

Photo Essay: Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park

It was a beautiful mid-summer weekend when I decided to visit Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park in southern Alberta, also known as the Áísínai'pi National Historic Site. This area is sacred to the Blackfoot people who have hunted and lived in the Great Plains region for centuries. A friend who lived in southern Alberta told me that Writing-On-Stone was a very spiritual place and it had a special energy so I was really excited to visit the region.

As I got closer to the entrance of Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park, there was a big sign on the roadside that warned, "Beware of rattlesnakes." Really? I had entered rattlesnake country. Yikes! There were two creatures in the wild that petrified me: bears and rattlesnakes. More on rattlesnakes later.

Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park is located 42 km southeast of Milk River, a small Alberta town, and the Park is very close to the Alberta-Montana border. The Milk River valley has the largest concentration of petroglyphs (rock carvings) and pictographs (rock paintings) in the Great Plains of North America.

Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park is also a popular vacation destination as campers and RVers currently use the Milk River and surrounding area for recreational activities. In fact, there is evidence that people have camped in this spectacular region for at least 3,500 years. Access to the natural environment sustained former campers physically with everything they needed for survival within reach while the reported supernatural powers believed to inhabit the sandstone cliffs, sustained them spiritually.



Along the Milk River were sandstone formations and grasslands. The region had a combination of cliffs, hoodoos, grassy knolls, and coulees. The mushroom-shaped hoodoos were sculpted when the rock was eroded primarily by frost and wind-directed rain. Hoodoos were a mixture of soft sandstone prone to erosion and hard rock layers not vulnerable to erosion. This combination of rock and exposure to weather related elements created the unusual rock formations. The Writing-On-Stone park guide informed, "Holes in the formations occur when very hard deposits of rusty coloured round-shaped ironstone become dislodged and fall out as softer sandstone erodes."

Tours were available at Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park with an interpretive guide. Tour times differ throughout the year. Please refer people to the [Park website](#) for accurate tour times, and to reserve online. The display of petroglyphs and pictographs were inaccessible to the public without a guide due to vandalism in the past that included graffiti. In order to protect this archaeological sacred site, restrictive measures were taken years ago in 1977 when the Archeological Preserve was implemented. Touching the petroglyphs was not advised since it is illegal to damage any natural object protected in a provincial park. Under the Historic Resources Act of Alberta, fines up to \$50,000 and a year in jail will be

enforced if damage is done to this irreplaceable legacy. With more than 50 art sites in the Park, the preservation of rock art at this historic site has been of utmost importance.

I ordered the ticket ahead of time for the morning tour. Information about the Writing-On-Stone tour can be accessed on the [Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation website](#). Our group's tour guide was Stella, a pleasant humble Blackfoot woman whose ancestors utilized this sacred area. Stella shared her stories and information with the group about the symbolic petroglyphs and pictographs known as Writing-On-Stone.

It was as scorching hot hazy day and more humid than usual in Alberta, an indication of the changing weather patterns. Stella advised us to dress appropriately when hiking and to bring a lot of water.

I attached one of my favorite lenses, the AF-S 70-300mm F4.5-5.6G VR Nikkor Zoom Lens to my Nikon D7000 camera. This zoom lens was necessary to get close-up images of the petroglyphs and pictographs.

Much of the rock, rock art, and archaeological sites are dated from the Late Prehistoric Period (2000 – 250 BP or 0 AD to 1750 AD). The First Nations people followed the bison herds on foot. The Blackfoot and Shoshone are two tribes possibly responsible for the Late Prehistoric rock art at Writing-On-Stone. The Historic Period began circa. 1730 AD where during this period, Writing-On-Stone was controlled by the Blackfoot Nation. With the arrival of guns, metal, and horses as the form of transportation, it revolutionized the First Nations culture. Hunting and raids were conducted by invading tribes such as the Cree, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Crow, Kutenai and Shoshone. Although researchers believe that the Blackfoot created most of the rock art, other invading tribes may have been involved as well.



