

Thunder Bay, Northern Ontario
By Suzanne Wright

A white feather, curled like a comma, floats in the water. Overhead a float plane practices take-offs in a cobalt sky. To my left, vast grain silos rise on the banks at the water's edge. Dave, a river rat from Wild Waters with zero percent body fat and a grin that splits his face—with one missing tooth—slices by me in the glassy water. I lay my paddle across my lap and plunge my hand into the liquid cold and arch my neck to the warm rays of the sun.

I am in Thunder Bay, Northern Ontario, Canada.

Settled by aboriginals and Europeans, by the early 1900s, Thunder Bay was the world's leading grain handling port and a gateway on the Trans-Canada Highway. Once a thriving city, it's been losing population. Though there are about 120,000 residents currently, a local says with a laugh, "Everyone knows you, is related to you or divorced you." Still, though it's perennially popular with hunters and fishers. No wonder: you're never far from Lake Superior.

The city's boosters broaden its appeal, transitioning Thunder Bay from a gritty industrial town (my hotel room off the main drag features a view of the paper plant's stacks) to an eco-friendly destination. It's not as far-fetched as it may seem: within an hour's drive are numerous unspoiled natural attractions. Head to Mount Mackay Lookout (located on native land for a scenic view of the expanse: it's "bush" as far as you can see. Investment is being made. Though controversial with baby boomer locals, a \$1 million waterfront skateboard park aims to attract younger folks, a newly opened green-ish cabins called Beyond the Giant have opened and connecting flight service from Toronto is frequent.

Long the most popular attraction in town, Fort William Historic Park is one of the country's top ten tourist destinations. Sprawling over 25 acres of land on Lake Superior, it's a living history museum that recreates the world's largest fur trade post, circa 1815. (It puts me in mind of Williamsburg). Once the inland headquarters of the North West Company, it drew traders, voyageurs and aboriginals who paddled hundreds of miles to do business. Although less a hive of activity today, its 42 historic buildings feature costumed and conversational interpreters who will teach you to build a birch canoe, press furs for transport, forge iron or throw an axe. Bring a picnic and you could easily spend the day. Check out The Trading Post Gift Shop which has local items such as inukshuks (Inuit rock figures that resemble humans and serve as guideposts), leather goods, lanterns and fudge.

"This is amethyst country" crow brochures and sure enough, you can tour a mine and take home a sample of the province's official gemstone. Farmers once believed the purples rock would protect crops from hailstones and locusts. Another boast, the "Niagara of the North" proves apt. I hear the thundering of Kakebeka ("thundering water" in Ojibwa language) Falls before I see the root-beer colored waters roaring over

the sheer cliffs before making their way to Lake Superior. The Kaministiquia (Kam for short) River was a trade route used by aboriginals, explorers, travelers and fur traders. Fossils dating back 1.6 billion years have been found here.

Ouimet Canyon, another provincial park, is chiseled from the “Canadian Shield,” pre-Cambrian rock along Lake Superior’s North Shore. Called the “mini Grand Canyon”—marketers seem to compare Thunder Bay’s every charm to another far, far away—the gorge is reached by a gentle trail less than a mile long. Standing on the viewing platform you can look into the canyon floor some 329 feet down and see huge vertical columns of diabase rock that look like totem poles. Artic plants flourish in this climate.

Captain Greg Heroux of Sail Superior looks like TV actor Grant Show (sans the droopy mustache Grant wears in the current *Swingtown*). The handsome former model and his wife own the 40-foot Finnish-built sloop *Frodo*, a handsome teak vessel. There’s not much wind, so we motor past the breakwaters and Thunder Bay’s famous red and white cylindrical lighthouse. We sail past the Welcome Islands and Pie Islands, black cormorants and white pelicans our occasional company. But the highlight of the trip is going ashore at Trowbridge Island. For a decade, the island, a lighthouse station, has been home to an eccentric 80-year old woman. You’d never guess from the lilac bushes outside the simple wooden house what lays inside. Heroux has a key to her home and we tour with jaws slack: there are themed collectibles jam-packed into each room, ranging from Reagan memorabilia to teletubbies, Royal Canadian Mounted Police poster and Egyptian souvenirs. It’s fantastical—like a film set.

Sleeping Giant State Park is the region’s gem, drawing visitors from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Canada. When viewed from a distance, the rugged peninsula that curves around the southern tip of Thunder Bay looks like a man sleeping on his back. Volcanic activity gave rise to the granite rock, also part of the vast Canadian Shield. The park is unique, ecologically speaking: a transition zone from the boreal and Great Lakes-St. Lawrence forests. Cedars, junipers, jack pine, poplar and ferns dominate; wildlife includes deer, foxes, porcupines and moose; wildflowers include primrose and butterwort. Hiking, kayaking and camping are popular summer activities.

The guided Sea Lion hike takes one hour, includes tidbits about woodland plants and affords you great views across the lake. Bright orange lichen grows on the sea lion (whose head has since fallen into the water). Be sure and visit the nearby tiny hamlet of Silver Islet, once the largest silver mining town in North America. With its bright blue paint, bikes propped out front and banging screen door, the General Store’s cinnamon rolls are worth lingering over in the tea room.

All this activity occasions a hearty appetite. I’ve been cautioned that “Thunder Bay is a meat and potatoes town” by more than one local and sure enough the best plate at a table of six at the Valhalla Inn’s Nordic Dining Room was easily the grilled rib eye with gorgonzola potato au gratin. At the Stanley Hotel, where the mix of patrons included twentysomething native guys, families with infants and a barefoot fiftysomething woman wrestle with the double patty Stanley Burger to a 1980s rock soundtrack

But there are culinary surprises.

Like the dinner buffet at the Masala Girl, with well-spiced East Indian specialties, and the Asian-inspired dumplings, noodles and crab and avocado wrap at the Good News Café, located in a handsome red brick building by the harbor and in front of the (active) railroad tracks. Madhouse has a boho feeling and a great Greek salad. Though unimpressive from the exterior, the Caribou Restaurant is warm and contemporary inside with an appealing bar. I slurped up a fine roasted tomato soup and the best pork ribs I have ever eaten, fall-off-the-bone tender in an almost candied laquer of coffee, bourbon and maple syrup, washed down with a baco noir, a varietal grown in Ontario. Just outside of town, the Thunder Oaks Cheese Farm is the province's only gouda-producing farm. Five generations of award-winning cheesemakers have been producing 12 varieties including dill, jalapeño and cumin and cloves since 1995 (using grandmother's recipe from Holland).

Still, the place everyone asks if I've been is Hoito. Located in the blue and white Finnish Labor Temple, which dates from 1910, it's a modest meeting place—think high school cafeteria of the 1960s. But since its opening, when it served bushworkers hearty, inexpensive food, Hoito has thrived. The famous pancakes are delicious, thin and crepe-like, with crispy edges.

No matter how much Thunder Bay changes, it's heartening that some things stay the same.

For more information on the area, log onto www.visitthunderbay.com.