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Wawa, Ontario, is More than a Goose and a Moose ...

DECEMBER 23, 2019 BY ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN

3 COMMENTS



"North of Superior" as they say ...

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While it's not unusual for towns across Canada to have a big roadside monument to attract travellers' attention, Wawa's giant goose is the only one to merit a song written by Stompin' Tom Connors. Take a gander around the visitor centre next to the big honker, find the panel with the words to the tune, and feel free to sing along. Stomping is optional.



The Wawa Goose - among the most photographed monuments in North America. - all photos by Robin and Arlene Karpan (except where indicated)

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Today's goose is the third incarnation. The first was built in 1960 to mark the completion of the last link in the Trans Canada Highway, just south of Wawa. Local business owners were disappointed that the new highway skirted the edge of town rather than pass through it. So they decided that a big goose on the road into town might tempt travellers to stop and check things out. It worked. Over the years, two more versions were installed as the old ones deteriorated. Town boosters boast that their goose is among the most photographed monuments in North America.

Wawa means Wild Goose in Ojibway

Continuing along the road into town after visiting the goose, we soon come to Wawa's second mascot, the moose - not a mere statue, but the real thing - stuffed, mounted, and proudly standing on the porch of Young's General Store. It has an even more storied past. The original moose, Henrietta, who greeted visitors since the mid-1990s, was a big hit. Then one dark day in 2001, conservation officers confiscated her. There were allegations that Henrietta may have been taken illegally, and a court case was pending.



Henrietta-the-Hardier, Wawa Ontario's moose at Young's General Store keeps watch over the summer sausage and pickles, moccasins, moose-hide gloves, fishing lures, ice cream, tourist knick-knacks and homemade fudge.

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The community soon devastated that they started a yellow ribbon campaign

The community was so devastated that they started a yellow ribbon campaign demanding Henrietta's return. Posters portrayed the poor moose behind bars. Even local politicians got involved. After two years and widespread media coverage, Henrietta was finally cleared and sent back to Wawa. Sadly, doing hard time in a government lock-up had taken its toll, and Henrietta's hair started falling out. Eventually she was replaced with the bull moose we see today.



This ain't no bull.

A moose on the porch is only one quirky aspect of Young's. Store founder, Bill Young, was behind a promotional stunt to paint giant goose footprints on the highway leading into town, which highway officials frowned upon and painted over more than once. The storefront is scattered with antiques, while inside we find an eclectic mix of everything from pickles in a huge pickle barrel to moccasins, moose-hide gloves, fishing lures, tourist knick-knacks, a popular ice cream stand, and homemade fudge. What first caught our attention on opening the door was the enticing smoky aroma of dry summer sausage, another of the store's claims to fame. We bought some for snacks while wandering around Wawa, then stocked up before heading home. Now we wish we had more.



The beauty of big Canadian nature is the name of the game on the Michipicoten River.

Wawa was built on mining for gold and iron ore, as well as forestry, but as those industries declined, so did the town's fortunes. It has had to reinvent itself, and has recently been putting more effort into tourism. Fortunately, the town of 3,000 has a prime location, on the shore of spring-fed Wawa Lake, next to Lake Superior, and near the historic Michipicoten River, and Magpie River with its series of impressive waterfalls. [Lake Superior Provincial Park](#) is just down the road, and other places to enjoy the beauty of nature are a stone's throw away.



The rugged shores of Lake Superior Provincial Park.
— photo courtesy of Ontario Parks

The waterways were important travel routes for the Ojibway and became even busier during the fur trade. The Michipicoten River is part of a series of waterways connecting Lake Superior with James Bay. The list of early visitors reads like a who's who of northern exploration, from Alexander Mackenzie to Philip Turnor, David Thompson, and Alexander Henry among others.





Heritage Doorways at the Wawa Visitor Centre.

