

Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park

Route: From the intersection of 16th Avenue and 68th Street NE, drive 92 kilometres east on the Trans-Canada Highway. Go south on Secondary 842, through Cluny, for 7 kilometres to the Blackfoot Crossing Interpretive Centre parking lot.

Driving Distance: About 100 kilometres

Note: The Blackfoot Crossing Interpretive Centre is open 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily from mid-May to mid-October, with reduced hours the rest of the year. Admission charged. Phone toll free 1-888-654-6274 or (403) 734-5171. www.blackfootcrossing.ca



Until recently, Alberta's only world-class Aboriginal interpretive facility was Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. Now there's a second: Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, a \$25-million project which officially opened in 2007. Indeed, it may well eclipse the former in the splendour of its interpretive centre and in its location—perched on the rim of the broad, winding Bow River Valley.

A national historic site, the 800-hectare Blackfoot Crossing celebrates the rich cultural heritage of the Blackfoot Confederacy,

which long ruled the plains of what became southern Alberta. The park includes the archaeological remains of an ancient and rare earth lodge village; the gravesite of the great Blackfoot chief, Crowfoot; and one of the largest intact prairie river ecosystems in North America.

But the showpiece is its interpretive centre. Designed by Calgary architect Ron Goodfellow with guidance from native elders, the centre is an inspired reinterpretation of Blackfoot culture. The front incorporates symbolic buffalo drive lanes and a glass eagle feather fan that casts colourful shadows across the entryway. Around the back is a magnificent amphitheatre, with high glass walls of gold (representing the earth) and blue (the sky) topped by crisscrossing, steel Sundance poles.

Inside the 62,000-square-foot building, this glass wall provides an enormous picture window overlooking the river valley. But most visitors will be engrossed in the story of the Blackfoot, told in displays located in and around five lofty teepees.

Historically, the Blackfoot Confederacy was an alliance of three plains peoples sharing a common language and culture—today's Blood, Peigan and Blackfoot Nations. (The latter are properly known as the Siksika Nation, and Blackfoot Crossing is located on its reserve.) The confederacy fiercely ruled the southern plains for centuries, first using dogs to haul their nomadic possessions and then switching to horseback, in the 1700s, to hunt and wage war against outside tribes.

Though they later traded for European goods, the confederacy refused to allow fur trading posts on their lands and effectively blocked the passage of explorers and traders. But with the disappearance of the massive buffalo herds and the introduction of two deadly white poisons—liquor and diseases such as smallpox—their numbers by 1870 shrank to some 6,150 people living in 760 teepees. Led by Crowfoot, they thus reluctantly signed Treaty No. 7 in 1877, ceding their traditional territories in exchange for the three reserves they now live on. (While visiting on the 100th anniversary of the treaty signing, Prince Charles suggested a cultural centre be developed on this historic site; three decades later, this largest First

Nations owned and operated interpretive facility in Canada was completed.)

Although the interpretive displays acknowledge this dark chapter and that of the residential schools that followed, the overall mood is celebratory and proud. Alongside the modern recording of voices and interactive displays on the Blackfoot language are exquisite artifacts from the late 1900s, including bows and arrows and powwow dance costumes.

After exploring these exhibits, leave sufficient time to visit at least one of the outdoor sites, on your own or with a Siksika guide; they also provide tours of the interpretive centre. One gravel trail leads north past two monuments—to Poundmaker, another visionary chief, and the Treaty 7 signing—and stops at Crowfoot's gravesite.

Another trail descends steeply from the interpretive centre into the Bow River flats. It's well worth the approximately 15-minute walk, for those willing to make the equally steep ascent on the return. Just after passing a modern assembly of teepees and accompanying interpretive signage, the trail levels off in a cool, amazingly dense poplar forest this far from the river. Even on a hot summer afternoon, when I visited, there was an amazing chorus of birds—including the drilling of two downy woodpeckers.

A large clearing just beyond is where Blackfoot for centuries set up large winter teepee camps, close to shelter, water and game. The nearby river offered one of the few area crossings of the Bow River, hence the name Blackfoot Crossing.

The trail ends at the site of a rare Aboriginal earth lodge village, which featured a fortified palisade wall, a moat-like trench and half-moon dwellings of logs and mounded earth. Though its exact origins are a mystery, it is believed to have been built around 1740 by a native group from the U.S. Dakotas that migrated northwest and briefly lived here. The abandoned site was seen by several white visitors in the mid-1870s and, much later, excavated by archaeologists, who found animal bones and fragments of pottery and beads.