

## Kate & Jim's Travels with Charles

### Episode #21 – Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park

After leaving the mountainous area of Waterton National Park, in southern Alberta, we knew we were heading into Big Sky Country as we drove east.

So we were expecting, and we got lots of this...



... which is  
beautiful ...



... but in a totally  
different way than  
we'd been used to  
during the previous  
several weeks.

Of course, we were  
prepared to see more – and  
MORE – of this kind of  
landscape for many hours -  
or days – ahead as we  
continued driving generally  
east.



So, we were quite surprised to find ourselves in the strange territory of badlands and hoodoos, in Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park, another UNESCO World Heritage Site (our FIFTH on this trip!).



For those who don't know what a hoodoo is (I didn't), it's defined as "A tall, thin spire of rock (usually sandstone) that protrudes from the bottom of an arid drainage basin or badland."



There were canyons filled with these odd-shaped outcroppings.





The campground in the park was just near the Milk River, which was shallow and nice to wade in, and rimmed by these fantastic banks.





But as you might have gathered from the name of the park, there's something more noteworthy about these badlands and hoodoos.

We went to the interpretation centre to get some information. This plaque explained what makes this area significant: The artwork that's engraved or painted on the rocks and pillars in the valley.



## ÁÍSINAI'PI


Áísinaí'pi—"it is pictured, it is written"—is one of the most important sacred places for the Niitsítapi (Blackfoot). Here, Niitsítapi seek the guidance of the Spirit Beings that dwell in the hoodoos and among the nearby hills, known as Kátoyissiksi. Their messages take the form of pictures carved into and painted on the sandstone cliffs. Other images are biographic, recording the exploits of the artists' lives. Áísinaí'pi has one of the largest concentrations of rock art on the Great Plains, including the most complex and intricate compositions in the region. For the Niitsítapi, this cultural landscape is a vibrant and enduring expression of the meeting of the physical and spiritual worlds.

The interpretation centre was beautiful and open, overlooking the badlands, and designed to reflect the Blackfoot traditions and artistic styles, as well as the landscape.



**CAMPING AT  
 NG-ON-STONE / ÁÍSINAI'PI**

at, the Milk River valley in the vicinity  
 / Áísinaí'pi was a good place to camp.



This petroglyph shows a tipi camp (akoká'tssin) arranged in a circle.

...an (Blood Man), also known as  
 Photo Courtesy of William E. Farr

...do (summer), camps were located along valley rims, wh  
 and the mosquitoes at bay. In istoyí (winter), camps w  
 ouble bottoms, out of the cold wind and close to rela  
 nps were never made close to the drawings, out of

**ROCK ART  
 DICTIONARY**

Push buttons to light up the pictographs



- Bear Paw (Wááyeoh) Kat
- Cuck (Ináanaawá)
- Horses (mookosamínks)
- Tipi (mútooye)
- Plains Bison (múwe)
- Bow Spear (mophokosamínks)
- Bad (páksweh)
- Shield (owó'ááwe)





We decided to sign up for a tour and were lucky enough to get a private tour (only because nobody else had signed up for that one) with a Blackfoot elder named Saa'kokoto.

Not only is he a tour guide, he has actually helped to interpret some of the art that has been discovered etched on these rocks.



He was lovely and passionate and full of stories passed down to him by his 92-year old Uncle Charlie, who was and still is his mentor. (He pulled out his phone to show us a recent photo of Uncle Charlie.)

He drove us to this cliff where they've discovered a number of petroglyphs that are estimated to be close to 2000 years old.



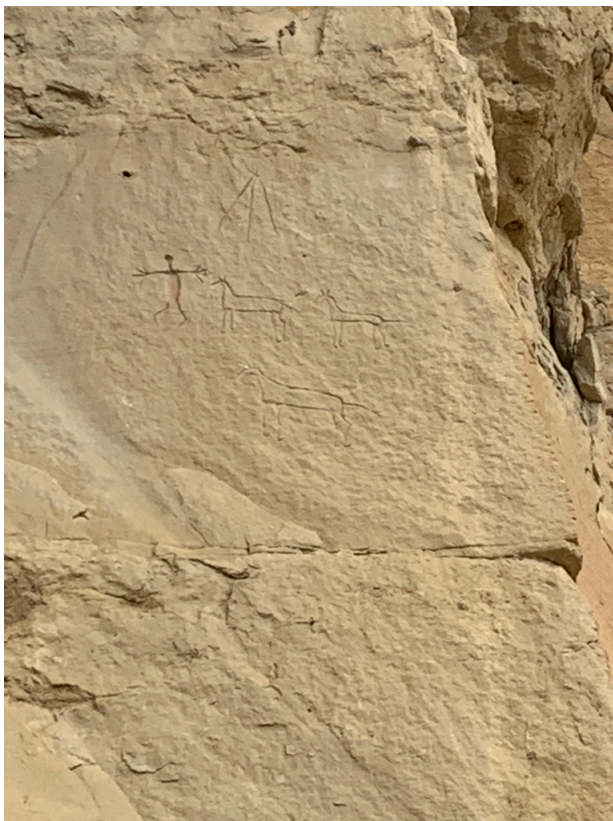
Saa'kokoto not only explained the meanings of many of the images carved into the sandstone, he also talked about the times, the lifestyles and the traditions of his people going back centuries.

One of the conclusions they had come to, in their research, was that the etchings that were higher up on the rocks were likely accomplished by the artists suspending themselves down from above, as they didn't have any way of elevating themselves that high off the ground. No horses to sit on, no wood to make ladders from.

He told us how they looked at the natural characteristics of the rock and used them within their art. For instance, the round circle, which represents the sun, below, is a natural formation in the rock. There are lots of these circles in the hoodoos, and eventually they'll fall out, so there will be a hole. As there are in this cliff nearby.



It was a little disheartening to see lettering carved into the rock, defacing the original art, but this would have happened before the area was designated an archaeological preserve in 1977.



The higher ones were free of graffiti and very clear.

Here you can see a chief (most likely) with his herd, and above, his tipi.

Saa'kokoto explained that this etching was a prairie chicken. Then he showed us a photo of the actual bird so we could see the resemblance. He told us the story about how the prairie chicken was the inspiration for the Blackfoot's traditional Chicken Dance.



He also treated us to a traditional song that's chanted at their powwows, and a kind of lullaby that would be sung to calm everyone down at end of day.

It was a very special tour. He definitely gave us more time than the tour was supposed to go, and we were very grateful for the unique insights he shared with us.



A few more dramatic  
views on our way  
back to the centre...





... Then we went back to our campsite for a nice simple dinner.



And for dessert, a brilliant sunset. Well, not actually the sunset, but the effects of it on the rocks.







A memorable end to an unforgettable day in Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park.