

Stratford offers full 'storybook' experience

By Alex HPSpecial to the KWS

A visit to Stratford is an all-encompassing experience, combining art, culture and serenity. While visitors are largely drawn to the renowned Stratford Theatre, there's plenty of off-stage magic in this beautiful city. Shakespeare himself never visited Canada's Stratford, but this namesake city would have made him beam with delight. He would have found inspiration in many of the city's bookstores, cafes and walking paths.

Stratford is best enjoyed with a group, and our recent girls day out included taking in Little Women, a tasteful, contemporary rendition to the original Louisa May Alcott classic about sisterhood. Our pulses still elevated from the play, we headed out to explore what Stratford has to offer. It requires at least a full day, maybe two, to enjoy this quaint, historic city that bustles with life. While the majority of visitors may not be playwrights or musicians, it still has that air about it, a lingering artistic flavour. That flavour is enhanced by the bounty of restaurants, cafes and hideaways.

We visited several on our excursion, including the famous Church Restaurant. The restaurant, and the upstairs Belfry, epitomize the feel of Stratford. It's a perfect example of converting a historic landmark into a hospitality venue. The interior is beautiful, a testament to its former glory as Mackenzie Memorial Gospel Church. You're almost distracted, in a pleasant way, by the architecture, wood stained furniture and gorgeous stained glass windows.

Quaint cafes draw you in like a kid in a candy store. You'll love Brista's, The Livery Yard and the patio at Romeo's Corner Cafe. For dessert, there are some nifty chocolate shops you can't pass up. If you're an antique lover, you can stop by the galleries. There are a couple of breweries in town if you like sampling some unique brews. And the gift shops, with authentic British and Scottish products, await. Once you're done all that shopping and eating, a stroll through Shakespearean Gardens will burn some calories. A walk along the Avon River, or better yet, a paddle boat ride, will definitely soothe the soul.

Stratford Festival and the city itself, are gems that beckon to be discovered. If you haven't visited recently, don't waste any time and put this on your day-trip list.