

FOGO ISLAND
CANADA

Preface: Her money was made in California but Zita Cobb put it to work on the island she left as a 16-year-old. The result has been Fogo Island’s startling revitalisation and a heady lesson in localism. And it goes to show that with determination almost anywhere can be your base.

Population: 2,400
Key trades: geo-tourism, fishing and hospitality
Time to register a business: 1 day
Annual hours of sunshine: 1,600
International flights: Gander International Airport is an hour’s drive away and offers several daily flights to Toronto’s Pearson international airport, Canada’s busiest hub

Quote: *“There was a time when people wondered what they would do if they couldn’t fish”*

Forty-five minutes from the coast of Newfoundland proper, Fogo island is home to 2,400 people and is a perfect case study in entrepreneurial determination that other rural communities can take a cue from.

The island’s regeneration is thanks to a returning native’s vision and grit. Her name is Zita Cobb and what she has done is proof that the best ideas can bear fruit in the rockiest of ground. Cobb left Fogo Island at 16 and eventually became CFO of hi-tech company JDS Fitel in Ottawa. She retired early in 2001, returned to Fogo Island and established the Shorefast Foundation, a charity that uses her earnings for the island’s future. “I had more money than I needed to live a life. How could I set it free?” says Cobb.

First she founded Fogo Island Arts, a series of residencies in four modernist studios dotted around the area, built by Bergen-based architect Todd Saunders. Artists and writers visit, mingle, get inspired and create.

Next came the Shorefast Business Assistance Fund, a micro-lending scheme to help create small businesses and alleviate the reliance on fishing as the sole economic provider. Applicants include Nicole Decker-Torraville who started a successful café before taking over the lease of a shop and converting it into Growlers ice-cream parlour. Her ingredients and recipes are sourced locally, her proud contribution to the island’s industry.

Other businesses helped by the fund include bed-and-breakfasts, a taxi firm and greenhouses that extend the farming season. “There was a time when people wondered what they could do if they couldn’t fish,” Decker-Torraville says, referring to the stoic fishermen displaced by changes in regulations who chose to stay anyway. “But now when I see these people who have stayed, their faces are not sad anymore. They’re happy.”

Fogo Island Inn is Cobb’s latest venture. It is intended to pull together the smaller businesses, offer consistent employment opportunities for islanders young and old and open up Fogo Island to the curious, intrepid tourist. Long and timber-clad, it features 29 sea-facing rooms, a rooftop sauna, cinema, library and art gallery. Its structure is a nod to the island’s architectural vernacular.

The inn has even drawn new residents to Fogo Island. Among them is Curtis Burns, who started up Flat Earth Coffee. “It’s a new skill I can bring because Fogo Island is traditionally a tea-based community,” he says.

Or as Cobb puts it: “The goal is not to take anything away from the island but only adding to it.” — (M)



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01 Architects of the Inn (left to right): Kingman Brewster, Joseph Kellner, Eric Ratkowski and Nick Herder
02 Fogo Island’s coastline
03 Ladies of the textile guild



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04 Miniature fishing stage in the community of Tilting
05 Squish Studio artists’ residence
06 Zita Cobb of the Shorefast Foundation



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On the ground

- 1 Engage local communities. Because of its far-flung locale, local residents have had to do things on their own. In the process they’ve developed useful skills from making furniture to quilting.
- 2 Returning residents and creatives have opened up Fogo’s world view. They are receptive to new ideas, drawing the best from around the globe and adapting them to the local context.
- 3 Band together. Thanks to a small population and guilds, people from different parts of the island have a long history of working together. Tap into these community structures and networks.
- 4 It’s not just the artists who have to be creative; entrepreneurs must take an imaginative approach, too. Look for gaps in the market and fill them.
- 5 Think about the seasons. Winters can be harsh and worth keeping in mind in the longer term when developing your business.