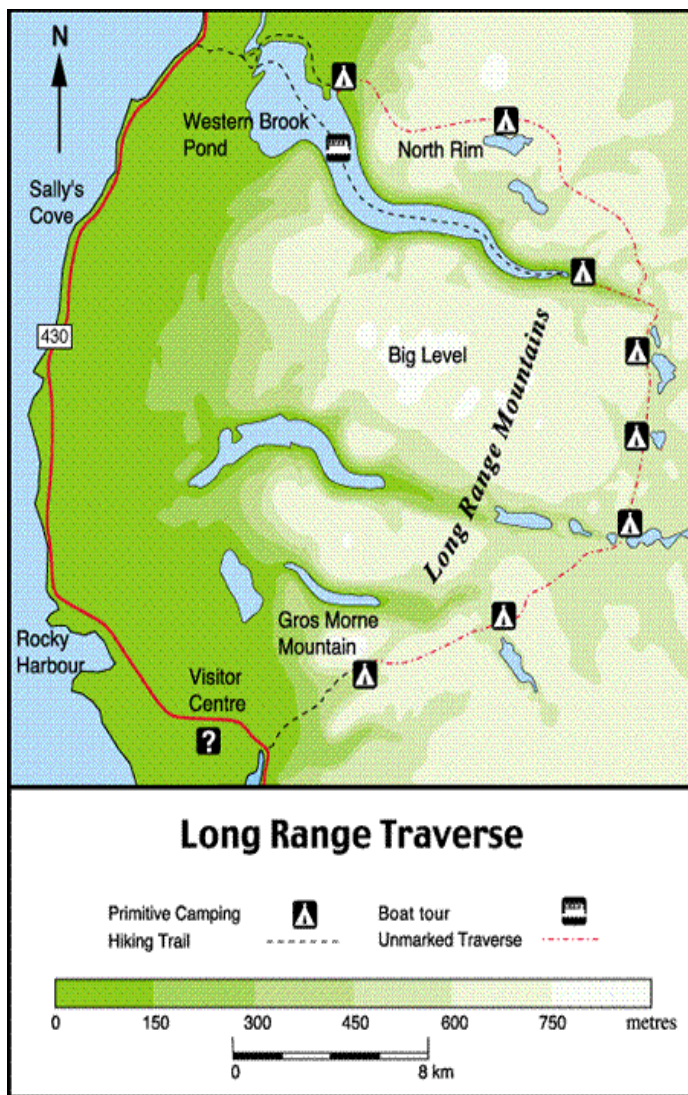


The Long Range Traverse – Gros Morne, Newfoundland

by Chris Heap

The [Long Range Traverse](#) is a challenging backpacking trip atop the Long Range Mountains of Western Newfoundland, in a very wild and remote part of the Gros Morne National Park. The Parks authorities have deliberately kept this hike solitary and remote by not providing a marked trail. Navigation is therefore a serious issue. So much so that they require at least one of the group to pass a test of navigation skills before they will issue a backcountry permit. The ruggedness of the hike is borne out by the fact that it took us 5 days of hiking to traverse about 44 kms.



We were six in our group, Liette, Anita, Chris and Mary Mitchell, Malcolm – an old friend of mine from Switzerland, and myself. Malcolm and I both had navigation experience, and since this is such a vital aspect of the hike, I was very glad I wasn't the only one.

The hike starts with a boat ride to the eastern end of Western Brook Pond. From there it is a steep, rugged climb out of the gorge up to the windswept plateau at the top of the Long Range Mountains. You then have to thread your way up and down, over and around innumerable obstacles in a roughly south-westerly direction before a very steep descent into Ferry Gulch, which lies at the foot of the Gros Morne massif. This is where the wild aspect of the hike ends, as it joins the well worn Callaghan Trail for the final ascent of Gros Morne and the hike out to the trailhead. Our only guide in this endeavour was a line on the map in the Visitor's Centre - what the Parks people call the "preferred route". I was somewhat skeptical of this "preferred route" since I had traced it onto my map in 2006, but when I checked it this time it had changed considerably. During the hike we noticed quickly you couldn't follow the "preferred route" precisely anyway - it's only intended as a rough guide. The details are up to each group. I imagine they do this on purpose since they don't want everyone going the same way.

