

Labrador town of Red Bay gets World Heritage Site status

Designation granted at UNESCO committee meeting in Cambodia

[CBC News](#)

Posted: Jun 22, 2013 9:28 AM NT

Last Updated: Jun 22, 2013 4:20 PM NT

73

A tiny town in Labrador has joined famed sites like Machu Picchu and the Taj Mahal as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The United Nations body made the decision at a committee meeting in Cambodia this weekend.

"We've always known that Red Bay was unique and special," the town's mayor, Wanita Stone, told CBC News. "And now everybody in the world knows also — and also agrees with us."



[Red Bay](#)

Red Bay is being recognized for its Basque history — a history that was all but forgotten.

Long before commercial fishing, and the arrival of permanent settlers, boats from Spain and France filled Red Bay's harbour.

It was all part of Canada's first oil boom — an oil boom of a very different type. Basque whalers hunted their prey for their valuable oil.

Massive bones are evidence of a thriving whaling industry centuries ago.

But for decades, other clues such as clay roof tiles were overlooked. That was the case until the 1970s, when a researcher matched them with tiles still used in Spain's Basque country.

"So they were part of our landscape, part of our lives," Cindy Gibbons of Parks Canada said.

"But we had no idea what they were exactly."

As a student more than 25 years ago, Gibbons helped awaken Red Bay's mysterious past.

Archeologists dug up Basque artifacts from the 1500s, including the graves of whalers.

There were Basque shipwrecks nearby — the oldest in Canadian waters.

"There was very little known about the history of Canada between Jacques Cartier in the 1530s and [Samuel de] Champlain in the early 1600s," Gibbons said.

"There was really a gap in the history of the country, and the work that we've done here over the last 30 years has filled that in."

Residents delighted with designation

Local people couldn't be happier with their new international recognition.

"A small community of 200 people in Southern Labrador... to be known around the world — that's amazing," Red Bay resident Verna Brown said.



Cindy Gibbons was a student 25 years ago when the first steps were taken to unearth Red Bay's hidden — and historic — past. (CBC)

The UNESCO title is usually a boon for tourism. But people in Red Bay are determined to stay true to their community.

"Just keep it very simple, and very plain," Brown said.

"That's what people want to see ... I'd like to see more things on the go here and more attractions to keep the tourists here, at the same time, not to go too big too fast."

Mayor Wanita Stone said the designation represents a "new beginning" for the town.

"Our young people are moving away, but hopefully this will bring them all back for work in Red Bay," Stone said.

Red Bay becomes Labrador's first World Heritage Site, the province's third, and Canada's 17th.

UNESCO granted the designation to a total of six new locations. Qatar and Fiji got their first World Heritage Sites, while others were added in Niger, Japan and Portugal.

2 recommendations made

Back in Labrador, a Basque flag flies alongside the Maple Leaf at the Red Bay Heritage Site.

While UNESCO did grant World Heritage Site status to the Labrador town, it made two recommendations to the Canadian government:

- Notify the international body of any nearby agricultural or mining project "which could potentially have a negative impact" on the property;
- Take steps toward "Improving and deepening the interpretation of the site for visitors."

Modern-day Red Bay was built unwittingly on top of the old Basque settlement.

Today, that history has put the tiny Labrador town on the global map.

