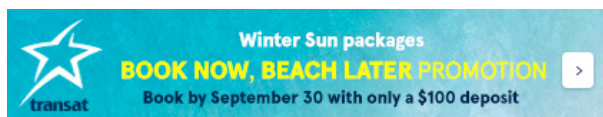




Travel Industry TODAY



HOME

ABOUT VIDEOS COLUMNISTS CONTACT SEARCH



IGNITING THE SPIRIT

Experiencing the excitement of
Winnipeg

Steve Gillick

[SHARE ON FACEBOOK](#)



12 JUN 2017: Apparently I have the wing span of a Great Grey Owl! Jacques Bourgeois, the marketing coordinator at Oak Hammock Marsh, just north of Winnipeg, was simply stating fact as I stretched the tape measure from fingertip to fingertip. He quickly added that the Great Grey Owl was the

Provincial Bird of Manitoba so I should feel honoured.



And then we got into even more weighty topics as I stepped on the special Bird Diet scale. It indicated that if I was a bird getting ready for the migration from the Yukon to the Gulf of Mexico, I would need to eat 88 pizzas every day for 2 weeks to prepare. Sadly I had to decline the challenge, however I happily participated in the popular “Bird in the Hand” encounter.

This is one of the Canadian Signature Experiences that was created to counter the belief that travel in Canada consists of nothing more than “Mounties, Moose and Mountains”, but also to provide travellers with the opportunity to ‘do something’; to interact with a destination. For this encounter, a number of birds were removed from the capture net, and then banded, measured and weighed. Afterward I was allowed to delicately release two Yellow-rumped Warblers back into the wild.

The Marsh is a great place for outdoor enthusiasts, birders, families, kids and photographers, and

aside from bird sightings, there are frogs, ground squirrels, muskrats, beavers, interactive activities and a paddle in a Voyageur Canoe.



But for those looking for slightly larger critters, you can head over to Fort Whyte Alive in the southwest area of Winnipeg. On the Buffalo Safari our bus entered an enclosure and stopped in the middle of a herd of 30 Bison (Plains Buffalo) who are happily doing what Buffalo do: roaming, sleeping, grazing, nursing, scratching, cavorting and wallowing in the dirt. We stood in the stairwell with the bus doors open to take some 'up close and personal' photos, at which time a few young adults and calves had serious thoughts of joining us inside the bus. Wisely, after a few seconds of deliberation, they bolted in the opposite direction.

The Buffalo is the official Manitoba provincial animal and figures prominently in a visit to the renowned Manitoba Museum. Near the entrance, a full-scale diorama depicts a Métis Buffalo Hunt, emphasizing not only the importance of the Buffalo to the Indigenous people and fur traders (they depended on Pemmican, powdered Buffalo meat, for a light-weight food that could be easily be carried into the wilderness), but also the significant role that the Métis played in the very creation of Manitoba. The Museum's collection of 26,000 artifacts from the Hudson's Bay Company, along with a number of exhibits, provides insight

into the lives of the Dene, Ojibway, Cree, Algonquin and Inuit.

And for those fascinated by the culture of the Inuit, there's no better place to spend time than the WAG, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, which boasts the largest collection of Inuit Art in the world. Darlene Wight, the Curator of Inuit Art allowed us into "the vault" to see some of the 13,000 sculptures, prints, drawings, textiles, dolls and clothing that were being readied for display in the new Inuit Art Gallery which will open in 2019. As a great admirer of Inuit sculpture, I suggested that the Museum start a sleep-over program inside the Vault...but I guess their overwhelming silence meant 'no'.



We were treated to more art when we stopped for lunch at Neechi Commons. Louise Champagne, the President of the Co-op, explained that "Neechi" is a Cree word implying 'relationships' and 'connections' with the community, and therefore it's fitting that the Commons includes Neechi Niche, a consignment store selling Indigenous crafts and art, a grocery store, Kookum's (Grandmother's) Bakery that specializes in Bannock, and the Bison Berry Restaurant. Here you can feast on an entire wall showcasing the work of local artists, as you enjoy the great food. My Bonnie Burger (a Buffalo Patty with spinach, goat cheese, mozzarella and sautéed onions on a Bannock Bun) was so good and filling that I wasn't

able to finish my dessert of Wild Rice Pudding with fresh blueberries.

And the food situation in the city is, in a word, wonderful. Whether it's the food court in the Forks Market or the incredible array of restaurants in The Exchange District, the emphasis is on freshness and imagination. The 'King Salmon' at Peasant Cookery will make you a fan for life.

One of the best places to learn about Manitoba's history is at The Forks, the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in the heart of downtown Winnipeg. Our Parks Canada walking tour ("6000 years in 60 minutes") emphasized the importance of the Forks as a meeting place for Indigenous people for thousands of years, but also as the centre of European settlement after the fur trade ended, and then the centre of attention when Louis Riel, the Métis leader created a Provisional Government in 1869 that led to the Manitoba Act and the creation of the province, one year later.

In fact, the spirit of Riel is closer than you realize. From the Forks, the Riel Esplanade takes you over the Provencher Bridge to the east side of the Red River and the community of Saint Boniface, where a huge bust of Louis Riel graces the front yard of the Museum. On the inside, Vania Gagnon, the Director, revealed that her family roots go back to the late 18th century when a member of the Lagimodière family (Vania's maiden name) married into the Riel family. Vania is Louis Riel's first cousin, five times removed!

And with Indigenous history and rights in mind, it was fitting to visit the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The iconic building was designed by Antoine Predock to represent Canada, to attract people from all around the world, and to reflect an Indigenous perspective. The Museum is based on

the theme that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”, with a sub-theme that moves visitors “from darkness to light”, as the galleries present a dialogue on human rights throughout history.

Aside from exploring the Museum galleries we took one of the themed tours, The Mikinak-Keya Spirit Tour, that explained the Indigenous perspective, from the architectural roots of the building (connecting it to Mother Earth) to the Tower of Hope (connecting it to the sky), while the journey along the way revealed the teachings of the Seven Sacred Animals. It was a fascinating experience.



We also had the pleasure of attending Winnipeg’s annual Manito Ahbee Festival, where the theme “Ignite Your Spirit” included singing, dancing and drumming performances and competitions, showcasing incredibly colourful ceremonial dress,

amazing talent, and a lot of smiles, laughter, energy, conversation and fun.

Winnipeg is one dynamic city. While I had been there on quick business trips over the years, I never had the time to explore and connect with the city. I discovered that it has so much to offer to so many special interests. For travellers looking to explore Canada, this is a great place to start.



Releasing a Harris' Sparrow in Oak Hammock Marsh, after it was banded



Email



Share on Facebook



Twitter



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

[Read more from Steve Gillick](#)