

Right and bowhead whales, once plentiful in the waters of coastal Labrador, attracted whalers from the Basque region of northeast Spain and southwest France during the 16th century. A thriving industry based on the production of whale oil for sale in Europe developed along the Labrador coast during the mid to late 1500s. The busiest port for this historic enterprise was the sheltered harbour of Red Bay.



A Thriving Whale Fishery

For about 70 years beginning in the 1530s, whalers from the Basque region of Spain and France used the harbour at Red Bay as a seasonal base for hunting whales and processing whale oil for sale in lucrative European markets. Each spring as many as twelve ships and upwards of 2000 men arrived after a dangerous voyage from Europe to set up operations at Red Bay, one of about a dozen seasonal whaling stations along the south Labrador coast.

History Unveiled – Rediscovering Red Bay's Secrets

By the 1580s, the number of whales in the Strait of Belle Isle had declined and Basque whaling at Red Bay had ended by the early years of the 17th century. Archival research in the Basque Country led to the discovery of the archaeological remains of the whaling station in 1977. Research has since revealed an exceptional example of the world's first large-scale industrial whaling and production of whale oil.



Red Bay Basque
Whaling Station
inscribed on the World
Heritage List in 2013

La Station baleinière
basque de Red Bay
inscrit sur la Liste du
patrimoine mondial en 2013

Red Bay Basque Whaling Station represents one of the best preserved and most extensive examples of a large-scale, pre-industrial, commercial whaling operation found anywhere in the world.

Photo: Sheldon Stone



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History Under The Sea

Underwater archaeology has played a key role in our understanding of Basque whaling at Red Bay. Four 16th-century whaling vessels have been found here in the harbour, along with several smaller boats used by the whalers.

One of the galleons, believed to be the San Juan, which was lost at Red Bay during a storm in the

fall of 1565, has been completely excavated, recorded and reburied in the harbour. It was extremely well-preserved by the cold water and silt of the harbour. Study of this ship has greatly advanced our understanding of the evolution of shipbuilding during the 16th century, and it is also key to building a replica of this vessel in the Basque Country.

A nearly complete chalupa, a boat used by the whalers to hunt and kill whales, was found underneath the hull of the San Juan. Parks Canada underwater archaeologists retrieved the chalupa and took it to a lab to uncover its secrets. After 13 years of study and conservation it was reassembled and returned to Red Bay for you to discover.

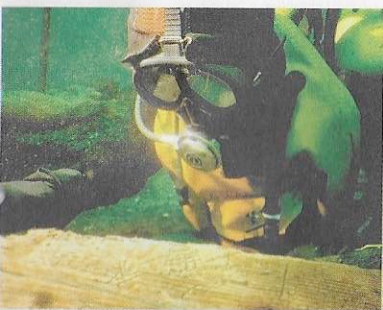


Photo: Denis Page



Photo: Chris Rearson

Spend Some Quality Time With Us

- See the restored chalupa at the Visitor Orientation Centre.
- Explore an incredible collection of original 16th-century artifacts at the Interpretation Centre.
- Learn how researchers and archaeologists pieced together the long-forgotten story of the Basque whalers of Labrador.
- Catch a boat to nearby Saddle Island and follow the interpretive trail to the site of rendering ovens, cooperages, wharves, living quarters and a cemetery.
- Meet the “ghost” of a Basque whaler and hear tales of adventure, wrecks, and survival in 16th-century Red Bay.
- Visit the Town Hall and see the skeleton of a 16th-century bowhead whale; find out how researchers are working to protect the whales once hunted at Red Bay.
- Hike the Boney Shore Trail to a beach where 400 year-old whale bones were discarded. Spot icebergs from the lookout on the Tracey Hill Trail.
- Take home a unique hand-made souvenir of your visit.