

# Cattle country — but bears lure the tourists

By Janet Mendelsohn  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LONGVIEW, Alberta — If we had been using a GPS, we probably never would have found it. But relying on an old-fashioned paper road map, we drove northward on the Cowboy Trail. What we saw along the way was the real thing: cattle country, with a spur-of-the-moment stop at a ranch.

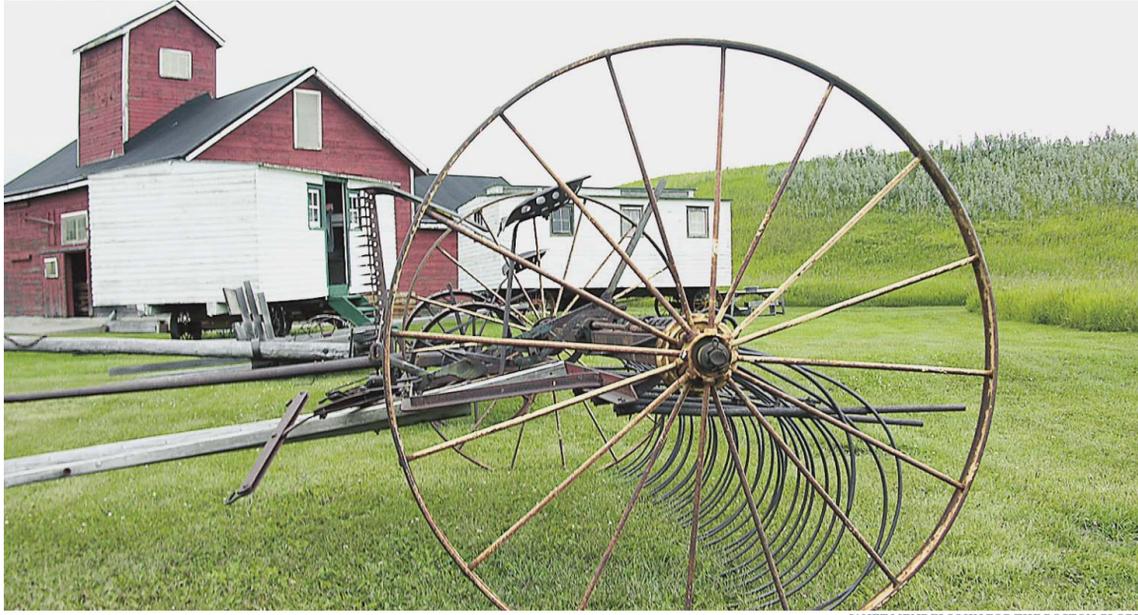
On our last morning in Waterton Lakes National Park we met a couple from Calgary, Duncan Thomson and Trish Hines, who, like us, were spellbound by the Canadian side of Montana's Glacier National Park. Half-kidding, my husband, Bob, and I grumbled about failing to see any bears while hiking in the two wildlife-filled parks.

"There's a greater concentration of grizzlies here than anywhere else in Canada," said Thomson, frustrating us all the more.

"You're heading to Banff and Lake Louise next?" said Hines. We were. Soon we parted for the open road.

Southern Alberta's rangeland is beautiful but there are few towns. We were in a dead zone when Hines called my cellphone, leaving this message: "Take Highway 6 to 22 to 541 to 40 to Route 1 West. You'll love it." By the time we got her message, we were in Banff. Maybe she had reached us cosmically, because that's exactly the route we had taken after studying the map and noticing "Cowboy Trail" beside Highways 6 and 22, some 435 miles. Although we had turned off before Calgary, 22 continues past Edmonton.

A jam on Akamina Parkway made it clear we hadn't left grizzly country. Almost out of the park, dozens of vehicles blocked the road. People stood on the hoods of cars, RVs, and pickups, or edged into knee-high grass, craning their necks, aiming cameras, even cellphones at a brown speck far across a field. Our first bear! "Not a legit sighting," said



JANET MENDELSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Bar U Ranch is the only Canadian National Historic Site commemorating the history of ranching.

Bob. We got back in the car.

Even though I had grown up watching TV westerns with my dad, the grandeur of open prairies took me by surprise. The Cowboy Trail is a straight gray ribbon through a gently rippling valley. Few vehicles shared the road. Miles apart, long dirt roads jatted east or west, marked by high gates with ranch names and silhouetted bucking broncos, a star, or a cowboy roping a steer, and leading to distant barns, stables, a house or two, and sheltering stands of trees.

No billboards marred the scene. Only wire fences separated us from grazing horses. Low brush and fescue grass covered the ground, tough enough to withstand Alberta's fierce Chinook winds. But the day was calm, the skies deep blue. We saw cowboys herding livestock and a family on horseback kicking up dust.

