

Travel restrictions revive interest in nearby attractions

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Some of the biggest travel trends emerging recently have included outdoor activities, staying reasonably close to home and taking road trips in our own vehicles.

The pandemic has been the main driver of this. While hope for greater travel freedom is on the horizon with continued vaccine rollouts, it seems unlikely that significant change will come soon enough to alter travel patterns for spring and early summer, and quite possibly longer.

The pandemic has hit the tourism industry hard, although there have been some bright spots as well. The impact has been disastrous for airlines and cruise ships, and tough for hotels, restaurants, or anything else that depends on gathering people together or going inside buildings.

But it's been a different story for those involved in outdoor pursuits where physical distancing is possible.

Activities such as canoeing, hiking, camping, bird-watching, boat-



Hiking, such as in Alberta's Waterton National Park, is a good thing to do while staying close to home. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

ing and fishing have all seen a surge in popularity.

Canoe outfitting businesses have set records for canoe rentals. Shops selling canoes, bikes, skis, recreational vehicles, and camping equipment often run out of stock. It seems that the shortages aren't sorted out yet.

We recently decided that it was time to buy a new tent, so we compared various models and eventually made a choice. That was the easy part — finding it in stock was another matter. Every dealer we checked was sold out, but we finally found a place that had one left — possibly the last in Canada.

The developing trends caught a lot of people off guard, including us. An important part of our business is writing and publishing travel guides to Saskatchewan. When the pandemic first hit last spring, book sales dropped to almost zero, and stayed there. We were prepared for 2020 being a complete bust.

When summer came, people were anxious to get out and about and travel where it was possible to go and where they would feel safe. This usually meant parks and other natural areas, or taking road trips where social distancing was a lot easier. Since our guidebooks such

as *Saskatchewan's Best Scenic Drives* fit with that style of travelling, they were suddenly in demand again. The turnaround came so quickly that our book on visiting natural wonders, *The Great Saskatchewan Bucket List*, soon sold out. We're working on an updated edition to be released soon.

Tourism trends have been shaped by travel restrictions, governments discouraging interprovincial travel, and a significant shift in tourist promotion messages.

Traditionally, provincial tourist offices have put a lot of emphasis on attracting visitors from other parts of the country and abroad. But now, for example, Tourism Saskatchewan's website opens with "Discovery is in your own back

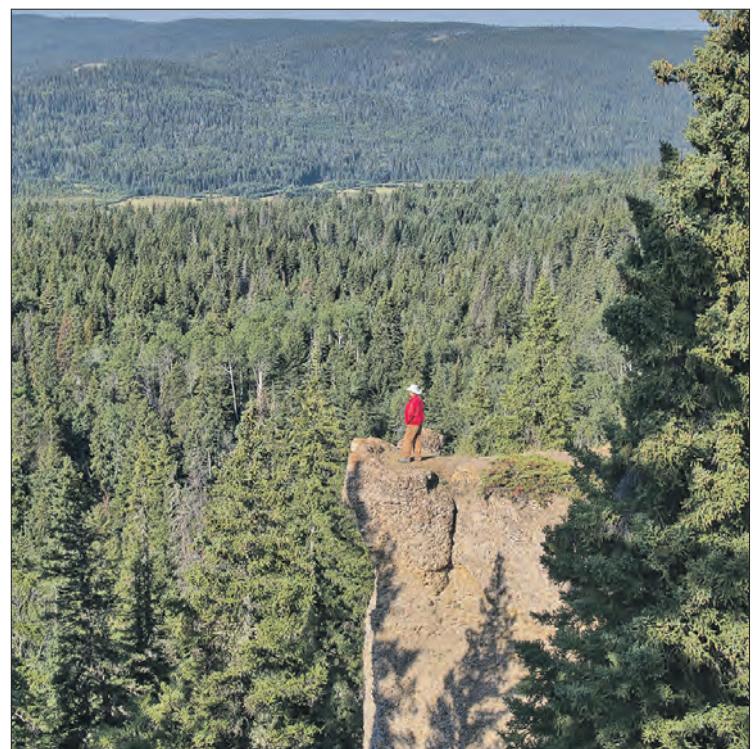
yard". Travel Manitoba promotes places "right here at home in Manitoba." Locals have become the target market.

The back-to-nature trend is extending low-season use of many parks. In our previous column about winter camping in Prince Albert National Park, we mentioned that we were the only ones camping during our mid-week stay. Later, we took a day-trip to the park during a mild weekend in late February and it was a completely different story, with several campers and day-visitors picnicking, snowshoeing, and just enjoying wandering around. The increase in winter camping in the park was considered significant enough that it became a TV news item.

These trends suggest that you may have to plan farther ahead. If you're eyeing that perfect lakeside campsite for summer holidays, it's probably a good idea to book as early as possible. Buying camping equipment or other outdoor gear likely shouldn't be put off until summer in case stores once again face shortages.

With higher use in the more popular parks, this may also be the year to check out lesser-known parks, or to take off-the-beaten-path road trips. Everyone is looking forward to travelling freely as we did before. But in the meantime, those of us living anywhere in Western Canada are fortunate to have a wealth of places to explore without wandering too far from home.

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



TOP: More people have become interested in canoeing during the pandemic.

ABOVE: Cypress Hills is an area in southwestern Saskatchewan that is worth exploring if you're staying close to home this summer.

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