Like all First Nations people, the traditional Blackfoot culture and religion are based on a sacred relationship with the land. The circle, a prominent symbol in their culture, is meaningful in many aspects of their lives. For example, Stella shared with the group that the pictographs of circles with lines in them represented a very brave person who overcame many challenges in life. The circle is also a symbol of protection from external harmful influences. The 'circles of protection' in the image are actually body shields, which were used by warriors in the time before horses were reintroduced to North America in the 1730s.

The faces and figures that can be observed in the rocks are natural formations. The Blackfoot believe that these are spirits in the rocks, revealing themselves to the viewer. Although the exact time that the petroglyphs and pictographs first appeared was uncertain, it was ascertained that some of the rock art at Writing-On-Stone may be 5,000 years old. Before the introduction of metal tools, petroglyphs were scratched onto the sandstone cliffs with antlers or bones. Pictographs were painted with red ochre that was made up of crushed iron ore mixed with water or bison fat. Lumps of charcoal were also used for

the pictographs. The First Nations people of this region were proud of their heritage, highly expressive, creative, and definitely wanted to share their legacy.

The carvings reflected the Blackfoot culture in many ways. By carving and painting on these rocks, they recorded important events in their lives such as hunts, significant life experiences and battles. Spiritual dreams that occurred during vision quests were recorded as well. Since the Blackfoot people regard this land as sacred, they still perform their ceremonies in this area today.



The backcountry hiking area at Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park is rich and vast. The Davis and Humphrey coulee areas south of the Milk River have 930 hectare of backcountry allocated to hiking and exploration. The backcountry is comprised of grasslands, hoodoo fields and narrow sandstone canyons. Although there are no developed trails, game trails allow access to most areas. However, there are restrictions as overnight camping and fires are not allowed in the hiking zone.

As mentioned at the beginning of the Photo Essay, this is rattlesnake country so there are cautions that hikers, campers, and RVers should be aware of when visiting the area. Apparently, a rattlesnake rarely strikes at large moving objects unless provoked. In fact, it is a very “timid” creature and will try to escape when given the chance. That makes two of us!

The Alberta Parks guide that I picked up when visiting another historic site, the Bar U Ranch, gives some great advice for hikers when exploring rattlesnake country:

- Watch where you are walking; stay on trails and out of long grass.
- Examine an area before you sit down to rest.
- Stop young children from running ahead and climbing hills and rocks.
- Keep your dog on its leash; prevent it from putting its nose into bushes, holes, or anywhere else a snake might hide.
- Do not put your hands or feet into cracks, holes and crevices, or into or under bushes.
- Do not lift rocks or logs.
- Never poke or throw things at snakes; not only will you bother them and make them more likely to strike, it is against the law to disturb all wildlife in the park.
- Do not walk under ledges; never reach up with your hands if you can't see where you are putting them – a snake could be there!
- Never handle an injured or dead rattlesnake.
- If you hear a rattling sound, do not move until you know the snake's location, then move away.

Traditional First Nations beliefs maintain that all things in the world – animals, plants and rocks are charged with supernatural powers. In this remarkable valley, the cliffs and hoodoos are known to be the home of powerful spirits that help people who come to pray at this sacred place.



The interpretive tour was educational and the couple of hours where I learned about petroglyphs and pictographs had flown by. It was well worth the time learning about the fascinating heritage of Alberta. After the tour, Stella drove the group back to the unrestricted area.

A few hours of exploration in this sacred area was simply not enough time especially since 930 hectares of backcountry had yet to be explored. My friend was right; the energy was special at Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park. There was definitely something very spiritual and potent about this area. I have never felt a spiritual energetic space this powerful anywhere else in Alberta so I will definitely return to this sacred place in the future.

Contact Information for Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park

Box 297, Milk River, AB T0K 1M0

Email: writingonstone@gov.ab.ca

Campground and Group Reservations

Phone: 1-877-537-2757

Phone: 1-403-647 Comfort Camping

Programs, Resource Management, Public Safety and Enforcement

Phone: 403-647-2364

Toll-Free: 310-0000 (Alberta)

General Provincial Park Information

Website: [Alberta Parks](http://AlbertaParks.ca)

[Tour Information](#) Toll Free: 1-866-427-3582