

Road trip through Souris Valley rich in history and scenery

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

The Souris Valley in southeastern Saskatchewan offers great road trips. The most convenient starting point is Estevan, known as the Sunshine Capital of Canada, said to have more hours of sunshine than any city in the country. It's also considered the Energy Capital of Saskatchewan because of the importance of oil and gas production and coal mining to fuel nearby power stations.

Coal mining history looms large. An historic marker next to the ornate Estevan Court House commemorates Coal Miner's Corner. It was here in 1931 that striking coal miners were confronted by police. In the ensuing riot, three miners were killed and other strikers and some police were injured.

An enduring reminder of that event is in the cemetery at Bienfait, a town just east of Estevan. The epitaph on the grave of the three miners reads "Murdered in Estevan Sept. 29, 1931 by RCMP?"

Feelings ran high over the incident, with the controversial inscription rubbed out and repainted a few times. To commemorate the 90th anniversary of the strike in 2021, the grave was refurbished and plaques were installed recognizing the three miners as heroes of the labour movement.

The nearby Bienfait Coalfields Historical Society Museum features coal mining from 1895 to the present. It's housed in the former train station, which was the site of another



The imposing sandstone formation near the hamlet of Roche Percee is a highlight of a trip through southeastern Saskatchewan's Souris River Valley. | ROBIN & ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

er notorious event. During Prohibition in the United States, a flourishing business in the Bienfait and Estevan area was smuggling booze across the border to a thirsty American market.

In 1922, rum-running kingpin Paul Matoff was shot and killed in the Bienfait railway station. His killer was never found. This incident spurred the government to clamp down on rum-running.

Other reminders of early mining days lie scattered across the landscape — countless spoil piles or

huge mounds of soil that were removed so miners could access the coal seams beneath.

Today, mining companies are required to level and reclaim the land when the coal is depleted, but not so years ago. Some consider them eyesores, while others see them as excellent wildlife habitat or grazing land.

We can do a circle road trip around the Boundary Dam reservoir, the long, narrow lake that supplies water to the Boundary Dam Power Station. Heading south of Estevan



Travelling beside the meandering Souris River can make for a pleasant country drive.

on Highway 47, we pass two sections of Woodlawn Regional Park, one in a treed area next to the Souris River and another at Boundary Dam Beach. This is the only place in Saskatchewan where it's possible to catch largemouth bass, since heated water discharged from the power station maintains a temperature that is warm enough for this species.

Other sites along the way include a place to watch massive trucks cross the highway as they transport coal to the power station. Historic site markers commemorate an early North-West Mounted Police camp, as well as the crash of a Royal Canadian Air Force plane in 1946 that killed 21 airmen. At the south end of the lake, a wildlife sanctuary at Wood-End Lookout offers great views.

Driving up the west side of the lake, we can extend the route to include Rafferty Dam on the Souris River, built for flood control and water supply, along with fishing and other recreation.

Our favourite road trip heads east of Estevan and includes the top scenic highlight of the Souris Valley — the imposing sandstone formation at the hamlet of Roche Percee. While the most direct approach is along Highway 39, we prefer a more

scenic route. Take Shand Road just outside Estevan going south to the Shand Power Station overlooking the Souris Valley. Cross to the south side of the river, then follow the back roads running east along the picturesque river valley to Roche Percee. Along the way, a cairn commemorates Short Creek Camp where the North-West Mounted Police camped on their historic March West in 1874.

Roche Percee is named for a window-like hole in the rock, hence the French name for pierced rock. While the upper portion of the main "window" collapsed years ago, the extensive site is filled with intriguing formations such as arches, smaller windows and hoodoo-like pillars.

Travelling east from Roche Percee, we can stay in the Souris Valley all the way to Highway 9, south of Oxbow. The valley is lined with other sandstone outcroppings and landmarks, such as Sugarloaf Hill, named for its distinctive shape. The rest of the route has a more remote feel, with little traffic and few farmyards as we travel beside the meandering river on a pleasant country drive.

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