Where monsters roamed and giants played

A step back in time in Southern Alberta

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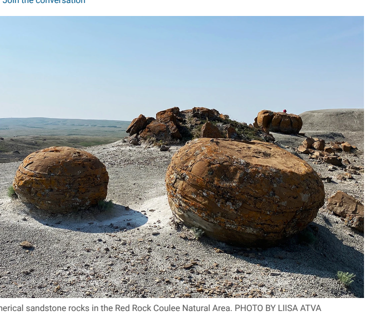

Spherical sandstone rocks in the Red Rock Coulee Natural Area. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

Sometimes you don't have to travel far – in this case only to the neighbouring province – to be immersed in another world and time. A nine-day tour of Southern Alberta this past June with Mile Zero Tours, revealed the areas ancient past and its cultural journey.

Our step into the past began in Drumheller, at the Royal Tyrell Museum, which houses one of the world's largest displays of dinosaur remains. Walk among the skeletons of: a Tyrannosaurus Rex, a 21-metre-long Ichthyosaur, and hundreds of other fossils, and life-sized reproductions. Turn the corner and the museum is suddenly alive with activity; paleontologists at work with chisels and brushes in a large modern workshop, and in the Learning Lounge, school children immersed in interactive displays, including a hand-operated dinosaur racetrack.

A dinosaur display at the Royal Tyrell Museum. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

A short drive from the museum is the Atlas Coal Mine site. With its abandoned structures, weathered wooden buildings, and a graveyard of old trucks, it's the perfect set for an old Western movie. The photos and story boards tell a compelling story of the miners' lives. In the 1930s, up to a third of contract miners earnings went to fees and costs. They had to pay; to have the weight of the coal they mined checked, for explosives they used to make their work easier, and for living arrangements which included "chicken coops with eight other miners for $18 a month," or the rent-free option of "a man cave you built from digging into the soft hillside."

Two-hours drive southeast, and not far from Medicine Hat, is the Red Rock Coulee Natural Area. That's as specific as I'll get as I promised our guide Rick, I wouldn't mention the exact location of one of his special places, (although on-line searches will.) Scattered across the landscape lay massive, rusty-red round boulders, some up to two and a half metres in diameter and dating back millions of years. "It's as if giants abandoned a game of marbles," said Rick.

An abandoned mine structures at the Atlas Coal Mine site. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

Provincial and National Parks

On the short drives between sites, we passed dramatic landscapes. In the Badlands plains drop away to reveal ravines, canyons and hoodoos carved from layers of clay, sandstone and shale.

"It's almost like the Grand Canyon," said one of my tour mates.

"It reminds me of Cappadocia, Turkiye," said another, as we hiked through hoodoos near Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park.

The prairies are an interesting mix of mustard-yellow canola fields, center pivot irrigators, wind turbines, small rodeo rinks, and rocking-horse oil pumps. Maybe not exotic to the locals but not something city dwellers see every day. As we neared the Rocky Mountains, the plains gave way to cattle ranches and rolling hills with an occasional pronghorn antelope.

Set in the Rocky Mountains, Waterton National Park, is what I envision Banff and Jasper once were – quaint, and uncrowded. Without ski hills to bring winter tourists, many hotels and businesses are open for only a few months a year. We stayed at the Prince of Wales Hotel, a fairy tale, gabled castle overlooking Waterton Lake. Built in 1927, its room are resplendent with original wooden beams and panels. The lobby with its comfy highbacked chairs, and floor-to-ceiling windows offering a spectacular view of the lake and mountains, is a delightful spot to enjoy afternoon tea.

The Prince of Wales Hotel, overlooking Waterton Lake. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

Head-Smashed In Buffalo Jump

Head-Smashed In Buffalo Jump is one of the oldest, and best-preserved buffalo jumps in North America. The Interpretive Centre exhibits and guides bring to life 6,000 years of Great Plains buffalo culture. Seventy million of these majestic animals once roamed the plains and were a crucial resource to the Blackfoot tribes. Groups of hunters herded the buffalo into drive lanes, and then one brave soul ran in front of the herd luring them toward and over the cliff. In the movie the runner jumps to safety just before the edge of the cliff. "That's the Hollywood version suitable for children," explained our guide.

Another tour highlight was the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre at the site of Canada's deadliest rockslide. In addition to exhibits and a viewing platform, the theatre plays a 30-minute movie depicting the morning of April 29, 1903, when 110 million tonnes of rock thundered down Turtle Mountain and buried part of the town of Frank. Seventeen men and a horse were trapped underground as their families waited for them to come home. I won't be a spoiler and reveal their fates.

Hiking through hoodoos near Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

Our last stop was Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, where in 1877 the Blackfoot signed a historic treaty. The museum, set on a high-windswept bluff with soaring views, is an architectural beauty evoking a 19,000-sq-metre teepee adorned with painted feathers. We joined a diverse group of guests, including about 40 elementary students from the nearby town of Vulcan, and a dozen refugees from Congo who settled in the area only weeks earlier. We were entertained by Indigenous dancers and singers wearing beaded, embroidered clothes, feather headdresses, and shaking rattles. After the show, we were treated to a lunch of barbequed burgers on Bannock. Celebrating Indigenous culture was a befitting finale to a cultural and historic journey of Alberta's past.

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