

# Long Run Home

Philanthropist and social entrepreneur **Zita Cobb** takes on the trials and trails of Fogo Island



By **Valerie Howes**

Growing up on Fogo Island, N.L. in the 1960s, Zita Cobb loved *copying* – leaping from ice pan to ice pan across the thawing Atlantic. It was good agility training for the boys who’d grow up to be sealers. For Cobb, the only sister to six brothers, it laid the groundwork for trail running, decades later: “You let your body make fast decisions,” she says. “The minute your brain gets involved, it’s over.”

Running helps balance the life of the founder of the Shorefast Foundation, a not-for-profit organization spearheading arts, eco-tourism and social entrepre-

neurship programs. The Foundation has been instrumental in resuscitating the economy of a population decimated by the collapse of the cod fisheries.

Cobb herself had left the island with her parents and younger brother at 17, when her fisherman father could no longer compete with the trawlers stripping local waters of marine life. She studied business in Ottawa, then embarked on a remarkable career that culminated in her heading up a multi-billion-dollar merger for California-based tech giant, JDS Uniphase. After investing in the dot-com boom, she retired one of Canada’s wealthiest women in 2001 at age 43.

The Newfoundlander sailed the world next, decompressing from a lifestyle of long-haul flights, high-stakes meetings and “a lot of being stuck inside under fluorescent lights.” But by 2006, she was ready to go home to Fogo Island. “I’m made of this place,” she says. By then the population had dropped from 5,000 to 2,700. Jobs were scarce and the government spoke of cutting essential services.

Through Shorefast, Cobb created a 29-room, luxury inn looking out to Iceberg Alley, which has garnered global attention since opening last summer. She launched an international artist residency program and brought in consultants to help islanders start their own businesses, showcasing local culture and heritage, and profit from the influx of tourists. In 2010, for the first time in decades, enrolment in the local kindergarten class rose.

But sometimes Cobb’s schedule feels as charged now as at the height of her executive career. “I need running to create healthy stopping points,” she says. These days she logs around 1,200K a year. However her maiden run, in February 2000, barely spanned a city block.

“I went out to train for Run for the Reach in Ottawa, but I couldn’t get from my driveway to the end of my street. I was qualified as an aerobics instructor, so I thought I’d get by on natural fitness, but I was wrong. A third of my lungs are calcified from childhood tuberculosis – it takes a while for them to open up.”

But she persevered. “My goal was to get to the end of the first block, and then the middle of the next, and then as far as the next.” On April 16, 2000, she ran her first 5K in 26:40.

After that, Cobb booked hotels on business trips close to rivers or city walls, with running in mind. “In China, Germany and Japan, negotiations were intense,” she recalls. “The runs were essential – good ideas come when I’m active.”

Weather determines Cobb’s routes on Fogo Island today; she describes the place as “a windscape.” “If gusts are coming in from the northeast, I’ll take Turpin’s Trail; if they’re coming from the Northwest, I’ll avoid the Great Auk,” she says.

Turpin’s Trail is near Tilting, an Irish community of sun-bleached fishing stages, picket fences and shirts billowing on clotheslines. It passes wild coves and coastal meadows of springy moss and



» Cobb built the Fogo Island Inn, an architectural gem on Fogo Island in Iceberg Alley off the northeast coast of Newfoundland

lichens. “Half the time I see caribou there,” says Cobb. “But the most distracting thing is when there are blueberries – it’s hard not to stop.” The Great Auk trail loops around a 6-ft tall bronze statue honouring an extinct bird last seen on the island. “I go out and pay my respects, stretch, then come back.”

But Cobb’s favourite trail is Lion’s Den – a hilly coastal path with “epic views and crazy rocks.” It goes through abandoned communities, where she can see the remnants of houses and gardens – a reminder of the people who came before and what’s at stake on Fogo Island now. “Running over the rocks, I feel a direct connection to everything that’s happened there,” says Cobb. “I feel the continuity of time.” **R**