

SOUTHWESTERN SASKATCHEWAN | SCENERY

Eastend Coulee Country exotic mix of scenery

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

When it comes to scenic drives on the Prairies, the Eastend area in southwestern Saskatchewan is at the top of our list.

While dinosaurs are the town's main claim to fame, with the T. Rex Discovery Centre telling the story of many important fossil finds, what we notice first is Eastend's picturesque setting, nestled in a valley beside the Frenchman River.

As attractive as the scenery is here, it's only a taste of the panoramas that unfold along nearby roads.

Our favourite drive is between Eastend and Ravenscrag. Head west of Eastend on grid road 614, and then after about two kilometres, turn left onto Ravenscrag Road.

Most of the route follows the Frenchman River, which meanders across the broad valley.

It's one spectacular view after another with dry eroded hills tinged with colour flanking the fertile green valley. Most striking are exposed deposits of brilliant white mud, a kaolinized sandstone prized for use in ceramics because it remains bright white even after firing.

Ravenscrag Road ends at a T-intersection. Turn north and cross the river, then turn right on the first road heading east. This is Middle Bench Road, taking you back to Eastend along a higher route into the hills, through mostly open grasslands with sweeping views.

After about 11 km, take the minor road to the south that leads to Jones Peak, the highest point of land on the river valley rim. It is named after Harold Saunders "Corky" Jones, a local amateur palaeontologist who discovered many significant fossils in the area.

The setting is outstanding, giving a bird's-eye view over the expansive valley along Ravenscrag road.

Middle Bench Road ends at grid road 614, just north of Eastend. It's worth heading north on 614, also known as Brady Coulee Road, for 25 km or so following the twists and turns along Conglomerate Creek Valley.

Open pasturelands are broken by spruce groves nestled in coulees, ranch yards sit in picture-postcard settings and a sign points out the Continental Divide, where waters to the north flow toward Hudson Bay and those to the south flow to the Gulf of Mexico.

Another nice loop drive runs east of Eastend. Take Highway 13 toward Shaunavon, then turn north on grid road 633 to Pine Cree Regional Park. This is one of our favourite spots to camp in the south.

Billing itself as "Saskatchewan's only true natural environment regional park," it boasts shady campsites by a babbling brook (stocked with brook trout), nature trails into



ABOVE: The Frenchman River winds its way toward the Cypress Hills. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

BELOW CENTRE: Middle Bench Road between Eastend and Ravenscrag offers scenic views.

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ABOVE: Water is crystal clear in Swift Current Creek.
LEFT: Rock formations loom at Jones Peak in the Eastend area of the Cypress Hills.
LEFT BELOW: A round-leaved orchid is in full bloom at Pine Cree Regional Park.



the hills and wildflowers galore.

A unique feature is the reconstructed Hermit's Cave, where a reclusive hermit lived in the 1960s.

Back on 633, head north of the park for about three km, and then turn west. This is Baker Coulee Road, winding through hilly pastureland for about five km, and then ending at a T-intersection on Chimney Coulee Road.

Turn south and follow the roller-coaster route to the historic site of Chimney Coulee, named for stone chimneys left standing from an early Metis settlement.

This idyllic spot on a sheltered hillside had a tumultuous history. Isaac Cowie established a Hudson's Bay Company post here in 1871 and traded several hundred grizzly bear and elk hides, before abandoning the post because of problems with whisky traders and wars between the Assiniboine and Blackfoot.

Metis wintered in the coulee and later, the North West Mounted Police set up a post. Part of their job was to keep tabs on Chief Sitting Bull's Sioux, who sought refuge in Canada after the Battle of Little Bighorn in Montana.

From Chimney Coulee, the road winds south for another six kilometres to Eastend.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.



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