

Meet Zita Cobb—Fogo Island’s Inspired Entrepreneur



Zita Cobb and her brother Tony are making things happen through the Shorefast Foundation.
Zita Cobb et son frère Tony produisent des résultats par l'entremise de la fondation Shorefast.

Fogo Island’s windswept granite shores are a one-hour ferry trip from Newfoundland’s isolated northeast coast. Inhabited by 2,700 stubbornly independent people, its declining fishery has meant many others have forsaken the outposts of Newfoundland and Labrador.

But that trend could soon be reversed, thanks to a “local girl” who has returned home with seed money, connections, and ideas to create a sustainable economy for the island. Enter Zita Cobb: a devoted philanthropist and social entrepreneur who wants to make Fogo Island a world model for rural economic transformation.

Raised in Joe Batt’s Arm and the only daughter of a family of seven children, Zita left home at 17 to attend Carleton University in Ottawa. From there, she soared to great heights. “I entered—and left—the technology boom at just the right time,” she writes. “I made good investments, worked with some of the country’s top leaders and, best of all,

I travelled the world.” In 2001, Zita retired from JDS Uniphase Corp. at age 42, and walked away with millions.

Since then, her focus has been set on harnessing Fogo Island’s culture of entrepreneurship to ensure its long-term survival. “We have a history of making our own way and rising to the challenges that threaten our existence in this place. We need to do so again,” she explains.

To help make this happen, Zita formed the Shorefast Foundation, convincing the provincial and federal governments to invest \$5 million each, to which she added \$6 million from her own pocket. Working with her brother Tony, her goal is to create a critical mass of sustainable businesses that will fit with the local culture, history and ecology, while diversifying the economy beyond the traditional fishery.

Shorefast investments aim to align Fogo Island’s resources (boatbuilding, farming and cooking, singing, innovating, and surviving in a rugged climate)

with market opportunities. Projects include the development of a luxury inn, conference centre and spa that will feature a heritage library, local art, and gourmet cuisine using local foods; a residency program for contemporary artists called the Fogo Island Arts Corporation; and investment in a farmers co-op and a return to community gardening. Shorefast has acquired five deconsecrated churches and is reviving the traditional wooden rowing boats or punts that were once prolific on the island.

New partners and new ideas are tackling old problems. “To succeed, we must act as a symphony,” Zita explains. “All of our actions, past and present, all of our hopes and dreams, must come together in concert to create a healthy whole. We must respect our heritage but not rely on it; we must find new ways to put our heritage to work. Together, we can find these new ways and use them to sustain our culture, our environment, and our economy.”