Thunder Bay rich in history and natural attractions

Thunder Bay's port and grain terminals give the city a rich agricultural history.

TALES FROM THE ROAD

ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Thunder Bay has long been an important Canadian transportation hub. In recent times it has been best known as the western-most port on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway system, where grain and other products are loaded onto ships bound for export markets.

However, this strategic location for transportation dates back to the early days of the fur trade when Fort William, one of the communities that would later make up modern-day Thunder Bay, was a crucial link between east and west.

Fort William Historical Park recreates those glory days when the North West Company used this as a rendezvous point for western-bound trade goods, and where voyageur brigades brought furs destined for Montreal and export markets.

Recreating life during 1816, this is considered one of the largest living history attractions in North America, covering 250 acres across 57 buildings. Several guides in period dress bring the fort to life, playing the roles of voyageurs, traders, blacksmiths, coopers, farm hands attending animals on the working farm, the doctor, and those living in the Native Encampment. Especially impressive is the large shed where craftsmen build and repair birch bark canoes. Visitors can take part in many activities — who wouldn't want to fire an authentic muzzle-loading musket?

The most remarkable aspect of Thunder Bay for us was its spectacular setting, on the shore of Lake Superior and surrounded by the forested Canadian Shield, rivers, waterfalls, smaller lakes, and canyons. A short drive west, the Kaministiquia River plunges 40 metres over Kakabeka Falls, making this the second highest falls in Ontario after Niagara. Walkways line both sides of the gorge for close-up views, and there is a pedestrian bridge crossing the brink of the falls.

The most famous natural feature is the Sleeping Giant, with great views right from the city. Head to any high point, such as Hillcrest

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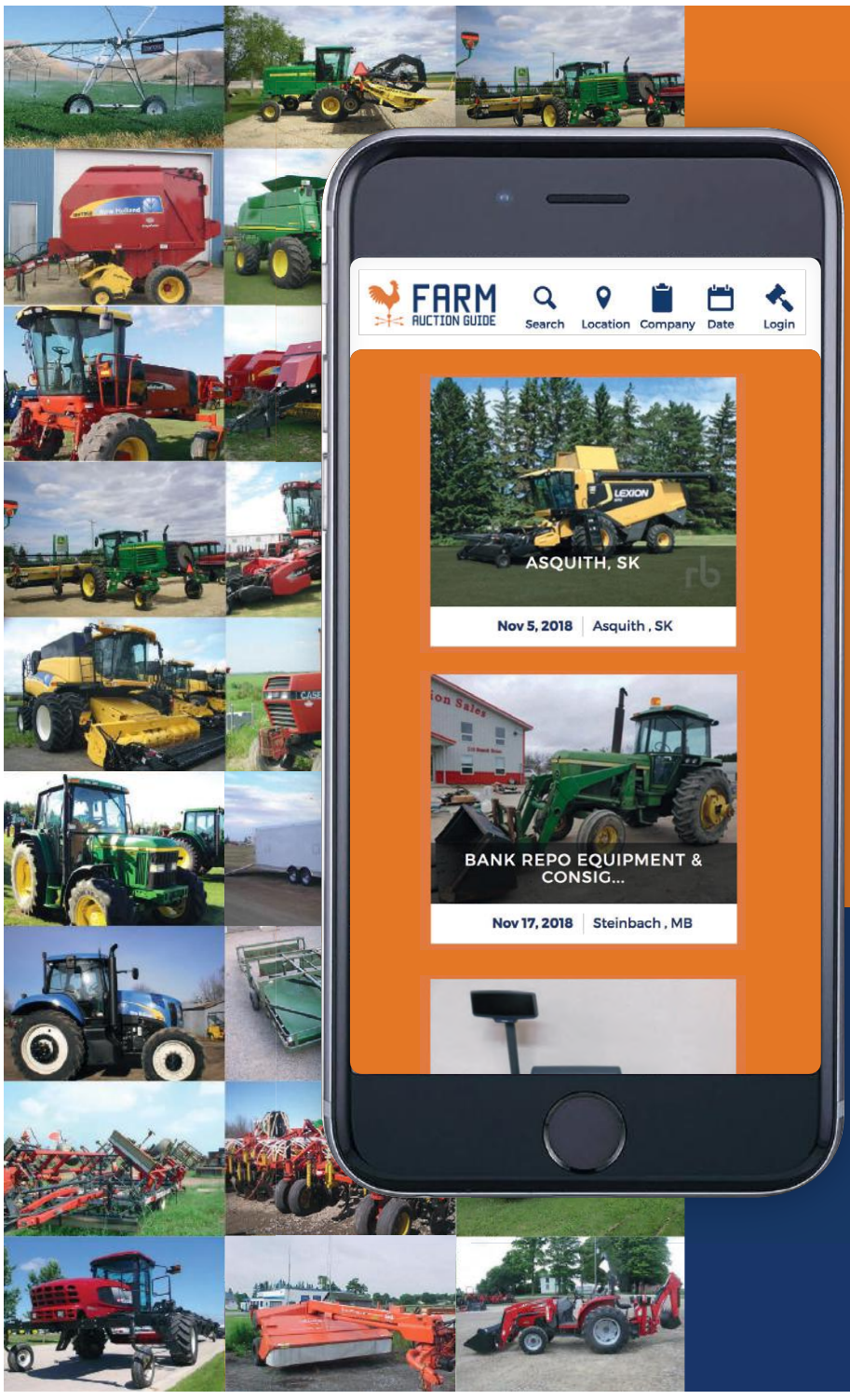

