



Red Rock Coulee features unusual rock formations. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS



Jake Knodel's Station Coffee Co. is one of the stops on Medicine Hat's unique downtown coffee tour.

History, artistry and nature abound in Medicine Hat

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

As we drive through Medicine Hat, the World's Largest Tepee tempts us to see what this small prairie city has to offer.

With main masts as high as a 20-story building, the Saamis Tepee introduces the city's history and unusual name — a loose translation of the Blackfoot word Saamis, a medicine man's headdress. Visitors who linger longer find a community with a rich history, a strong artistic tradition and unusual natural attractions.

Originally founded as a divisional headquarters for the Canadian Pacific Railway, the discovery of huge natural gas reserves put Medicine Hat on the map. During the early 20th century, this cheap new energy source made the community an industrial centre.

The most enduring and successful manufacturing enterprise was clay products, since gas provided a reliable heat source for the kilns, and clay deposits were close at hand along the South Saskatchewan River.

The Medalta Clay District is the most surprising part of the city. Now a national historic site, old factory buildings are part of a heritage museum where tours show how massive and far-reaching this operation was. Bricks and ceramics of every imaginable kind from utilitarian pots to decorative knickknacks were shipped across the country. Got an old ceramic crock in the basement? Chances are that it was made here. Ceramics are still important, but these days it's for Medalta's artist-in-residence program, where artists from around the world come to study and work, many of whom decide to settle in Medicine Hat.

The arts have always played a big role, with a long-running annual jazz festival, the oldest movie the-

atre still operating in Canada and the James Marshall Murals, made by the Medicine Hat native, who became a nationally famous brick relief artist. The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre has an excellent gallery on local history, and temporary displays such as the recent exhibition on the Group of Seven painters' special relationship with Alberta.

For something a bit more indulgent, sign up for the unique coffee tour. Coffee culture is so strong that locally owned shops dominate rather than big chains. Six in close proximity all thrive because each does something different. The guided walking tour visits three cafes, with coffee samplings accompanied by fresh-baked pastries, plus a healthy dose of Medicine Hat history.

If you prefer tastings on the cooler side, try one of the craft breweries. Using and serving local ingredients is all the rage these days, but at Medicine Hat Brewing, they go a step beyond. Locally grown barley is used to make the beer. The dried, left-over barley is sent to a local beef producer who feeds it to his cattle. Then the brewery buys beef from the farmer to serve in the restaurant.

Much of Medicine Hat's appeal has to do with its setting, stretched along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, with a maze of side coulees. Parks abound, and a great way to explore the city's 115 kilometres of trails is by bicycle. Don't have your bike with you? No worries, the visitor centre near the Saamis Tepee lends out bikes to visitors — for free.

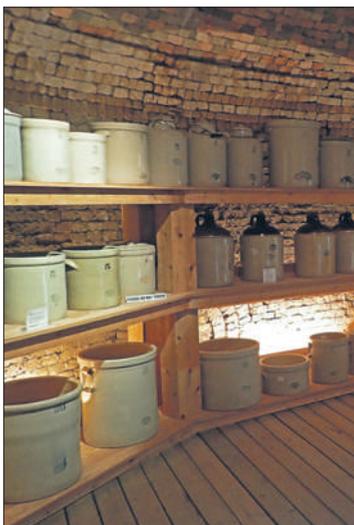
Several intriguing landscapes are a short drive away, such as Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park, where the terrain suddenly changes to heavily wooded highlands, or lesser-known Red Rock Coulee, an other-worldly landscape of massive concretions, rounded formations resembling oversized curling rocks.

Medicine Hat's distinctive name was almost lost during the city's early boom. City council wanted a more industrial-sounding name to attract new businesses, so they proposed changing it to Gasburg.

When British author Rudyard Kipling caught wind of the propos-



A golf course is nestled in a coulee in Medicine Hat.



Visitors to the historic Medalta Clay District can go inside the kiln.



One of many brick relief murals in downtown Medicine Hat remembers the disastrous flood of 1995.

al, he was horrified. Having visited Medicine Hat in 1907, Kipling was impressed with the place and wrote a scathing letter published on the front page of the local newspaper.

"This part of the country seems to

have all hell for a basement, and the only trap door appears to be in Medicine Hat," he wrote. "And you don't even think of changing the name of your town. It's all your own and the only hat of its kind on earth." The argument worked and

the name was saved.

For more details see www.tourismmedicinehat.com

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