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Basques and Portuguese had great influence on province

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“That whole Columbus story is a lie” – Police Officer, Lisbon, Portugal



Many of the places where I work with seabirds – Baccalieu Island, Funk Island, Cape St. Mary’s (formerly Cabo de Santigao) – carry Basque and Portuguese names. As well as having lived most of my life in Portugal Cove, these names have instilled a deep fascination about their origins.

A recent invitation to talk about seabirds and climate change at a meeting of the International Committee for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) at A Coruña (Galecia) in northwestern Spain provided an opportunity to help sate my curiosity. After the meeting, my wife Janet and I had the chance to explore Basque Country in northern Spain and a bit of Portugal. Here are some striking linkages, commonalities, beauty and contrasts that hit home.

Labrador and Terra Nova

From Labrador to the southwestern tip of the Island of Newfoundland at Port aux Basques to the easternmost outcrop at Y dos Aves [Island of Birds] or Funk Island, the pervasive Basque and Portuguese influence on the province is overwhelming and underappreciated.

Even John Cabot’s (Giovanni Caboto) initial account of “discovery” penned on a map by his son Sebastiano refers to Newfoundland as the Island of Baccalao.

The first known inhabitants of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Maritime Archaic People, lived along the Strait of Belle Isle 3000 to 9000 years ago. The first known Europeans – the Norse Greenlanders – showed up around 1000 AD, followed

five centuries later in relatively concurrent arrivals by the English, Portuguese, Basques, and French.

In Europe, Basque and Portuguese shipbuilders learned the shipbuilding technique of overlapping boards from the Vikings, allowing them to venture further out to sea to pursue whales and fish. They sailed to the cold waters around the Faroe Islands, where they found and fished cod, salting its fat-free flesh.

In doing so, they replaced the staples of the salted dark oily Mediterranean fish and of salted whale flesh with Bakailao or Bacalhau. Driven by market demand and profit, the hunt for cod moved quickly to the western Atlantic.

Similarities and opportunities

The former Basque ore mining centre in Bilbao experienced the inevitable as the metal was extracted and the mines closed. The crises created opportunity, and the community revolutionized its designs and artistic dimensions. Coarsely shaped iron sculptures abound, but the crowning jewel is the Guggenheim Museum of Art.

The ethereal flowing architectural images of sails and vessels with their irregular titanium exteriors transform hues and reflections throughout the structure, throughout the day and through changing weather conditions. The experience felt like the visual and physical awe created in the presences of an iceberg. Inside, the space was breath-taking and the most entrancing involvement I have ever sensed with human creation.

In the Basque and Portuguese coastal communities, fishing is still a dominant activity, although fishing – and no doubt overfishing – has been ongoing for well over a millennia. Every day, boats venture from ports and every morning fresh fish is on ice in the markets, and dining on the local fare is exceptional and unpretentious.

The geology of Basque Country is crushing. Here the Iberian Peninsula rammed into the European mainland, folding up the Pyrenees Mountains and pushing the ocean floor into vertical sheets of sheer cliff-faces.

Along ocean cliffs and through a magnificent countryside of vineyards, farms and forests, winding undulating networks of trails link the Camino de Santiago. The pilgrimage trail from Southern France is a hiker's paradise – something to die for (and given some of the topography) possibility to die on.

Hikers are everywhere. Yet it was always peaceful and all our treks on the Camino were in solitude, as it should be. We rarely encountered another hiker or two. Hikers exude a natural fitness and wellbeing, and local people and towns are friendly and welcoming. Another priceless bonus for hikers and the environment was the complete absence of ATVs – no noise and no tracks, just wind and refreshing silence.

The trip and treks have created a deeper appreciation and insight about our links abroad and our opportunities at home. I was intrigued when a Portuguese policeman, from whom I had asked directions in Lisbon, pointed out the similarity between the Portuguese word for thank you – “obrigado” – and the Japanese “arigato” and emphasized, “We have been everywhere.”

“I know,” I replied. “I live in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. Obrigado.”

Onshore gales

Onshore winds in late September and early October often coincide with the peak of fledging departures of storm-petrels from Baccalieu Island and the Witless Bay Islands. When they do, as they have this year, they often cause strandings in the

area. Storm-petrels have recently been picked up in St. John's, Killigrews (Karen Morris) and elsewhere around the bay.

I get so many calls from people who have picked up wayward storm-petrels that it is worthwhile to summarize what to do. Keep the bird in a small box with towels and a dish of salt-water, and if you have it you can put bits of capelin, cod, other fish, or cod liver oil in the water. Keep the box in a dark, warm and quiet place. Attempt to release the bird at night as soon as possible.

The bird must be released at the coast and away from bright lights. Just hold the bird on the palm of your hand over your head. Give it a bit of time to adjust. If the bird doesn't take flight in three or four minutes, use both hands and, without squeezing it, toss the bird high into the air and hope for the best. The best is giving a doomed animal a second chance.

In Holyrood, Jim Miller and others are setting up a storm-petrel/seabird patrol designed along the lines of the Puffin Patrol in Witless Bay. Holyrood is situated at bottom of Conception Bay and is a key site for seabird stranding during most of the year.

Birds in the area and around the province

Ringed-necked pheasants have been seen in North Harbour, St. Mary's Bay (Gerrie Young and Wayne Cowan). They are likely escapes from nearby.

On the crisp fresh morning of October 8, I was taken aback by what sounded like the autumn singing of a fox sparrow. The day was clearly something to sing about.

Fall migration is ongoing. It's an exciting time to be in the woods, but be alert for moose hunters. It's a shame that Sundays are no longer hunting-free days to be shared with hikers and berry-pickers. For that, you can thank PC government, whose former minister of the Environment is now a Liberal. Go figure.

Keep looking carefully - mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (h), 693-5305 (c), 864-7673 (w).