



HISTORY | WRITING-ON-STONE PROVINCIAL PARK

# Aboriginal rock art offers look into past

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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**A**ncient images carved on weathered rock gaze over the meandering river, its green banks lined with a fairytale landscape of eroded cliffs and whimsically sculpted hoodoos.

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park has two claims to fame: the largest collection of aboriginal rock art on the North American Great Plains and an unusual and delightful prairie landscape.

The park straddles the Milk River Valley in southeastern Alberta, 44 kilometres east of Milk River and just north of the Montana border.

As we drive through the gently rolling cropland and grasslands, nothing prepares us for the breathtaking sight when we come over the crest of the valley rim.

The river is lined with towering cliffs and rugged badland coulees with a backdrop of the Sweetgrass Hills in Montana.

But what really grabs our attention is the sea of hoodoos just below us, like a thousand overgrown golden mushrooms sprouting on the riverbank.

Walking along the appropriately named Hoodoo Trail, we wander through this extraordinary landscape sculpted by frost, wind and water.

Extensive erosion has carved contours and caves into cliffs and worn holes through hoodoos. A surprising number of wildflowers add splashes of colour to the seemingly inhospitable badland terrain.

While spectacular at any time, the warm light of early morning or evening seems to bring the hoodoos to life. We're treated to an extra show the day we arrive.

Storm clouds are brewing and then in early evening the skies open up in a powerful but fast-moving thunderstorm.

Now low in the sky, the sun comes out immediately after the passing storm, illuminating the wet sandstone with a rich golden glow and

turning the grasslands an intense green. Topping it off, a rainbow frames the entire scene.

As stunning as the scenery may be, the rock art is the main reason for protecting this area.

About 50 sites have been identified. Most of the ancient images are petroglyphs, where drawings have been etched into the stone, but some are pictographs, made by painting on the rock with coloured ochre.

Many artists are thought to be ancestors of the Blackfoot, who still consider this place to have spiritual significance.

Archaeologists say that people have camped in this valley for more than 3,500 years. The age of the drawings is unknown because they are difficult to date.

Some images are obviously more recent because they portray horses, guns and items available only after European contact.

However, others are thought to be several hundred years old and possibly more, providing a fascinating window into our distant past.

The drawings portray a wide array of figures and subjects including headdresses, people, animals, hunting scenes, battle scenes with warriors carrying shields, and cryptic designs whose meanings have been lost in time.

Some images may be associated with vision quests, where a young man would fast for days and wait for a vision to guide him.

The most famous petroglyph is the Battle Scene, elaborate mural-like carvings showing warriors attacking a tipi encampment.

You can reach this site along the Hoodoo Trail. Most other rock art sites are closed to the public. The only way to see them is on a guided excursion led by a park interpreter, a highlight of any park visit.

Rounding out the park facilities are an interpretive centre, beach, hiking area to wander farther afield and lookout points galore.

The campground is nestled in a wooded area in the valley. You'll be thankful for the shade in mid-summer because Writing-on-Stone has a reputation as one of the hottest places on the Prairies.

For more information, visit [www.albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone](http://www.albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone).

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ABOVE: Tourists hike to the top of hoodoos along the Milk River at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, Alta.

LEFT: Ancient pictographs and petroglyphs are part of the collection of aboriginal rock art.

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