



The Saamis Tepee in Medicine Hat towers 20 storeys above the Alberta landscape. (Jacquie D. Durand/Vacay.ca)

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MEDICINE HAT, ALBERTA — Driving along the Trans-Canada Highway (Highway 1 in Southern Alberta), approaching Medicine Hat, I was inherently awed by the sight of a large white framework of a towering tepee.

Walking around the inside of the tepee, I was further inspired by the 10 large round vividly painted shields hanging high above my head. The artwork and the stories each one represented were impressive — from how Medicine Hat got its name through the relationship of the Plains Indians’ with nature; the 1877 Treaty 7 between the Blackfoot and the Queen’s government to the Circle of Unity (Multiculturalism).



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Built during the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, the Saamis Tepee was relocated to Medicine Hat. (Jacquie D. Durand/Vacay.ca)

Saamis (pronounced sa-mus) is the Blackfoot word for the eagle tail feather headdress worn by medicine men, who inspired the name “Medicine Hat.” Originally built for the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary, the Saamis Tepee measures 215 feet (65.5 metres) in height — equivalent

of a 20-storey building — with a base diameter of 160 feet (20,000 square feet or 48.8 metres). Designer Steve Illes had the tepee painted “white for purity, red for the rising and setting sun, and blue for the flowing waters.”

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The storyboards provide you with a comprehensive history of the aboriginal peoples of the region and how they interacted with the white man.

“The Historic Context Paper 2013, The City of Medicine Hat Historic Resources” tells us:

“The Blackfoot history associated with the naming of Medicine Hat involves a young man and his wife, who were asked by Council elders during a great winter famine to go on a quest to the ‘breathing hole’ to ask the river serpent for aid. The couple reached the ‘breathing hole’ and the serpent required the man to sacrifice his wife in exchange for a ‘Saamis’, which would grant him special powers. In an attempt to trick the serpent, the man threw his dog into the river; but, the serpent would not be fooled and the man then threw his wife into the river. The serpent instructed the man to spend the night and the next morning he would find his ‘Saamis’ at the base of the nearby cliffs. The man found the Medicine Hat and through its use, located abundant game to feed his starving people.”

Amerigo “Rick” Nella Filanti purchased the tepee from the City of Calgary, with the hopes of donating it to the City of Medicine Hat, where he felt it rightfully belonged. Without the finances to complete the relocation of the tipi to its perspective destination, Filanti requested the support of the City of Medicine Hat. In 1991 Filanti’s wishes were realized and the Saamis Tepee was erected on the edge of an old Blackfoot buffalo jump site.



The Saamis Tepee features large murals in the form of discs near the structure’s base and a dedication to the man who helped bring the landmark to Medicine Hat. (Jacquie D. Durand/Vacay.ca)

Below the Saamis Tepee, at the bottom of the cliffs, is where both the Seven Persons Creek and Ross Creek meet to empty into the South Saskatchewan River. A self-guided hike along well-worn paths will lead you to one of the most important archaeological sites of the Northern Plains, the Saamis Archeological Site. The area was once a buffalo camp and meat processing site. It is believed there are an astounding 83 million artifacts buried here.

As a natural gathering place, before the arrival of Europeans, the area had been used for hundreds of years by the Blackfoot, Cree and Assiniboine nations. The converging waterways and native cottonwood trees attracted both people and migratory bison passing through the area.

As stated by Randy Follett, manager of cultural development for the City of Medicine Hat: “The Saamis Tepee is a stunning visual reminder of

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After reading the storyboards and walking the grounds around the World’s Tallest Tepee, I can fully understand why this special place was chosen for Filanti’s contribution to Medicine Hat to be erected for appreciation by all passersby.

MORE ABOUT SAAMIS — WORLD’S TALLEST TEPEE

Telephone: 403-529-8115

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Medicine Hat Tourism

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