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Tourist industry picks Canada's best attractions

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Travel

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The 14 winners of Canada's annual competition to find the country's best tourist draws include some stalwart, all-Canadian attractions.

A bird sanctuary off Newfoundland and a fort with 19th-century drills, for example, certainly fit the country's image, as does the museum in Ontario dedicated to bush planes and forest fires.

But the gangster hideout in Saskatchewan is a little odd for Canada, and the world's largest dinosaur seems just a trifle showy for our usually retiring image.

There's also something gratifying (and daring) for a country as cold as this one to name two landscaped gardens among its best attractions.

The winners are picked every year by Attractions Canada, an industry program designed to get Canadians interested in their own country -- always a laudable aim.

The biggest prize went to the Fort Henry National Historic Site in Kingston, which is certainly an interesting place to visit -- especially if you have kids who like to watch soldiers in scarlet tunics fire cannons and muskets.

The star-shaped fort, built to defend Canada against the Americans in the wake of the War of 1812, was named the best attraction of national or international interest. The judges called it a "marvelous reproduction of 19th-century military life," which indeed it is.

The prize for the best new attraction went to Pier 21 in Halifax, a huge, waterfront shed that has been transformed into a tribute to the thousands of immigrants who landed in Halifax to start a new life in Canada.

Some of the most interesting prizes went to the West. First, there's that gangster hideout in Saskatchewan. It's actually in Moose Jaw, a humble little Prairie town that was once the hub of a mammoth liquor-distribution network that funneled thousands of gallons of illegal booze into the U.S. during Prohibition.

In fact, Moose Jaw's nickname back then was Little Chicago, and one of the bandits who hid out in town was Al Capone. A few things made Moose Jaw attractive to Capone and his pals: it was quiet, it was reasonably close to the border and it was riddled with a maze of underground tunnels that were ideal for hiding both men and liquor.

The tunnels were the work of Chinese railway workers who'd dug them decades earlier so they could hide whenever officials decided to collect the notorious ``head tax".

Moose Javians -- yes, that's what they call themselves -- have organized a couple of entertaining tours to explain both aspects of the tunnels. Both use live actors and call for plenty of interaction. The tunnels and their tours were judged to be the best leisure or amusement centre with an operating budget of more than \$600,000.

The low-end prize in the same category went to the world's largest dinosaur in Drumheller, Alta. This outsized tyrannosaurus rex has a viewing platform in his mouth that's about 20 metres above the ground. Kids love it.

Another interesting western attraction that won is the Edge to Edge Marathon in Ucluelet on Vancouver Island. It has to be one of the world's most scenic foot races, following as it does the western edge of North America. It was judged the best sporting event with a budget of less than \$110,000.

The West also had the biggest winner -- literally. The glaciers of the Columbia Ice Fields were judged the best outdoor site bigger than 100 square kilometres.

The best outdoor site smaller than 100 square kilometres is at the other end of the country in Newfoundland. The Cape St. Mary Ecological Reserve is home to hundreds of thousands of seabirds that breed and nest on the rocky cliffs and headlands. The reserve is not only one of the world's largest rookeries, but one of its most accessible.

The last two prizes were for cultural events. The Yukon International Storytelling Festival in Whitehorse, which focuses on tales from the circumpolar region of the Earth, was judged the best event with an operating budget of less than \$350,000.

The top prize for the high-end cultural event went to the Celtic Colours International Festival, an autumn-long event that fills the valleys of Cape Breton with the sounds of Gaelic music.

Montreal won a couple of prizes. The Botanical Garden was named the best developed outdoor site with an operating budget of more than \$1 million. The other winning garden was Kingsbrae in St. Andrew's, N.B., which manages to operate on less than \$1 million a year.

Montreal's other prize went to the June Bike Fest. It got the top prize for a sporting event with an operating budget of more than \$110,000.

Quebec also won for the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, which won for an indoor site with an operating budget of more than \$400,000.

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ILLUS: Color Photo: Fort Henry in Kingston, with soldiers in scarlet tunics firing cannons and muskets, was judged the best attraction of national or international interest.