

# The StarPhoenix

Buried treasure: Moose Jaw tunnels have wealth of history

The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)

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Destination

E20 / FRONT

Peter Wilson

Winner of national and provincial competitions, this Saskatchewan tourist haunt looks like it's becoming one of the province's hot destination spots but you'll have to go underground to find it.

Tunnels of Moose Jaw relives a vivid part of that southern Saskatchewan city's colourful past, building a successful tourism package that's bringing in more and more visitors every year. With about 100,000 visitors annually, the underground tunnels have become a ``must-see" in the Spa city's expanding list of tourist attractions.

Blending legend and folklore with known Canadian history, the tunnels connect visitors to the lives of past generations. They provide a venue to history and also present a unique educational discovery for Canadians of every age and ethnic background.

Likely built more than a century ago by steam engineers, widening and extending the existing underground channels that carried the steam pipes which brought heat and water to downtown buildings, the tunnels were to become almost communities beneath cities across Canada.

``As commerce expanded, they would add more pipes and simply punch holes through walls to conveniently access other buildings," explains Brain Bowman, marketing manager of Tunnels of Moose Jaw.

Over time, the tunnels were widened to eventually become passageways connecting basement factories; enterprises like laundries and burlap assembly shops which relied heavily on immigrant labour, principally Chinese workers, Bowman says. As well as working here, these workers would also live in the cramped, unsanitary conditions of these tunnels.

Curiously, in a number of Canadian cities where tunnels were located, tunnels also served as a means for the Chinese workers to avoid the harsh realities of life above ground. Faced with rampant racism by some of the white population as well as harsh taxes imposed by the national government in Ottawa, the Chinese felt at least some measure of safety hidden away in the tunnels.

``The tunnels are a poignant reminder of the importance that immigrant Chinese labour played in the development of Moose Jaw," he says.

Population pressure, political instability and poverty brought many Chinese people to Canada seeing a better life. Chinese labour played a major role in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, which reached Moose Jaw in 1882. It was the arrival of the steel rail which transformed Moose Jaw into a bustling boom town.

More colourful legends emphasize that the tunnels were used by American gangsters, including the notorious Al Capone, who allegedly shuffled Canadian made liquor into a very thirsty prohibition-era Chicago in the 1920s. The fact that the Soo Line, which ran through Moose Jaw, originated in Chicago adds credibility to the booze-running connection.

“We've tried very hard to bring the past alive in our presentation.” says Bowman, who says that illegal whiskey-stills have been discovered in the tunnels. “We want our visitors to experience being transported back through time to some of the most colourful periods of the city's history.”

Re-enactments use theatrical guides to represent characters from vintage 1907 Moose Jaw, helping build on the atmosphere created by historic sets and backdrops. Two distinct guided tours have been developed which vividly highlight those early days.

“The Passage to Fortune” tour documents the hardships and achievements of Chinese immigrants who managed to triumph over years of prejudice and unfair and even oppressive Canadian immigration policies in the early part of the 20th century.

The other tour, “The Chicago Connection” focuses on prohibition in Canada and the United States and profiles the relationships between local suppliers of illicit booze and gangsters such as Al Capone.

“We present both shows using guides in costume who speak to the topic both in and out of character,” Bowman explains. “Our visitors actually become part of the recreation.”

The tunnels and other areas used in the tour have all been refurbished to bring them up to building code standards and to ensure the comfort and safety of visitors, Bowman says. The sets, outfitted with period furnishings and decor, build a near-perfect backdrop to help create the time-travelling mood for visitors.

With state-of-the-art animatronics, audio, video and the special effects, which includes secret passages and hidden doorways, the re-created atmosphere of Moose Jaw's historical underground legacy is complete.

If You Go: Located at 18 Main St. North in Moose Jaw, The Tunnels of Moose Jaw are open year round. For ticket information or reservations call 306-693-5261. On the web go to [www.TunnelsofMooseJaw.com](http://www.TunnelsofMooseJaw.com)

Moose Jaw has its tourist foundations of Temple Gardens Mineral Spa, Tunnels of Moose Jaw and its extensive use of well crafted murals in the city's downtown, but this energetic and enterprising community has incorporated a whole lineup of accommodation choices, craft shops, galleries, boutiques, restaurants and other tourist venues in its itinerary possibilities. Visitors

would do well to consider spending more than one night here if they want to explore attractions here to the fullest.

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Colour Photo: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix / Gus the gangster checks out his latest brew in his underground distribution facility.

Colour Photo: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix / A worse-for-wear ``drunk" sleeps it off in Ms. Fanny's bar, as the infamous saloon keeper leads off a tour group to show off ``Big Al's" office, complete with hidden door behind the fireplace.

Colour Photo: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix / Mr. Dawson, the steam engineer, takes visitors to the Tunnels of Moose Jaw on a journey of discovery of what life might have been like , including this opium den recreated inside the tunnels.

Colour Photo: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix / Visitors exiting the ``Passage to Fortune" tour pause to reflect in the unique underground photo gallery.