



ALL-AGES
EXPLORATION

Three moms weigh in on exactly what it's like to explore some of Drumheller's top attractions with kids in tow

By Meredith Bailey, Julia Williams and Elizabeth Chorney-Booth



The Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology with Preschoolers

Dinosaurs are a big deal in our house. Our four-year-old son could tell the difference between Iguanodon and Parasaurulophus by the time he was three, and our two-year-old could “roar” before he could talk.

A visit to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller—the only museum in Canada dedicated exclusively to the study of ancient life and home to the world’s largest display of dinosaurs—seemed like a must-do.

THE TRIP

At roughly 90 minutes from Calgary, a day-trip to the Royal Tyrrell Museum with preschoolers is easy.

There are views of Alberta prairie—peppered with pretty farms—and lots of places to stop. You can pop into CrossIron Mills on your way out of the city or stop at one of the little villages and hamlets along the way.

We made a pit stop in the village of Beiseker (halfway to Drumheller) at the Arcadia Cafe. Besides made-from-scratch food and excellent espresso, it has a little play area with a tunnel, slide and toys. We shared a breakfast burrito, crispy sweet potato fries and a bowl of French onion soup.

Fuelled by our snack, we piled back into our truck and, about 45 minutes later, pulled up to the museum.

i **GOOD TO KNOW** Kids six and under get in free, which makes a visit to the Royal Tyrrell Museum with preschoolers a steal.

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

There is nothing stuffy or exclusive about the museum. Right away I noticed the huge number of interactive elements at eye-level for both my two- and four-year-old. There are options to view fossils through microscopes, touch specimens, play with interactive computer screens and even look through the eyes of an *Albertosaurus*. My kids were particular fans of the Cretaceous Alberta exhibit, a reproduction of what Alberta looked like 69 million years ago, complete with realistic fleshed-out dinosaur models and sounds of the ecosystem.

TIMING

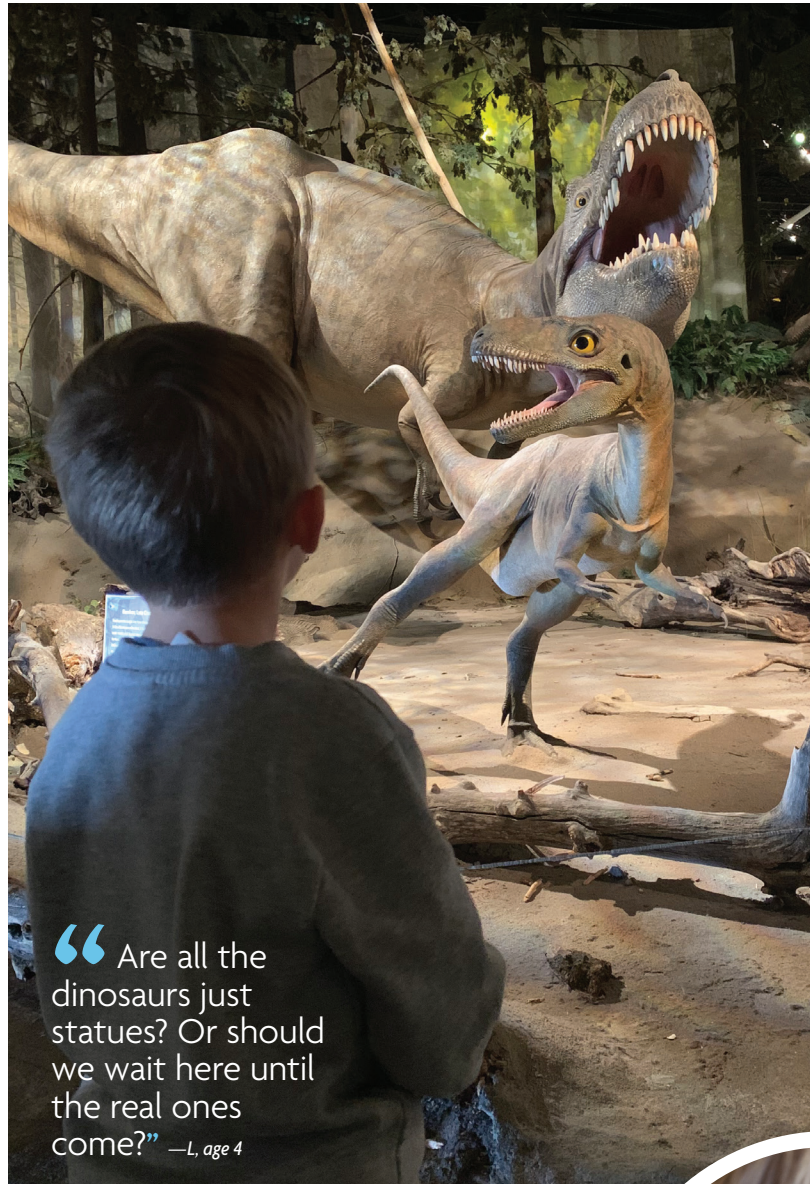
The Royal Tyrrell Museum, which is open year-round, recommends two to three hours to thoroughly explore its galleries and we spent 2.5 hours wandering through. In the summer months, I'd suggest budgeting closer to four hours to accommodate time for the outdoor Cenovus Palaeo Play Park, a colourful play structure, as well as some of the museum's public programming, such as Storytime or the Dino Adventure Hour.