Alberta is where the prairie meets the Canadian Rockies.

Near the town of Pincher Creek (population 3,700) the peaks begin to emerge. Along the Cowboy Trail, the landscape is a patchwork quilt of hilly farms. Abruptly, we saw a seemingly endless line of giant white metal windmills. We later learned this was Summerview Wind Farm. Its 61 turbines on 80-foot towers made it the largest in northwest Canada when it was commissioned in 2002. In February, another 22 windmills went online, reportedly now producing 395,000 megawatts of power a year, enough to meet the needs of 55,000 homes, roughly 65 percent of nearby Lethbridge, Alberta's fourth largest city.

Hunger hit us in Pincher Creek but nothing in the town looked welcoming to travelers. We motored on. South of Longview (population 300), "café" caught my eye on a sign for the Bar U Ranch. Hokey tourist trap? Maybe, but we were famished. And wrong. The Bar U Ranch is

the only Canadian National Historic Site commemorating the history of ranching. Today, Parks Canada operates the 367-acre spread, but from 1882 to 1950, it was headquarters for one of the country's first and longest-operating commercial ranches. It's a great place to learn about the coming of the railroad, the rise and fall of fortunes, and the lives of cowboys over seven decades of cattle drives and change.

Instead of climbing into a horse-drawn wagon for the guided tour, we spent the afternoon wandering on foot among corrals and barns, 1902 post office, kitchen garden, and cookhouse, immersed in stories of the pioneers, their winter hardships, and the harmony and conflict among Native people, traders, and the Canadian government. For over an hour, we talked with a third-generation rancher turned volunteer blacksmith as he hammered out horseshoes.

But it was the short-order

cook who made the biggest impression and not just because his chargrilled burgers were fantastic. A horse trader when times are good, he connected what came before to life in Alberta today and made the stories real.

Bar U Ranch history began in 1881 when the government offered 21-year leases on a maximum 100,000 acres for a penny an acre. Two leases, a combined 147,000 acres of prime grassland, were granted to investors who formed the Northwest Cattle Co. At its largest, the ranch encompassed 157,960 acres.

Northwest's first customer was Canadian Pacific Railway, buying 1,000 steers for \$75 each. From 1909-19, it was the world's largest and most famous Percheron horse breeding operation. There's a stud horse barn and a foaling barn, used until the 1940s when the war effort ended Percheron sales. In the cookhouse kitchen, ingredients for supper were on the counter. Up

## If you go . . .

**Bar U Ranch National Historic Site of Canada**  
Highway 22 (at junction with Hwy. 540)  
Longview, Alberta  
888-773-8888  
www.pc.gc.ca  
www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/ab/baru/index.aspx  
Open May 23-Sept. 30, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Visitor Orientation Center, Roadhouse Restaurant, and gift shop.  
Adults \$7.80, seniors age 65 and older \$6.55, children ages 6-16 \$3.90, family or groups up to seven \$19.60.  
**Note:** Hwy. 40 is closed Dec. 1-June 15.

stairs, the dormitory looked like the ranch hands had just left.

Back in the car, we left the Cowboy Trail at Highway 541, heading west on Highway 40 into Kananaskis Country, a region of provincial parks big on outdoor sports in all seasons and site of cross-country skiing for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary.

Alone on a two-lane road, we drove the winding highway through densely wooded, towering mountains, awestruck in a landscape that rivaled the national parks. A red fox darted from the trees, running briefly alongside our car. A mile farther, I spotted three tell-tale large brown lumps in the road, then movement in the narrow band of grass and bushes between us and the trees.

Bob's quick U-turn brought us back. Two other vehicles came from nowhere and parked. But this was no bear jam. Everyone stayed respectfully (fearfully) inside their cars. A big, hump-backed grizzly was so close we could hear her munching berries.

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# Birds and badlands, dunes and dance, spas and vineyards

## ► SASKATCHEWAN

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mer railway hotel. It's just a short walk to the free **Mendel Art Gallery** (950 Spadina Crescent East, 306-975-7610, [www.mendel.ca](http://www.mendel.ca)).

## Grey Owl's cabin

**Prince Albert National Park**, the meeting place between parkland and boreal forests, is where you'll find Grey Owl's cabin. Canada's Thoreau was an environmentalist who posed as an aboriginal. Archibald Belaney (later known as Grey Owl) immigrated from England in 1906. In 1931, Parks Canada wardens relocated Grey Owl, his Mohawk wife, Ana-

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hareo, and their two pet beavers to the newly minted park (306-663-4519, [parkscanada.ca](http://parkscanada.ca)). Grey Owl's cabin and grave, both National Heritage Sites, are a few hours north of Saskatoon on the edge of Ajawaan Lake. Each summer, a trickle of North American and European visitors set off in canoes to discover the home of Canada's first conservationist and camp under the northern lights. (*Waskesiu Marina Adventure Centre for canoe rentals and guided trips*, 306-663-1999, [www.waskesiumarina.com](http://www.waskesiumarina.com)).

