Travel

Newfoundland and St. Pierre share prohibition-era bootlegging past

Whispers of rum running on Canada's East Coast

Judy Robbins, Postmedia News

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Twilight in the port town of St. Pierre, whose rich and exciting history still resonates. PHOTO BY SPM TOURISME

The salty tang of the North Atlantic fills my lungs as I stand upon cobblestones, taking in the colourful clapboard houses lining the narrow street. Their vibrant hues stand in stark contrast to the gauzy sky above. Eric Simon, a local guide with a mischievous glint in his eye, beckons me toward a large nondescript building. I can just barely make out the faded letters of SPSS on the faded exterior panelling.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"SPSS," Simon explains, "stood for St. Pierre Slips and Stores, but that was just a front."

He gestures to the building before us, one of several in town bearing the same inscription.

"These weren't ordinary warehouses. They stored whisky."

As realization dawns, I find myself standing at the epicentre of Prohibition-era bootlegging. The innocuous initials suddenly take on new meaning, hinting at the island's intoxicating past.

Here in the cool, damp air in the port town of St. Pierre, capital of the French overseas territory of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, I'm being transported back to the Roaring '20s when the island was awash in contraband alcohol destined for thirsty American shores.

Though France ceded almost all its North American possessions to Britain under the terms of the 1763 Treaty of Paris, this French outpost, situated just 25 kilometres off the coast of Newfoundland, was left under France's control. And while the French territory is tiny, it holds an outsized place in the lore of Prohibition-era smuggling.

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Prohibition began in the U.S. in 1920, but it wasn't until 1922 when St. Pierre got into the game. That year the islands received special dispensation from the French government to import alcohol from Canada. Before that, the fishing industry kept the islands afloat, but depleting stocks and the lure of making more money for less laborious work converted many an islander to bootlegging.

St. Pierre is home not only to a captivating history but features cobblestone streets and colourful homes and businesses PHOTO BY MATHIEU DUPUIS

The islands' strategic location and status as French territory made them the perfect staging ground for smuggling operations. Newfoundland fishermen, already skilled at navigating the treacherous North Atlantic, found a lucrative side hustle in transporting liquor from Canada into St. Pierre and Miquelon. After being stored and processed in St. Pierre, the bottles were transported to the U.S. by rum runners, whose fast boats and surreptitious methods often outwitted law enforcement.

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While the days of Prohibition are long gone, it's easy to imagine clandestine deals being struck in shadowy corners while wandering the streets of St. Pierre. From the grand French colonial facade of the former Telegraph Office hinting at its pivotal role in co-ordinating alcohol shipments to the murals and historical markers dotting the streets, its Prohibition-era past are scattered everywhere.

The era is further revived when taking a dory run with Les Zigots. This local group dedicates themselves to preserving the tradition of the dory, a small, flat bottom boat that was ideal for navigating the shallow waters encircling the islands. Les Zigotos not only restore old dories, they continue the legacy by building new ones and offering rides to tourists, providing a tangible connection to the past for those interested in this vital piece of local history.

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Meeting Zigotis Marc Détrible at the group's fishing shed along the St. Pierre Harbour, it's explained to me how dories were an integral part of the culture. It was a mode of transportation, a way to source food and used for sightseeing on rare days off.

"It's a symbol of the island, but to us, it represents freedom," he shares.

Waves whipping off the coast of de Aux Marins, a 10-minute ferry ride fromSt. Pierre. PHOTO BY MATHIEU DUPUIS

Cutting through the steel-grey waters, our dory glides past the weathered remnants of former fishing factories and whisky warehouses. As the mist-shrouded islands quickly fade into the distance and waves crash against the bow, I gain a deeper appreciation for this humble boat and the sheer bravery of those who once relied upon it for their livelihood.

My education in bootlegging continues back in Canada, where Newfoundland's links to St. Pierre add further allure. I head to the Burin Peninsula, where I lay aboard a zodiac with Burin Eco Tours. As I take in the rocky shores and scrubby landscape, my guide, Mike Brennan points out a cannon that once protected this region from American privateers in mid 1700s.

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"In this area, there's always been rumours of pirates and privateers. When our fisherman had a poor year, they'd start selling. Every community has a rum runner," notes Brennan.

Brennan would know. He's also the owner of Smugglers Cove in Port-Au-Bras, an entertainment site with glamping-style bunkhouses and Tom's Roadhouse, a BBQ joint where nothing gets approved as decor unless there's a story behind it.

We make for Dead Man's Cove where stories of family tragedies, tidal waves and maritime disasters have unfolded over the centuries. But this area is also known as the rum runner side, reveals Brennan.

The deeply indented coastline is awash with numerous coves and caves — all perfect natural hiding spots.

"You can throw 100 bottles of rum or whisky into those little crevices behind a rock, no problem," observes Brennan.

Brennan seems to know an awful lot about rum running, both its past and potentially current incarnations. But as all fishermen know, loose lips sink ships. After one too many questions from me (How do they do it nowadays? Answer: Sea-Doo in three minutes flat from coast to coast), we change the topic of conversation.

But before I go, Brennan imparts a final piece of insight.

"The tide goes out, but it always comes back in again," he assures me with a wink.

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