



Hail to the Republic!

Edmundston's the capital and fun's on the bill

by Sandra Phinney

Grand place to be—Grand Falls!

Picture this: I'm standing on a platform next to my husband, overlooking Grand Falls. The roar is deafening. We're about to zip line over the gorge, smack in front of the falls, and I'm scared witless. As soon as I resume breathing on the other side, I say out loud, "Piece of cake." Our instructor from Zip-Zag Co. grins; he knows I'm hooked.

Eventually, we settle into the Malbeam Visitor's Centre for a tour and walk-about. The centre celebrates the story of Malobiannah, a young Maliseet woman who sacrifices herself to save her people. A new section with massive windows overlooking the falls features interpretive panels loaded with fascinating information about the region. Even the ceiling has something of interest, including a wire figure on a tightrope representing Van Morrel, who walked across the gorge in 1904. Half way across, he did a headstand on the tightrope!

You can also watch a great documentary about Secretariat—the horse that won the Triple Crown back in 1973. But the best thing about the film is seeing the jockey, Ron Turcotte, in action. Ron's from Grand Falls, and is still lives here.

Over at La Rochelle Tourist Centre, you can walk 401 steps down to the gorge! And there's lots more to discover here. Just go!

Four years ago while en route to Labrador through New Brunswick, my husband and I hunkered down for a night in Edmundston—a place I imagined to be as exciting as porridge. I now eat humble pie; I became so enamoured with the region, I returned three times.

Maliseets, the original inhabitants, called this place **Madawaska**, meaning "land of the porcupines." Acadians who had fled the Deportation and French-Canadian colonists from Quebec settled the area in the late 1700s. After the governor of the province, Sir Edmund Walker Head, visited in 1856, it officially became Edmundston.

But here's the fun part: in 1949, two enthusiastic citizens invented the concept of the "Republic of Madawaska," including a flag, coat of arms, and the *Order of the Knights of the Republic*. The concept stuck. Edmundston was declared the capital of the Republic, and whoever sits in the mayor's seat automatically becomes the president of the Republic. I figured that a place with a story like that has to have character.

Carolyn Campbell, a paddling buddy, joined me on a recent trip. Our first night happened to coincide with the annual **Jazz & Blues Festival**. After eating a lumberjack-sized meal at **Frank's Bar & Grill**—topped off with Sugar Cream Pie—we waddled our way to the outdoor stage. Although I enjoyed the music, I left early as I planned to get up at dawn to take photos.

Returning from my morning photo shoot, Carolyn confessed that she rolled in well after midnight, but she was so wired from the performance she could hardly sleep. I wondered if she'd have the stamina to paddle the Green River as we had signed up for a kayaking trip with **Le Canotier**. Turns out she was more energized than ever.

What we didn't know was that on weekends, hundreds of people from Madawaska head to the upper reaches of the river and party downstream. I've never seen so many people on a water system at one time. Why, we even saw a chap with only one leg paddling in a tube! Kids, newlyweds, grandparents—they were all part of the mix. The river seemed to bubble with joy.

All we had to do was follow our guide, Mike Power, and let the gentle



Looking for excitement? Head to northern New Brunswick. Find live music, river paddling parties, a botanical garden and lots more in Edmundston; plus zip lining and more outdoor fun in nearby Grand Falls.



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current take us for 26 kilometres. No stamina (and precious few skills) required. The toughest thing about the trip was doing justice to the massive lunch that Mike had packed. Nearing the end of our journey, a covered bridge loomed ahead. What a thrill to glide under it!

Another highlight was a visit to the **New Brunswick Botanical Garden**. First stop was the Herbalist Pavilion which features a glassed-in drying room for herbs built into the wall next to an open kitchen. A variety of workshops are offered here focused on the therapeutic, cosmetic and culinary benefits of herbs. This is also where we had our first taste of *le ploye*, something I'd never heard of. Think buckwheat pancake smeared with butter and a glob of brown sugar; undeniably addictive.

The latest addition to the botanical garden is Khronos, a circle that's formed by 12 impressive granite monoliths. (It put me in mind of Stonehenge.) It's all about tracking time and the constellations. My only regret is that we didn't have enough time here. Before leaving, however, we did spend a few minutes in the butterfly room in the visitor's centre; pure pleasure to have them land on our cheeks.

Later, we rolled into **Du Réel au Miniature Railroad Interpretation Centre**, owned by Guy and Géraldine Laforge. Just mention the word "train" to Guy, and his eyes shift to high beam. His passion for anything related to railroads started when he built a miniature train set for his son 30 years ago. "Stephane grew up; I didn't," he says, with a grin.

After wandering through the museum—which was built using recycled materials and features almost 4,500 donated items—we stepped into the basement of their home. This is where more than 350 cars course the tracks through 900 square feet of villages, towns, forests—you name it. The scenes are eye-popping and based on real stories. Carolyn and I just shook our heads in wonder.

Even more astounding is the miniature outdoor rail line where you can take a 10-minute ride on a 1600-foot loop. The Laforges were in the process of completing the loop so it wasn't operating, but it's fully functional now—with another 10,000 feet in the works.

One more reason to return to the Republic of Madawaska! 📍

Tourism New Brunswick



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