



Discover a Fresh Winter Cultural Getaway

Medicine Hat's Tongue On the Post Folk Fest

BY MIKE FISHER

I need a sunny blast of fun in midwinter. With Tongue On the Post annual folk festival in Medicine Hat, I get it and so much more.

If Medicine Hat (StayInMedicineHat.com) were a person, it would be country singer Corb Lund. Easy going and energetic, cozy and hip, it offers big-city flavours with small town handshakes amidst a burgeoning art and music scene, all year round.

TOP festival personifies the destination's informal vibe, attracting top talent and launching new artists. Alternative-country singer-songwriter Jay Bowcott, who plays in Lund's backup band The Hurtin' Albertans, is among many who've played at the festival. Parachute the intimate feel of a summer music festival into midwinter and you get a feel-good, live music jukebox that lifts your spirits without requiring much travel or spending. Sure, most of the cultural action takes place indoors, but there are opportunities for outdoor exploring (100 parks and 90 km of trails) and Medicine Hat's 2,500 hours of sunshine a year makes it Canada's sunniest city.



Free Tongue On the Post (www.topfest.ca) café concerts run Monday to Friday in local eateries. The main events are Friday and Saturday at Medicine Hat's cultural jewel, Medalta Potteries in the Historic Clay District, a Canadian National Historic Site. Friday is singer songwriter night. Saturday's affordable events culminate in a three-act closing concert at Medalta. You can discover the history of china and pottery making in Canada while enjoying the venue's exceptionally warm acoustics.

It's a festival that I'd been waiting to cross off of my must-do list and it's one of the few of its kind that I can attend during winter. I even participated in a throat-singing workshop (the most fun I've had since losing my voice shouting at an outdoors summer concert) while kids nearby got their faces painted.

Inside the semi-circular beehive kiln, one of the side stages at Medalta, I sat along with some 50 casually dressed music lovers. A young, plaid-shirted guitarist on stage flat-picked a song that soared somewhere between jazz and bluegrass. A jean-jacketed mom bounced her gleeful baby on her knee, while a grey-haired woman with purple reading glasses leaned her head on her husband's shoulder.

Nicely lit niches in the reddish brick walls held pieces of pottery that were once made in the factory, including crocks, bean pots and railroad dining cars finery.

"A performer told me there's the feeling that ghosts walk the floors here," said David Gue, a volunteer festival organizer and host. "The song you're hearing on the stage could be



about troubles or triumphs. The bricks are talking to you."

There's a comforting sense of being housed in history, even as some of the new performers make their own musical milestones. One of Tongue On the Post's many endearing aspects is its inclusiveness. It offers established and aspiring songwriters an opportunity to showcase their best work in front of a forgiving audience that's eager to give them a chance.

You get to see older established artists showcasing highlights of their careers and fresh faces looking to be the stars of the future. The music veers all over the folk map, crisscrossing country, blues, rock and more.

If you're a culture vulture looking for a place to migrate during some of Alberta's coldest months, family-friendly Tongue On the Post is a perfect place to perch for a quick and easy getaway.

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