

Cultural Calgary!

Indigenous experiences should be part of any well-rounded trip to Canada, says **Natalie Marsh**, who learns a First Nations-taught craft in Alberta's biggest city



It's so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. We're all gathered around a table, each of us with a pair of tweezers in our hand, delicately dipping tiny fish scales – which have been dried out and then dyed different colours – into some glue, before carefully placing them onto a small slice of wood.

We're taking a fish scale art class at Moonstone Creation in Calgary, and after seeing how precisely the scales were stuck on the examples our teachers showed us, we're concentrating too hard to talk at the same time.

Moonstone Creation is a small, family-run gallery and gift shop. Owner Yvonne is Cree First Nations, and the shop stocks artwork and products by more than 60 First Nations artists from all over the country. ➤

Heritage Park Historical Village, Alberta

ASK THE expert



Denise Parkhouse, managing director of online agency Tripse

"I've been really pleasantly surprised about how vibrant Calgary is and how it has embraced food. And there are several local distilleries run by young entrepreneurs in the area. Lots of people use Calgary as a hub airport and move straight on, but I would recommend your customers spend a few days exploring the city and the surrounding area. There are some fantastic museums, and a highlight was seeing the Kimball Theatre Organ being played at Studio Bell. I would also recommend clients drive out for a day to the Badlands and experience the Dinosaur Provincial Park – it's like a canyon just appears out of nowhere!"

Dinosaur Provincial Park



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Calgary Stampede; Calgary Public Library; fish scale art class at Moonstone Creation; Calgary sunset PICTURES: Travel Alberta/Youn Park/Cakewalk; Shutterstock/Sopotnicki, Jeff Whyte, SL Photography; Natalie Marsh

Our fish scale art class, which begins with a taste of some tea infused with plants picked from the land, plus small bites of smoked white fish, is one of several classes available here. I've managed to arrange my fish scales in wonky concentric circles, giving the finished work a flower-like appearance. The accuracy and patience involved from professionals to create fish scale art, as well as the delicate beading, weaving and other products found around the shop, is to be admired.

"There is growing interest in Indigenous tourism experiences as travellers are looking to find local connections and a sense of place," says Cindy Ady, chief executive of Tourism Calgary. "They're looking for immersive, experiential and educational opportunities. Indigenous experiences in and around Calgary are providing these opportunities for learning and connection, and Indigenous communities are sharing more of their history, culture and stories."

And with this increased focus on Indigenous tourism, more and more escorted tours to Canada now include Indigenous experiences alongside itineraries that take in the destination's main attractions.

CITY LIFE

One of Calgary's big tourist draws is the Calgary Tower. Standing at the top, 160 metres above the city centre, among its skyscrapers, it's possible to see the city's

“Standing by the chuckwagon race track, it's not hard to imagine the electric atmosphere at the Calgary Stampede

fast-growing neighbourhoods in all directions. I squint down and see a train track, where seemingly miles of freight are slowly being pulled between buildings on their journey into the Albertan plains. But my eyes keep being drawn to the Rocky Mountains on the horizon. This snow-topped ragged mountain range steals the show from multiple vantage points across the city.

Many international visitors use Calgary as a gateway to the Rockies, but you'll find there's plenty going on in the city to stick around for. Calgary has a strong brewing scene – the industry has seen rapid growth and there are around 50 breweries in the city alone.

There are now also 1,000 kilometres of paved pathways across Calgary, a milestone reached in 2020, making it more walkable than ever. And Stampede Park is also undergoing a huge expansion and renovation.

Home to the famous Calgary Stampede, the park attracts more than one million visitors across the 10-day

DESTINATIONS

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top tip

On October 1, Canada removed all its Covid-19 restrictions for vaccinated and unvaccinated visitors



INDIGENOUS TRIPS

Hear all about First Nations culture and learn how their ancestors lived off the land on a Mahikan Trails Medicine Walk, part of **Insight Vacations'** Spectacular Rockies and Glaciers of Alberta eight-day tour, led by a First Nations Cree Iroquois local expert. The itinerary costs from £3,055 for a May 31 departure. [insightvacations.com](https://www.insightvacations.com)

The village of Wendake, Quebec, is full of First Nations culture. **First Class Holidays'** Essential Quebec package includes three nights in Montreal, three nights at a First Nations-owned hotel and three tours. Prices from £1,899 from London and £2,039 from Manchester, travelling in May 2023, with four days' car rental. [fcholidays.com](https://www.fcholidays.com)

Guests at Indigenous-owned Painted Warriors Guest Ranch can embark on a horseback adventure and learn First Nations skills. A nine-night stay with **Ranch Rider** costs from £3,317 per person, based on two sharing, including most activities but not flights, from May to October 2023. [ranchrider.com](https://www.ranchrider.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Pictures from Heritage Park: main street, Gasoline Alley and First Nations encampment

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Anastasiia Valitova; Natalie Marsh

extravaganza every July – around 5% of whom are from outside Canada – who come for the rodeo, chuckwagon races, powwow and midway (or fairground, this side of the Atlantic). There's also an Elbow River Camp to experience the cultures of First Nations, and many other attractions. The park is almost empty when we visit it six weeks ahead of the 2022 Calgary Stampede, but standing next to the chuckwagon race track, looking up at the stands, it's not hard to imagine the electric atmosphere that will soon be arriving.

STEP BACK IN TIME

Just 15 minutes from the downtown area is a window into the region's past. Heritage Park is an immersive day out for the whole family, taking visitors through almost 100 years of history with reconstructed buildings, replicas and exhibits, from a fur trading fort in the 1860s all the way through to the pre-1950s-themed Gasoline Alley, where old petrol pumps, retro signs and vintage cars fill the room. This collection used to be owned privately, before being donated to the museum. Staff, dressed in period costumes and remaining in character, add to the experience.

We hop on board the park's steam train to get our bearings, passing some even more impressive views of the Rockies across the reservoir, before we disembark at The Settlement, where we're invited into the First Nations

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encampment to witness and partake in a 'smudging'. This is a traditional practice and is done by burning sacred herbs and wafting the smoke towards yourself to be rid of bad energy.

Walking out of the tipi, I realise for myself the importance of being able to connect with Indigenous communities through tourist experiences – and how this should play a part in any visit to Canada. [TW](https://www.travelweekly.co.uk)

BOOK IT

Premier Holidays offers a 10-night fly-drive to Alberta from £1,899 per person, based on two adults sharing, for travel in May 2023. The price includes return flights from Heathrow to Calgary, nine nights' accommodation in Calgary, Banff, Dinosaur Provincial Park and Drumheller, and car hire. [premierholidays.co.uk](https://www.premierholidays.co.uk)