties to paint a picture of a multi-dimensional destination. In one, intersecting lines labelled "Midnight" and "Mischief" run above an image of discarded clothes by a hotel pool.

The artsy ads do get you thinking, or rather, puzzling: Huh? Where is this, exactly?

Newfoundland's ads, like the province itself, aren't nearly as perplexing. The beautiful visual stories accomplish what they set out to do, which is to make you want to go and stand in the very spot where that old man stands, smell the clean clothes flapping in the ocean breeze or spend the night in Conception Harbour.

I've just raised Newfoundland to the top of my must-see list.

- Deborah Stokes

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