The boat ride to the end of Western Brook Pond was a scenic delight, passing as it does between towering cliffs soaring 700 metres high on either side, replete with cascading waterfalls with such colourful names as "Pissing Mare Falls". Although the boat was full of people, there were only the six of us who disembarked at the eastern end. Now we were on our own, and none of us really knew what we were in for. We all had an idea what tuckamore was, but until being introduced to it, we didn't know it was so completely impenetrable – a dense tangle of spiny and stunted trees and there's no possible way you could bushwhack through it. Moose can bust through it by brute force, but even they get cut up

badly in the process. All the other obstacles - bogs, ponds, stream crossings, fog, slashing rain, steep ascents and descents – these we understood, but again none of us knew how severe they could be. We'd been told that the rain up on top comes at you horizontally, and I always thought this was some sort of joke until the second night, when the rain came in under the eaves of my tent and soaked my sleeping bag and maps. I was angry with myself about this, because I'd been warned in advance to bring a plastic sheet to lay on the tent groundsheet and up the sides. I had the plastic sheet in my pack but I hadn't used it. I guess I'm fated to learn the hard way.

Even though we lived through just about the whole gamut of different weather – slashing rain, hail, fog, high winds – I thought this difficult weather actually added to the experience. We always had these difficult conditions in small doses, and always at the best times when we could easily cope with them. And when we were hoping for good visibility for those very special and memorable views of Western Brook Pond, Ten Mile Pond and Bonne Bay, we had what we needed.

The first day of hiking was far and away the hardest. We camped right near the boat dock, as it was too late in the day to make the big climb out of the gorge and get to the next camp site before dark. We set off early the next morning, for what we all knew would be the toughest day of our hike. It was a relentless climb, loaded as we were with all our food and equipment. The navigation was not as straightforward as I expected either. We'd been told to take a compass bearing on the waterfall at the end of the gorge and follow that. It sounded simple enough, but it turned out to be anything but. On many occasions there were different tracks to choose from all going in more or less the right direction. But because they were tuckamore tracks, once having chosen, you are compelled to follow it wherever it leads, or else turn around and go back. Once we started on a track which seemed to be going in the right direction, but then it turned and started heading towards the south wall of the gorge. We persevered too long, always hoping it would turn again. Eventually it did, but too far the other way now, and we came all the way back down to pretty well where we'd started up – a complete exercise in futility. After that we decided to follow the stream bed. Even though the going was very rough, we judged there was a good chance it'd lead to the waterfall. It did, but not before we'd had to scale some big rock walls, requiring us to take off our packs and pass them up to each other.

We eventually emerged very thankfully at the base of this elusive waterfall – now we knew exactly where we were. We had our lunch there and on leaving we were careful to obey the Parks people's injunction to “stay to the right of the waterfall”. We eventually



Western Brook Pond

found a tuckamore track which led us steeply all the way to a rock outcropping, and were rewarded for all our hard work by a superb view down the length of Western Brook Pond. The rest of the way was bare rock and though steep in places it looked easy enough. After scrambling all the way to the top, it was a fairly straightforward hike to our first campsite apart from a bit of excitement caused by a tired old moose with broken antlers lying right in the middle of our track. We had just got our tents up when the first rain hit. Malcolm and I cooked a very good supper while

lying inside the tent while the rain slashed outside. That night I learnt the hard way what is meant by horizontal rain.

Each campsite apart from the first one were equipped with tent platforms, bear containers and a thunderbox. You are not obliged to stay at the official campsites, but finding suitable spots could be problematic, as the only flat spots seemed to be quite squishy and damp.

We quickly settled in to a pleasant rhythm for the hike. The pace was slow, as we didn't have much distance to cover each day. The important things were to stay safe and not to get too far off course. The tuckamore was a challenge, but we started to get the hang of it after a while. There were many hills

where you could spy out the land ahead, and if you did need to pass a stand of tuckamore, you could either work around it, find an animal track through it or look for a watercourse where tuckamore doesn't grow. There is a network of animal tracks up here going in every direction and the trick is to use these tracks rather than to follow them. It is very easy to get drawn off course once you get on one, especially if there are boot marks in it. One hazard was stepping into a deep bog, so our poles were in constant use checking any dubious looking ground before stepping on it. This was particularly true when following a moose track through tuckamore, because the tracks are so narrow the moose would churn any muddy patch into a deep bog. Sometimes the only way through, was to risk getting scratched up and tearing your clothes by pushing into the tuckamore on one side or by trying to straddle the mud hole with one foot on each side. You couldn't really use the tuckamore itself for support as it was so spiny you would get splinters in your hands if you tried.

We took many photographs. I think one of our best was one that Malcolm took on the top of Gros Morne when we got rather too close for comfort to a big bull caribou, who showed his annoyance by pawing the ground with his foot.

As a team we had our ups and downs, but altogether we were a happy cohesive group. I would recommend this hike to anyone looking for an unusual challenge.