## A boreal Sahara

Saskatchewan's boreal Sahara is the most northerly set of major dune fields in the world. Located in the province's extreme northwest, it's the largest active sand surface in Canada, stretching for roughly 60 miles along Lake Athabasca's southern shore. Scientists consider this isolated spot an evolutionary puzzle since 52 rare plant species, including nine plants unique to this area, have been located. **Athabasca Sand Dunes Provincial Wilderness Park** (306-425-4234, [www.tpcs.gov.sk.ca/AthabascaSandDunes](http://www.tpcs.gov.sk.ca/AthabascaSandDunes)), which encompasses 1,200 square miles, was created in 1992 to protect this sensitive environment. Since there are no services, facilities, or roads, the dunes are only recommended for fully equipped, experienced wilderness travelers. Visitors can fly in by **float plane**, the only avail-



TOURISM SASKATCHEWAN/GREG HUSZAR PHOTOGRAPHY

able access for guided interpretative trips on foot or by boat (306-241-6807, [northernways.ca](http://northernways.ca)).

## Avian mecca

If you're a bird fancier, you'll want to seek out the **Quill Lakes International Bird Area**. Saskatchewan is an important migratory route for dozens of North American species, including the American white pelican, snow geese, and a wide variety of shorebirds like the black-crowned night heron. A million birds visit the region annually, so three towns, Wynyard, Wadena, and Foam Lake, cooperate to host east-central Saskatchewan's premier birding locale ([www.quill-lakes-bird-area.com](http://www.quill-lakes-bird-area.com); *Wynyard*, 306-554-2123; *Wadena*, 306-338-2145; *Foam Lake*, 306-272-3359). This avian mecca, managed by Ducks Unlimited Canada, spans 3,954 acres of wetlands for guided or self-guided tours, lookouts, and hiking trails, so pack a lunch and your hiking shoes. Stay at **Amma's House**, an Icelandic-Canadian heritage B&B (*Highway 16*, 306-554-2927, [www.ammashouse.com](http://www.ammashouse.com), doubles \$60) west of Wynyard. Dine at **The PepperTree**

**Family Restaurant and Steakhouse** in Wynyard, family-run with a variety of Greek dishes (*Highway 16*, 306-554-3665).

## Dead Sea of the Prairies

Little Manitou Lake, the "Dead Sea of the Prairies," is chock-full of healing magnesium and sulphate. Bathers float in the lake's naturally buoyant water. The lakeside village of Manitou Beach, an hour southeast of Saskatoon, is home to **Manitou Springs Resort and Mineral Spa** (800-667-7672, [www.manitousprings.ca](http://www.manitousprings.ca), doubles \$125-\$170), a full-service hotel with mud wraps offered in the funky spa. The mineral pool, which originates from Little Manitou, is pumped in, then warmed and circulated. Guests can kick up their heels at **Danceland** (800-267-5037, [danceland.ca](http://danceland.ca)). This historic venue boasts a unique maple dance floor built on top of local horsehair. Bands perform everything from polka to punk.

## La Reata (Dude) Ranch

Do you own a pair of cowboy boots? Then point your steed to **La Reata Ranch** (306-375-2225, [www.lareata.com](http://www.lareata.com)), a working



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Athabasca Sand Dunes Provincial Wilderness Park and, in Moose Jaw, the Temple Gardens Mineral Spa Resort Hotel.

ranch on the western shore of Lake Diefenbaker. This is where urbanites play out their long-suppressed cowboy urges while real cowboys do all the work. Guests (limited to 8 to 16 per week) bunk in all-inclusive western-style cabins (\$1,295 shared; \$1,555 private) and share meals with the ranchers and other international guests. You can hang out in the saloon or slip into the hot tub to soak Day One's case of saddle butt. Non-cowboy activities include canoeing, fishing, waterskiing, and swimming in a private spot along 125 miles of sandy beaches. The 2010 season (May 15-Oct. 16) starts during calving season and ends at the first chill of winter.