Much of Wawa's history is interpreted through a series of Heritage Doorways – door-sized murals portraying notable people and events. One tells the story of Louise Towab, a local Ojibway woman who, along with her husband William, uncovered the first gold vein in 1897, setting off the mining rush that changed the region forever.



High Falls has inspired some great music.

A doorway at Scenic High Falls on the Magpie River features music composer Glenn Gould, who frequently came here for inspiration. He always insisted on staying in a specific room in the Wawa Motor Inn and claimed that he did some of his best writing here.



Glenn Gould in quiet contemplation overlooking High Falls.

Not surprisingly, the scenery also caught the eye of landscape painters, especially A. Y. Jackson of Group of Seven fame. Jackson used a cabin on Sandy Beach in Michipicoten Bay as a summer retreat and featured this area in at least 15 paintings. A wonderful way to delve into the artistic side of things is on a guided walking tour led by noted Wawa historian, Johanna Rowe. It's a chance to follow in Jackson's footsteps and find the exact vantage points he used for his iconic works.



Johanna Rowe in the footsteps of A. Y. Jackson and the Group of Seven.

We visited Wawa as part of a longer road trip along Lake Superior's magnificent north shore, and discovered that this was the best place to actually get out on the world's largest lake. Wawa is home to Naturally Superior Adventures (NSA), specializing in canoeing and kayaking – everything from day paddles to instruction courses and multi-day wilderness adventures. National Geographic Traveler called NSA one of the top 100 outdoor adventure companies on the

planet.



Rock Island lodge is the spiritual centre of one of the top 100 outdoor adventure companies on the planet.

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The company run by David Wells is based at Rock Island Lodge, perched on a gorgeous rocky point jutting into Lake Superior, next to the mouth of the Michipicoten River. The lodge has four well-appointed rooms plus a campsite on the beach. Meals are served family-style with everyone from guests to the owner and staff all eating together around the big table. It feels like dining with friends. The large common room is equipped with comfy couches, a wood-burning fireplace, and picture windows framing Lake Superior. The only better spot for watching the sunset over the lake is on the patio just outside.



In a sea kayak during a calmer moment on Lake Superior, which can be fickle, and always demands respect.

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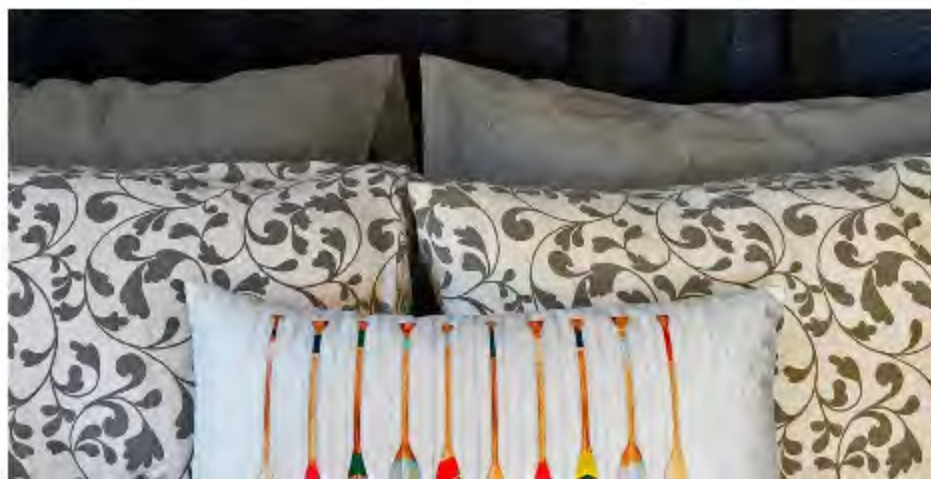
NSA guide Brychan led us on a half-day canoe trip down the Michipicoten River, starting several kilometres upstream then paddling back to the lodge. It's an easy-going stretch, being carried along the constant current, through a series of twists and turns and fun Class 1 rapids. Mergansers bobbed on the water, kingfishers flitted along the forested banks, while bald eagles soared above. Near the end we took a short detour to where the Magpie River enters the Michipicoten through plunging Silver Falls.



