

# TRAVEL+ LEISURE

## 20 Years Later: The Little Town in Newfoundland That Welcomed Nearly 7,000 Strangers on 9/11

As captured in the Broadway musical "Come From Away," the Canadian community of Gander welcomed in nearly 7,000 strangers in the midst of America's darkest days.

BY RACHEL CHANG | SEPTEMBER 11, 2021



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There's one thing that's for sure about the community of Appleton, just outside of Gander in Newfoundland: "It's the Little Apple and not the Big Apple," Derm Flynn, who was the mayor of the town in 2001, told *Travel + Leisure*. "We'd never get any accidental tourists to Newfoundland."

But on Sept. 11, 2001, the community was flooded with accidental visitors – nearly 7,000 of them – when the airspace over the United States was closed as the horrific events of 9/11 cast one of the darkest days on American history 20 years ago today. Suddenly, 38 commercial planes and four military aircraft were diverted to Gander International Airport.

Fortunately, Gander was used to getting international guests passing through – after all, the town was built around the airport, chosen for its strategic location on Canada's eastern island in the early days of transatlantic flying when planes would need to stop between North America and Europe. "Gander exists because of its airport," the town's current mayor, Percy Farwell, tells T+L of the airfield that was once the largest in the world. "We like to say in the Newfoundland context, we're not an outpost, we're an airport."



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Welcoming in the global community became etched in its DNA. "Our Sunday afternoon entertainment as kids would be to jump on our bikes and go to the airport, get an ice cream, and sit in the middle of that beautiful international terminal and watch the world come and go," Farwell, who has lived in Gander for more than five decades, said. "Security wasn't there at the time, so we'd mingle with the passengers. We're a small community in the middle of a relatively isolated island in the northern Atlantic, but we were very much exposed to the rest of the world... That probably helped prepare us for what happened in September 2001."

Indeed, the events of 9/11 unveiled the global compassion woven into the community's culture. As it became clear that the stranded passengers – or "plane people," as the locals affectionately dubbed them – were going to be there for days, they were eventually let off the planes, some after nearly 24 hours on the grounded aircraft. Without hesitation, the Newfoundlanders opened their homes to let them shower; their school gyms, community centers, and hotels to let them sleep and eat warm meals; and their hearts to the



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unknowns following a tragedy of such magnitude.

"People did it without any instructions – it was something that really came naturally to our people and volunteers," Flynn said. "In Newfoundland, 99% of the population are huggers." As proof through their actions, Flynn and his wife, Diane, each invited three strangers to stay with them in their modest three-bedroom home. "Our house is always open, quite frankly," he said. And they were just one of the families who did so throughout the region.

The unusual coming together of strangers put everyone on a level playing field. "All religions, all politics, all whatever were being treated exactly the same," Flynn said of the nearly 100 nationalities that were represented, being forced to eat the "craziest foods," including local favorites like moose and rabbit stew. "They were all being fed the same kind of buffet-style food. One guy might have been a millionaire and the other person next to him might have been [down to their] last dime – it didn't matter. This was a time when people were thrust into a circumstance and situation that they were all the same."

The empathetic kindness that was intrinsically showcased on a spontaneous and grand scale touched so many lives during such a dark time that the story found its way to books, documentaries, and most prominently, the 2017 Broadway musical ["Come From Away,"](#) which will reopen at Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on Sept. 21.

The attention wasn't ever something the community expected when they sprang into action, but two decades later, it has completely shaped not just Gander, but also the world's perspective of how essential embedded goodness can be.

That spirit now draws so many to visit the region. "Your typical tourist coming to Newfoundland and Labrador was not looking for Gander," Farwell said of tourism before 2001. "They were looking for whales and icebergs – we don't have whales and icebergs in Gander. But they left with the biggest impression being the experience they had with the people they met."

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Farwell recognizes that kind of expectation can be hard to deliver, as they work on building out more tangible offerings where the local interaction comes organically as a side dish. "We're very cognizant of what precipitated all the positive attention," he said. "It was precipitated by horrific events that we wish had never happened – we wish nobody showed up here that day for that reason, but they did. And our people responded instinctively."

The Flynns also noticed that desire from people to catch the Newfoundlander spirit as they traveled to premieres of "Come From Away" around the globe, including on London's West End and in Melbourne, Australia. "The audiences swarmed us and wanted to talk and ask the question, 'Did it really happen?'" he said. So, about eight years ago, they started inviting strangers into their home again by creating [Meet the Flynns](#), in which guests can come into their homes



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and reflect on the impact of 9/11 over a cup of tea. They then take them over to the Appleton Peace Park, which has been renamed Derm Flynn Riverfront Peace Park, on the Gander River banks, where a memorial with a piece of the World Trade Center towers stands alongside a children's playground that was built by money the "plane people" pooled together in 2001 in hopes of paying it forward to the next generation in Appleton.

Looking back on what happened 20 years ago now comes with mixed emotions. "This week has a degree of difficulty, but it also has a degree of pleasant thoughts because of so many nice people we met at a time when it was much needed," Flynn said. "We're honored to be a part of that whole experience and sympathize with the families that lost their loved ones."

While the small community definitely receives more time in the spotlight than before 2001, in a way, they're still just living life the way they know best. "I don't know that the people here have changed," Farwell said. "We've probably changed the way we look at each other or that we're looking at ourselves, and we probably appreciate more the value of what we do take for granted in what we



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consider just normal human interaction. But it also shows how significant it is that you can change the world without doing anything outside of your own doorstep."

And for those who do seek a bit of that Newfoundland inspiration, Flynn recommends allowing at least 10 days to two weeks to visit in order to properly soak it all in. "Don't book reservations in such a way that you're forced to be constantly in the car trying to get from point A to point B – we are Newfoundland, not Disneyland," Flynn, whose son runs [O'Reilly's Irish Newfoundland Pub](#) in St. John's, said. "Come for the scenery, come for the people, and don't be shy to talk to a stranger... In all likelihood, they'll invite you to their house."

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