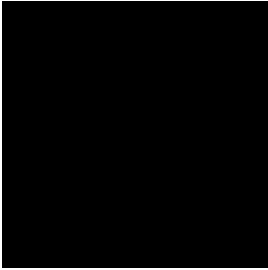


# WHEN THE GOING WAS GOOD

## FROZEN IN TIME, GANDER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT RECALLS THE GLAMOUR DAYS OF TRAVEL



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Visitors to the island of Newfoundland, the easternmost part of Canada, are traditionally welcomed with a Screech In. This time-honored ceremony, by which one attains honorary Newfoundlander status, involves kissing a cod on the lips – or, absent that, a puffin’s posterior – and downing a shot of screech rum, Atlantic Canada’s “golden elixir.”

An esteemed, if somewhat grotesque ritual, it has been foisted upon many an unsuspecting visitor, including foreign dignitaries and heads of state. His Royal Highness Prince Philip was Screeched In by his enthusiastic hosts when he was the guest of honor, alongside Queen Elizabeth, at the red-carpet inauguration of a new terminal at Gander International Airport in 1959.

At that point, Gander was the most important airport in the world. On the route between New York and London, trans-Atlantic flights had to land there to refuel, so everybody flying between North America and Europe stopped off at the “Crossroads of the World,”

as it became known.

First opened in 1938, its landing field was the biggest ever constructed. Business skyrocketed with the onset of mass commercial flight in the post-war era, and major renovations were undertaken in the late fifties to accommodate the stream of passengers in transit. Seeking to project a modern, stylish image of Canada, the government commissioned a futuristic terminal filled with avant-garde art and furniture. Local daily *The Beacon* triumphantly declared that the newly refurbished airport “is bound to convince every first time arrival from overseas that this, then, is paradise.”

But paradise soon became frozen in time. With the advent of jet fuel, stopovers became unnecessary; by the early 1960’s, traffic had slowed to a trickle. Preserved to this day, the terminal is a time capsule from the heady days when travel was exotic and airports were beacons of the future, destinations in and of themselves.

These days, traveling to Gander, population 9,650, is itself like going back in time; Air Canada only flies there with tiny, rickety twin-turboprop aircraft. Walking into the international terminal, one enters a shrine of jet age design.

“It’s still one of the most beautiful, most important modernist rooms in the country, if not *the* most important,” explains Alan C. Elder, design curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. “Gander was about Canada rethinking its place in the world, showing that it was part of what Marshall McLuhan was later to call the ‘Global Village.’”

The space, once ahead of the curve, remains out of this world. A 72 foot mural by Kenneth Lochhead, its paint tempered with over 500 dozen eggs, looms over a living museum. The terrazzo floor is a Mondrian-esque caprice that children once used for hopscotch-type games. “There’s a playfulness to the room,” says Mr. Elder, “but it’s also so sophisticated. You’d just like to carry the whole thing off.”

The mid-century masterpieces impeccably arranged on the geometric flooring are Canadian originals: Prismasteel seating designed by Robin Bush for manufacturer Herman Miller. Sleek black leather chairs and couches on the mezzanine seem intended for use on-board rocket ships.

Not everything has survived, however. Gone are Charles and Ray Eames’ Aluminum Group chairs upholstered with Alexander Girard striped fabric – but their charcoal fiberglass chairs are scattered about, notably opposite a long mirror in the pink, maroon and gray powder room. Looking somewhat forlorn, they conjure visions of starlets adjusting their astrakhan collars.

“A lot of very important people have sat in those chairs,” muses Gary R. Vey, the airport’s president and chief executive. “If they could talk it would be really fascinating to hear what they’d say.”

Mr. Vey’s office is full of orange leather Jacques Guillon seats that once occupied the

airport's Distinguished Visitors Suite. "I still remember that furniture," says Ron Jones, former head of catering. "One time, I was getting everyone wets" – drinks – "and the Empress of Iran stopped in with the full embassy entourage. She was a very statuesque woman, very beautiful. When she went to sit down, the straps on the bottom of the chair gave way and her tail feathers hit the deck. Boom! Her legs were right up in the air. Everybody tried to look away – some more successfully than others."

