



SPRUCE WOODS PROVINCIAL PARK | SPIRIT SANDS

Forest, river envelop sand dunes and cactus

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN



Following the trail through gently rolling hills, we pass by grassy meadows carpeted in yellow with flowering hoary puccoons. Pincushion cactus is just beginning to flower, and the air is filled with the sweet aroma of wolf willow. It's a prairie landscape, but one with a twist.

All around us are huge stands of mature spruce trees, as if a piece of northern boreal forest was somehow misplaced in the midst of the plains.

To add to the surprises, we climb a ridge along the forest path and suddenly gaze over a wide expanse of active, desert-like sand dunes.

Part of Spruce Woods Provincial Park, the Spirit Sands is an oasis of natural prairie, forest, dunes and river valley. Surrounded by southern Manitoba's rich croplands, the park is south of Carberry and less than an hour's drive from Brandon.

The dunes have been here since the last ice age. As glaciers retreated about 12,000 years ago, the Assiniboine River emptied into glacial Lake Agassiz, creating a delta.

When waters receded, the drying sand was sculpted by the wind into dunes. While still impressive, the unvegetated dunes today are only a small remnant of the original expanses of sand that once spread between current-day Brandon and Portage la Prairie, and as far north as Neepawa.

They are user-friendly sand dunes with marked hiking trails, shelters and toilets along the route, and

plenty of interpretive panels describing the flora, fauna, history and geological forces that shaped the land. There's even log steps hanging on chains, making it easier to climb up steep dune faces.

Following the shortest route, it's about a two kilometre walk from the trailhead to the nearest dunes. Better yet, take a half day or more and meander along the network of trails that wind through forest, meadows and dunes.

The forest is mostly spruce and aspen, along with a few impressive groves of burr oak. The route passes through a variety of dune formations from blowouts to advancing dune edges that are burying vegetation to circles etched in the sand by blades of grass whipped by the wind.

Sand dock is in bloom during our late June visit. This remarkable plant with showy pink to dark red flowers thrives in pure sand.

One branch of the trail goes to the Devil's Punch Bowl near the banks of the Assiniboine River. Underground streams have collapsed the sandy slopes, forming a 45-metre deep depression with a pool of eerie blue-green water, framed by sandy hills and spruce trees.

Fed by a spring, the water is constantly being renewed. While at first glance it looks like a stagnant pool, we hear water constantly running. A stairway leads to a



TOP: Hiking trails take visitors up the steep sand dunes and wind through the forest. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

LEFT: Blooming sand dock adorns the dunes.

CENTRE: Sand dunes have been here since the last ice age.

ABOVE: Trees line the blue-green water of Devil's Punch Bowl.

viewing platform with benches overlooking the pool, the ideal spot to enjoy a picnic.

Just beyond, the trail leads to a scenic viewpoint over the Assiniboine River. Interpretive panels relate the history of aboriginal people who considered the sands to have spiritual value, and the role this section of the river played in the fur trade.

This area was so important in making pemmican that 10 forts were established along the Assiniboine in the short distance between here and Brandon.

The Spirit Sands is only one part of

the park's vast trail network. Anyone who enjoys hiking could spend days wandering through prairie meadows and forest, and along river banks and lakes.

Kiche Manitou campground, across the road from the Spirit Sands trailhead, is nicely situated in a treed area next to the river. Parts of the campground that flooded a couple years ago are reopening this summer.

For more information, visit www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/parks.

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SUICIDE | LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY

Adolescent suicide

SPEAKING OF LIFE



JACKLIN ANDREWS, BA, MSW

Keeping secret will have lasting emotional effects if friend carries out threat

Q: My daughter learned one of her friends was planning to kill herself. She made my daughter promise not to tell anyone. My daughter is trying to be true to her promise, but suicide is a heavy responsibility. She broke down and told me about it last night. Both my husband and I think that we should talk to the parents of the girl considering suicide but my daughter is horrified.

The girl would know that my daughter had betrayed her and my daughter would lose all of her credibility. What do you think we should do?

A: You have both legal and moral responsibilities to let these parents know that their daughter may be in serious psychological difficulty.

If your daughter's friend committed suicide and neither you nor your daughter had forewarned her family, the consequences for all of you could be overwhelming.

Make sure that you have phone numbers and other contact information for your local mental health clinic to share with the family. They need to get their daughter into treatment as soon as possible.

Every year, about 200 adolescents kill themselves in Canada.

Although more girls than boys threaten to commit suicide, more boys than girls follow through and do it. Two to three times as many boys as girls committed suicide.

People who study suicide in adolescents have noted that they are seeing some changes in the numbers in the past four or five years, with the numbers going down for young boys and up for young girls.

No one has clearly identified what is going on but I have no doubt that social media is an important factor here. Kids are texting or emailing often devastating messages to each other and more girls than boys appear to be caught in this denigrating process.

We need to get more of these troubled youth into treatment and improve the treatment being offered to those who are working to help themselves.

We need more counsellors to work with young people to prevent suicide and more research to better understand how we can help those who are turning to their mental health support system for help.

This is a challenge for everyone involved.

Jacklin Andrews is a family counsellor from Saskatchewan. Contact: jandrews@producer.com.