Silver Falls is one of many rewards during the journey.

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Next day, kayaking guide Andrea took us out on Lake Superior in sea kayaks. Fortunately, the massive lake was in one of its calmer moods as we paddled leisurely around Michipicoten Bay. At the far end of Sandy Beach, it felt as if we were travelling through a Group of Seven canvas, as we followed the cliffs featured so prominently in A.Y. Jackson's paintings. As impressive as Lake Superior may look from shore, nothing can compare with being out on the water.



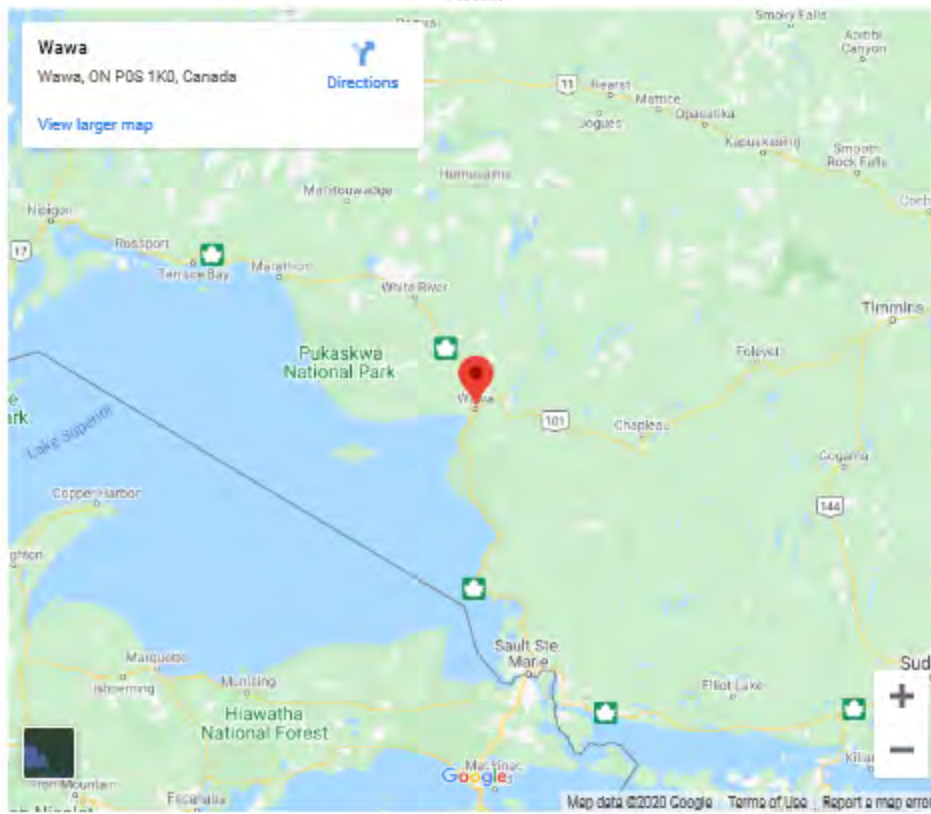


As you cruise along the Trans Canada Highway through northern Ontario, by all means stop for the obligatory selfie in front of Wawa's goose. But as we learned, this is just the starting point in discovering why this special corner of Lake Superior inspired artists, musicians, and paddlers, and continues to do so today.

For more details, see www.experiencewawa.com.



Full-moon inukshuk over Lake Superior.



Inukshuk

There is definitely something compelling about making a big pile of rocks; an Inukshuk. Inuit peoples started doing it a very long time ago.

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Canada's BIG mascots



A "mascot" is an animal, person or thing that is supposed to bring good luck.

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Leader wildlife sculptures

Unless you work or have friends in the area, Leader, Saskatchewan is not exactly the kind of Canadian town you would find yourself touring around in.