The VIP room's guest list reads like a who's who of 20<sup>th</sup> century arts, ideas and politics. On any given day, Marlene Dietrich or the King of Sweden could get off the plane – and they did. The Beatles first set foot on North American soil here. Frank Sinatra tried to butt in line at the bar, and was asked to wait his turn. Jackie O., Churchill, Krushchev, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, Richard Nixon, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Ingrid Bergman - the list of signatories fills encyclopedia-sized ledgers. Gander resembled a real-life version of those Edward Hopper "Nighthawks" knockoffs with Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley all at one desolate – but spectacularly lit - airport terminal.

"When I was a teenybopper, we were out tobogganing one day when Fidel Castro and his bodyguards came to join us," reminisces Marilyn Stuckless, who used to be the airport's commercial developer. "It was the first time they'd ever seen snow, and they were playing around like children."

The anecdotes are like a mainline into the Twilight Zone. "My memory is very vivid of the night I met and chatted with Professor Albert Einstein," writes former gift shop employee Mary Smeaton MacDonald in a pamphlet commemorating Gander's 1997 Airlines Reunion. What did they talk about? "Oh, the theory of relativity."

On Sundays, the entire town congregated at the terminal, eating Brookfield ice cream and watching the jet set swoop into town. Because security was a non-issue, locals were able to mingle with travelers in the terminal.

"We were so curious to see how the rest of the world looked and dressed and how they wore their hair," says Ms. Stuckless. "It was like a big club - you'd go up to someone and start speaking to them. I sat down next to Mohammed Ali when he was here, because that's what Newfoundlanders do. This is a little island in the Atlantic, and it's very relaxed compared to what most people are accustomed to. You could almost call us a bunch of innocents."

Indeed, that laid back, charming demeanor is what put 'the Rock' (as Newfoundland is affectionately known) on the map again in recent years. During 9/11, dozens of planes over the Atlantic were forced to land in Gander, and locals took thousands of stranded travelers into their homes, providing food and care. This hospitality was reciprocated with an outpouring of gratitude that culminating last December President Bush's first and only official trip to Canada, wherein he offered thanks to the maritime provinces.

"We Ganderites are open, not too critical, friendly, generous, and we also like a good

time,” says former Mayor Douglas B. Sheppard. On his wall is an old plaque that reads: “I’m a Canadian, yes; I am also a citizen of planet earth and a brother of every other man.”

This sentiment, displayed to outsiders during 9/11, is ubiquitous in Gander: David Hanrahan, a traffic control manager, provided a blank cheque (without even voiding it) in lieu of a business card while being interviewed for this story. “Gander was a little town where big things happened,” Mr. Hanrahan said. “My fondest memory is of the airport hummin’ and buzzin’, when it was bustling with thousands of people day and night.”

Traces of that lost splendor permeate Gander International Airport. Compared to the purgatory of contemporary flight, Gander is redolent of the golden age of travel. Just standing in that room recalls a time when in-flight meals were served with real china, silverware and crystal.

Nowadays, when the best we can hope for is a hassle-free trip, Gander continues to handle aircraft, predominantly cargo and military planes. The gigantic runway also serves as an alternate landing base for space shuttles and an emergency drop-off point for air-rage passengers. It’s not unusual to see soldiers in desert fatigues, returning from Iraq, reclining on the modular furniture. Private jets land here regularly to refuel: John Travolta, Mariah Carey and Bill and Hillary Clinton are among the recent visitors to the fabled VIP suite. (For a period in the 1970s and 1980s, the airport’s main source of income was Soviet-bloc aircraft, but mass defections, wherein passengers would flee into the surrounding woods, led to a crackdown by immigration authorities.)

Gander still exerts a magnetic attraction. A glass corridor has been built to accommodate those who come to view the international terminal. Despite being in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by turnip farms, moose, and the occasional polar bear, this small town was, for a brief spell, the most cosmopolitan destination in the world. Unlike most travel hubs, impersonal and indifferent, Gander has always embraced newcomers with open arms and puckered fish-lips. Like a repository of half-forgotten memories, Gander International Airport reminds us of a time when the idea of the world getting smaller filled us with hope, not fear.

- Adam Leith Gollner