

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park's spectacular cliffs protect the greatest concentration of native rock art on North America's Great Plains.

Blackfoot Blacktop

South of Calgary, where some of the first people may have penetrated the New World after the last Ice Age, the terrain transitions from mountain to plain to badland. As Bill Corbett discovers, it's a place where the flavour of the world before recorded time is powerful.

Alberta is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2005 as one of Canada's youngest provinces. But dig through a few metres of southern Alberta prairie soil, and you'll unearth a sophisticated human history stretching back more than six thousand years.

The Blackfoot Confederacy – comprising the Peigan (Piikani), Blackfoot (Siksika), and Blood (Kainaiwa) nations – has been a fixture on the southern Alberta plains almost since the continental glaciers receded. Much of its rich history can be traced on this looping tour from Calgary to near the Montana border, mostly on uncrowded, divided freeways and on the finest secondary highways in Canada.

For a good overview, head to Calgary's Glenbow Museum, the largest museum in western Canada. Its renowned Blackfoot collection features magnificent tipis, intri-

cately embroidered shirts, painted robes, bone tools, and illustrated "calendars," used to record events. Follow an aboriginal guide through the Nitsitapiisinni ("our way of life") Gallery, which tells the story of the Blackfoot Confederacy, from its creation by Napi (Old Man) to the present.

The Blackfoot once ruled Alberta's southern plains so completely that nineteenth-century explorers and fur traders sought safer passage through the Rocky Mountains. Beyond the warrior image, however, was a complex, nomadic society, where women organized a camp life complete with social dances and children's games.

Less than two hours south of Calgary, at the southern edge of the Porcupine Hills, is the wonderfully named Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, which refers to a young hunter crushed under a falling tonnage of bison. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is one of the



The Nitsitapiisinni Gallery in Calgary's Glenbow Museum

oldest, largest, and best-preserved buffalo jumps in North America, which archaeological excavation reveals was in use for more than 5,600 years.

Despite these impressive credentials, Head-Smashed-In is all about subtlety. It begins with a \$10-million interpretive centre, built to sensitively blend into the hillside.

For the buffalo, it ended with a mere ten-metre sandstone cliff. The trick was for hunters to have the organizational skills to lure these poor-sighted, mammoth creatures into an unstoppable stampede over the brink. Below, the remaining tribe members waited to dispatch wounded animals and convert carcasses into meat, robes, tools, and spiritual objects.

Learn more about this complex society in the five-level interpretive centre, perhaps accompanied by a Peigan guide. During the summer, visitors can attend powwows (native dancing and drumming competitions), go on archaeological tours, or spend a night in a traditional tipi overlooking the rolling plains.

The final stop on this tour is another hyphenated gem, Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, on the southern Alberta plains within sight of the purple haze of Montana's Sweetgrass Hills. The entrance into Writing-on-Stone is one of Alberta's grand scenes – intricate, weather-sculpted rock columns known as hoodoos, offset by the lazy meanders of the opaque Milk River.

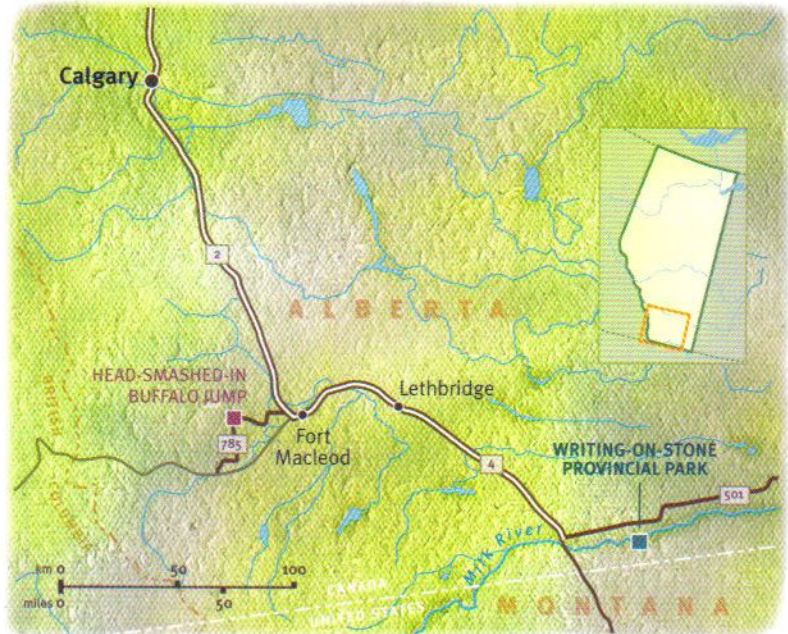
For some three thousand years, the Milk River Valley offered the Blackfoot shelter, food, and water. The soft hoodoos also provided a sandstone canvas for recording visions and important events. Writing-on-Stone protects the greatest concentration of native rock art on North America's Great Plains, with hundreds of petroglyphs (carvings) and pictographs (paintings).

The most condensed rock-art sites in the park can only be seen by taking a ninety-minute tour with a park interpreter. But the single most impressive work – an elaborate battle scene, featuring more than 250 characters – can be viewed at the far end of the 2.5-kilometre Hoodoo Interpretive Trail, a superb walk through hoodoos above the river. In midsummer, take plenty of water; in this sandstone oven, even the rattlesnakes shed their skin.

Across the river is a reconstructed North-West Mounted Police outpost, originally built in the 1880s to combat U.S. whisky traders. By then, the combined effects of alcohol, European smallpox, and decimation of the vast buffalo herds had effectively ended the Blackfoot's long, proud domination of Alberta's southern plains.

Bill Corbett is the author of *Best of Alberta: Day Trips from Calgary*.

IF YOU GO ...



The legacy of the Blackfoot people is dramatically realized in southern Alberta. Each of the three sites mentioned in this article can easily occupy a half-day or more, depending on amount of time and level of curiosity. Calgary to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump is a 160-kilometre journey, with Writing-on-Stone a further journey of 175 kilometres. For information on places to see, accommodations, and special events, contact:

Alberta South Tourism

Destination Region

3096 Dunsmore Road S.E.
Medicine Hat, Alberta T1B 2X2
T: (403) 526-6355 or 1-800-ALBERTA
E: absouth1@telus.net
W: www.travelalbertasouth.com

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park

Box 297
Milk River, Alberta T0K 1M0
T: (403) 647-2364
W: www.cd.gov.ab.ca/parks (click on "Gateway to Outdoor Adventure")

Some sites included in this article are open on a seasonal basis. For further information, contact:

Glenbow Museum

130-9 Avenue S.E.
Calgary, Alberta T2G 0P3
T: (403) 268-4100
E: glenbow@glenbow.org
W: www.glenbow.org

Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump

Box 1977
Fort Macleod, Alberta T0L 0Z0
T: (403) 553-2731
E: info@head-smashed-in.com
W: www.head-smashed-in.com



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