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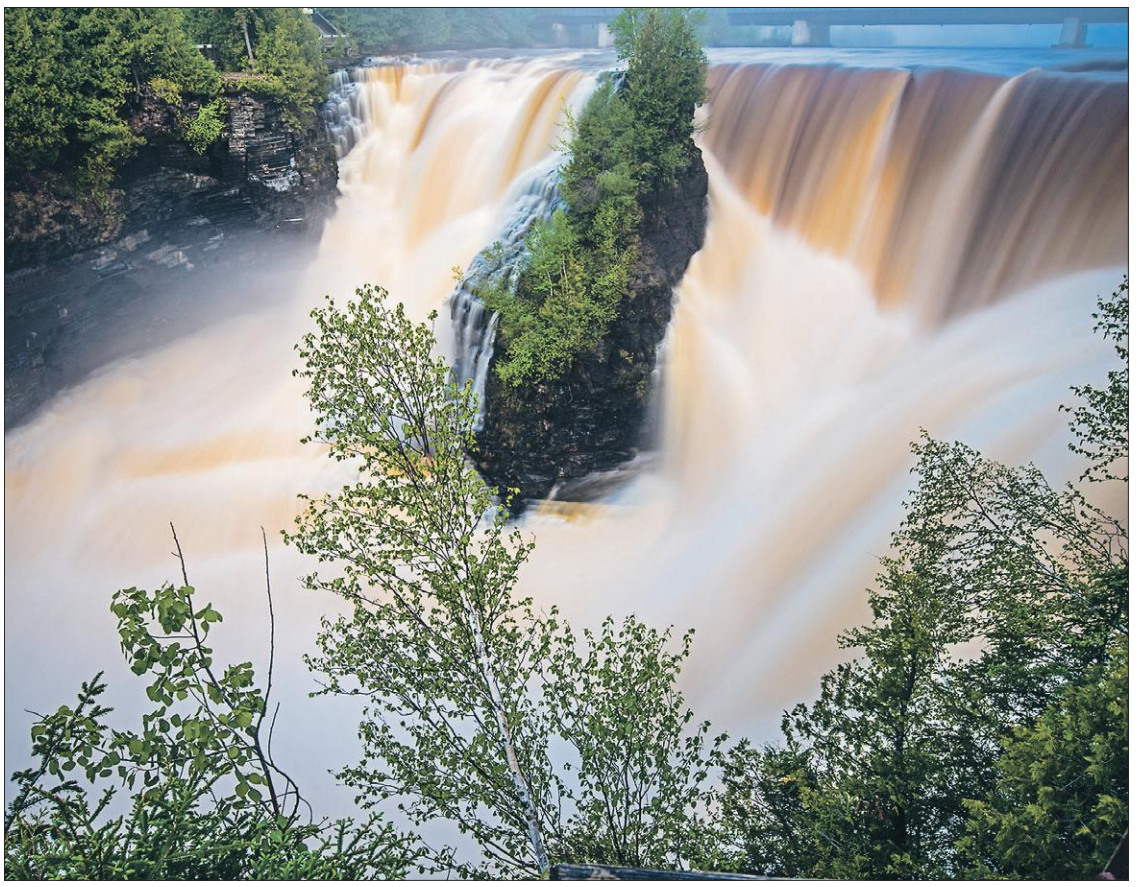

Kakabeka Falls is the second highest falls in Ontario after Niagara.

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Park, just back of the waterfront. The huge rocky formation resembles a giant lying on his back in the lake. While it seems to be an island at first glance, it's located at the end of a long peninsula.

To get there, we head east along the Trans-Canada Highway to the turnoff to the peninsula, passing the impressive Terry Fox Monument along the way. It was near here that the famous one-legged runner was forced to end his Marathon of Hope across Canada in 1980 when his cancer spread.

Sleeping Giant Provincial Park covers much of the peninsula, a mostly wilderness area with a nicely situated campground on a quiet inland lake. From the main road to the park, a minor gravel road heads for nine kilometres to the Thunder Bay Lookout, where sheer cliffs drop into Lake Superior. A viewing platform extends over the edge of the cliff where you can look straight down through the steel grate floor to the rock-jumble on the shoreline far below.

The park has more than 100 kilometres of trails, but our objective was the famous Top of the Giant Trail, a 23-kilometre-return trek rated difficult. It started out easy enough, with a level path near shore. Then as we headed inland, the steady climb took us over countless huge boulders and exposed tree roots.

Eventually, we emerged from the forest and arrived on the high plateau to enjoy one magnificent view after another. The trail ends next to a deep gorge on the edge of Lake Superior with massive cliffs so perfectly vertical that we can imagine them being carved by the giant. We looked straight down into the deep chasms as well as along the rugged shoreline and over the world's largest lake.

Though the eight-hour hike left us completely exhausted, it turned out to be the highlight, not only of the Thunder Bay area, but of our three-week trip wandering along Lake Superior.

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The view from the top of the Sleeping Giant is spectacular.

The Terry Fox Monument is located near here where the famous one-legged runner was forced to end his Marathon of Hope across Canada in 1980 when his cancer spread.

Fort William features a large shed where craftsmen build and repair birch bark canoes.