

Cold's Spell

Winter works a special magic in Canada, and Winnipeg, the 'City of Festivals', makes the most of it.

Winnipeg is one of Canada's best-kept secrets. But if you've heard of Neil Young, Crash Test Dummies, or Winnie the Pooh, then you know more about Winnipeg than you think.¹

I didn't know much about this place either until I moved here from Australia about three years ago. So, if you've really never heard of Winnipeg, then let me introduce you.

Winnipeg is on the eastern edge of the prairies in the province of Manitoba, virtually slap bang in the middle of Canada.

Manitoba's capital, it is home to about 650,000, a beautiful city with wide streets, generous parks and reserves, and a wonderful balance of new and old architecture. Framed by the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, Winnipeg is compact and easy to get around, and has about 128 kilometres of navigable waterways.

Before European settlement, the region was inhabited by the Assiniboine and Cree peoples. The first permanent European settlement was in 1812, though fur-trading posts had been operating since 1738. In 1822, the Hudson's Bay Company constructed Fort Garry, and the community grew with the fur trade.

In 1870, the settlement became Winnipeg – "dirty water" in one of the local languages – and grew rapidly. The Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in 1885, bringing migrants, capital, improved farming techniques, and higher wheat prices. Today's Winnipeg is a commercial and distribution hub for grain, livestock and minerals.

But there's more to Winnipeg than business. It is also known as the "City of Festivals" (there are 45 scattered through the year), the "City of Sunshine" (2,321 hours annually), and the "Christmas Capital of Canada" (more about that later).

Winnipeg has more than 900 restaurants, 50 dance clubs, 43 museums and galleries, and 30 live performance theatres and cinemas, along with a mint, a conservatory, a sculpture garden, a race track, three casinos, two universities, and a major library. Winnipeg is home to the Manitoba Opera, the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra – not bad for one small city. And there's sport: baseball, football, basketball, hockey, golf, and curling (like lawn bowls on ice).

On the edge of the city, you can wander through wildflowers and waist-high prairie grasses, and explore forests, marshes and meadows. Beyond is the rugged country of the Canadian Shield, sandy beaches, rolling hills, majestic woods, and

more than 100,000 lakes. The province is home to bears, elk, bison, moose, deer, raccoons and beaver, and an incredible variety of birdlife.

Further afield, Churchill is *the* place for polar bear and beluga whale watching, the aurora borealis (northern lights), scuba diving, snowshoeing and ice fishing. It's also a great place to experience a northern community. To sample the hospitality and way of life of rural Manitoba, you could visit any of the 30 tea houses, 43 bed & breakfasts, or 42 holiday farms scattered throughout the province.

The seasons are quite distinct: the snow melts before the spring explosion of life and colour; fields of golden wheat, yellow canola and purple flax stretch under endless summer skies as the buzz of festivals and good food go alfresco; autumn colours the maple, elm and oak trees above thick blankets of fallen leaves; and winter brings sun dogs, ice fogs, Hoare frost, snowstorms, and angels in the snow.

Yes, the winter is cold, but with the right clothes and a little enthusiasm you'll be fine. In winter you can ski along roads after snowstorms, skate across frozen rivers, and take a dog sled or sleigh ride. It's the time when people shovel their sidewalks, plug in their cars, and go for walks with their kids literally in tow – on a toboggan. It's where heated parking and bus shelters and enclosed walkways are the norm, and where golf courses become cross-country ski fields. And it's when many of the winter's cold nights are warmed and brightened by the spectacular northern lights.

Winnipeg virtually guarantees a white Christmas, hence "Christmas Capital of Canada".

And the people? Manitobans are a friendly lot, very like Australians, which may explain why the more than 100 Australians living here feel so much at home.

In 1999, Winnipeg will host the PanAm Games. As a qualifier for many events at the Olympics, the games will attract hosts of spectators from around the world, and may give you a taste of what's going to happen in your own backyard in the year 2000.

But don't wait until then. Whether you come for the festivals, the restaurants, the seasons or the people, just come to Winnipeg – I'll be here to show you around.

¹ A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* was inspired by a Canadian World War I regimental mascot, a bear named Winnipeg. Musician Neil Young and band Crash Test Dummies are both from Winnipeg.]