## Queen City

Start the day in Regina, the provincial capital, with a hearty breakfast at **Nicky's Café & Bake Shop** (1005 8th Ave., 306-757-3222). Then march over to the **RCMP Heritage Centre** for some pure Canadiana. Housed on the same site as the federal police training facility, this museum celebrates the men in red serge jackets, Stetson hats, and Strathcona boots. The stunning 68,000-square-foot museum was designed by Arthur Erickson and the interactive exhibits and multimedia displays were created by Montreal's Design + Communication. Visitors (\$12) can take in 10 main exhibits, comprising 33,000 Mountie artifacts, collected from their 1873 inception to the present (5907 Dewdney Ave., 866-567-7267, [www.rcmpheritagecentre.com](http://www.rcmpheritagecentre.com)). When Queen Elizabeth II visits

her namesake city, she stays downtown at the classic **Hotel Saskatchewan** (2125 Victoria Ave., 306-522-7691, [www.hotel.sask.com](http://www.hotel.sask.com)). Enjoy the best sushi east of Vancouver at **Michi Japanese Restaurant and Sushi Bar** (1943 Scarth St., 306-565-0141, [www.michi.ca](http://www.michi.ca)). Stroll around the lake at **Wascana Centre** (306-522-3661, [www.wascana.ca](http://www.wascana.ca)), the city's 2,300-acre Central Park. Dine on local fare at the upscale **Willow at Wascana** (3000 Wascana Drive, 306-585-3663, [www.willowonwascana.ca](http://www.willowonwascana.ca)) while savoring a classic prairie sunset.

## Moose Spa

In Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan's fourth largest city, you'll find about 20 day spas tucked downtown amid preserved Victorian architecture. The modern **Temple Gardens Mineral Spa Resort Hotel** (800-718-7727, [www.templegardens.sk.ca](http://www.templegardens.sk.ca)) features a rooftop mineral pool (locally sourced) next to the **Sun Tree Spa** (\$80-\$140). **Sahara Spa**, a Balinese-style spa in a renovated railway station, is Canada's only Jamaican spa (341 Stadacona St. East, 306-692-1012, [www.saharaspa.ca](http://www.saharaspa.ca), packages \$145-\$275). **Yvette Moore's Art Gallery** houses her Copper Café. Stop in for homemade soup and a fresh sandwich (76 Fairford St. West, 306-693-7600, [www.yvettemoore.com](http://www.yvettemoore.com), \$9-\$14). **Renate's Tea Time** (125B Main St. North, 306-691-1090, [www.renates.ca](http://www.renates.ca)) pairs authentic European pastries with more than 200 tea varieties for her afternoon tea (\$18/person). Dine at Temple Garden's **Harwood's Dining Room** (306-693-7778, *entrees*

\$18-\$36), then don a robe for an evening soak.

## Hot on the Outlaw Trail

The Big Muddy Badlands, two hours south of Regina, features glacier-tilled landscape surrounded by arid, undulating ranch land. American outlaws from the 1880s to the early 1900s used the Big Muddy as a base to rob banks and trains or steal horses in Montana. To escape lawmen in pursuit, it was only a short horseback ride across the border. Explore the **Big Muddy** with the Coronach Tourism Board's knowledgeable guides (306-267-3312, [www.bigmuddybadlands.com](http://www.bigmuddybadlands.com), June to early September, \$45 per adult by van/ \$150 per car load with guide). The engaging six-hour tour covers up to 110 miles and includes lessons in geology, ornithology, botany, anthropology, and history. Stay at the **Country Flavor B&B** (306-267-4507, [www.bbca.nada.com](http://www.bbca.nada.com), doubles \$60), a historic ranch house. Brown bag it on the Outlaw Tour and dine at **R.C. Chinese Restaurant** (306-267-2228, \$9-\$11), a 1970s-era prairie restaurant.

## High Country Wine

**Cypress Hills Vineyard & Winery** (306-662-4100, [www.cypresshillswinery.com](http://www.cypresshillswinery.com)) is renowned for its fruit wines. Saskatchewan's first and only commercial vineyard and winery is tucked into the hot, arid northern edge of **Cypress Hills International Provincial Park** (306-662-5411, [www.tpcs.gov.sk.ca/CypressHills](http://www.tpcs.gov.sk.ca/CypressHills)). Enjoy a hosted tour followed by lunch. The Winery Bistro's patio serves artisan cheese platters and a choice of saskatoon berry, chokecherry, sour cherry, rhubarb blend, black currant, and honey wine or a mead dessert wine. Dine at **Maple Creek's Star Café & Grill** (32 Pacific Ave., 306-662-2202, *entrees* \$17-\$28). This funky heritage restaurant features a menu tailored to the seasons. Rest up at the **Cypress Park Resort Inn** (306-662-4477, [cpri.sasktelwebhosting.com](http://cpri.sasktelwebhosting.com), doubles \$115) in the nearby inter-provincial park with full-service cabins set among the jack pine forest.

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