LITTLE LEGS

We brought our umbrella stroller and were glad we did, as toward the end of our visit, our two-year-old was ready for a walking break. If you do forget your stroller, don't fret. You can rent one from the museum for \$3.

2-YEAR-OLD HIGHLIGHTS

G loved the Burgess Shale exhibit. It's an immersive diorama you can walk through that shows the sea animals



“Are all the dinosaurs just statues? Or should we wait here until the real ones come?” —L, age 4

that lived 505 million years ago. There's a voice-over narration and the lights change depending on what animal is being highlighted.

4-YEAR-OLD HIGHLIGHTS

L loved the Learning Lounge area that features interactive displays, as well as a life-size bronze cast of the skeleton of the carnivorous *Albertosaurus*. Along with hands-on activities, like a build-your-own dinosaur videogame, there is a rest area

with vending machines, cozy places to sit and spectacular views of the surrounding badlands.

EXTEND YOUR STAY

Book a few nights in and around Drumheller and make your museum visit a little holiday away. There are excellent camping options along the Red Deer River, or you can book a room at more than a dozen in-town hotels. —MB tyrrellmuseum.com



i **PIT STOP** The Arcadia Cafe in Beiseker is a great stop to refuel—it's halfway to the museum from Calgary.



TAKE A TOUR! There are several options and the guides are outstanding. Better yet, make a day of it and take all the tours.



Visiting the Atlas Coal Mine with Tweens

When I asked my sons, ages 10 and 12, if they wanted to go to the Atlas Coal Mine National Historic Site, they responded with a tween blend of enthusiasm and world-weariness. “Sure, I guess,” they said. They figured it would be fun to go to Drumheller, but a national historic site meant history. And history is school. Understandably, they were expecting a classroom experience, or maybe a supervised tour.

Instead, my kids had an immersive, hugely entertaining afternoon that they’re still talking about days later.

STEP INTO THE PAST

The Atlas Coal Mine, which is open May through December, is in East Coulee, a 20-minute drive southeast of Drumheller,

first along Hwy 56 and then Hwy 10, through moon-like badlands scenery. For most of the 20th century, this region was a coal mining hub, and the Drumheller Valley was home to some 139 mines. The Atlas Coal Mine, which shut down in 1979, is the best-preserved of these.

Today, the site offers a range of interpretive tours from May through October, all of which are very kid-and family-friendly with some age restrictions. (The tunnel tour is for ages 6 and over and the adults-only Unmentionables Tour is recommended for children 14 and over.)

PLEASE TOUCH

To our delight, the Atlas Coal Mine was unlike school and wholly unlike a regular museum. There was no “No Touching.” There was no reviewing what we’d learned. Instead, there were plunging conveyor belts, a family of pigeons flapping through the mining buildings,



and stories about ‘50s kids pilfering carbide from their dads’ mining lamps to go depth-charge fishing in the Red Deer River. My sons were allowed to heft a bucket of metal mining teeth. They were invited to lick salt deposits off the walls of the mining tunnel. They were informed that in the mine’s heyday, 16-and 17-year-old boys

would quit school for work in the mines and occasionally boys as young as 11 or 12 were hired to work the tipples.

Our tour guide was passionate, funny and frank enough about the coal-mining life to keep us all enthralled. Every stop on the tour

featured real and sometimes hair-raising stories of the working life of men and boys. We were allowed to explore the wooden tippie, the spectacular grain elevator-on-stilts where Atlas coal was once sorted and distributed, and the last one still standing in North America. We were guided through the inky black tunnel that leads through the hillside

“The tunnel was the best part. I never expected to be able to access all the places that we got to go, and our guide was the best.” —*Oliver, age 12*

to the entrance of the mine. We poked around the caught-in-time office of the mine’s last manager, who gave the mine over to a local heritage society in the hopes sustainable jobs in tourism would be produced.

UNEXPECTEDLY EDUCATIONAL

School or not, the experience was enormously educational, and I learned as much as my kids did. We did math (how much did a miner actually make after the company deducted various costs and fees from his pay?), science (what might happen if a headlamp lit by a sparking mechanism is deployed in a tunnel full of coal dust?), geology (what would it be like to walk up a bentonite clay hill in the rain?) and even contemporary branding—the Atlas mine famously painted its product bright orange and sold it as Wildfire Coal.

We left the Atlas Coal Mine knowing there were still more stories to hear. I guess we’ll have to skip school soon and spend another day in the Drumheller Valley.

EXTEND YOUR TRIP

Add another layer of history to your trip with a visit to the East Coulee School Museum. You can opt for a self-guided tour of the town’s original 12-room 1930s schoolhouse or explore with a guide. During the Miss Morrison program, visitors experience a typical 1930s school day complete with old-school punishments like dunce caps. —*JW*

atlascoalmine.ab.ca





Hiking Drumheller with Teens

Most hikes in Alberta involve going up a mountain toward a snow-capped peak. Parents of teenagers know that hours of elevation gain can result in complaints of “I’m bored” or “My calves hurt,” which is why a family hike in a completely different topography can be a real treat. The Drumheller Valley is full of hikes that are especially perfect for teens who don’t want to be overly challenged but are willing to be wowed by some unfamiliar views.

HORSESHOE CANYON

One of the Drumheller area jewels that I explored with my tween, 11-year-old Henry, and teen, 14-year-old Ruby, is the famed Horseshoe Canyon, which is the first piece of badlands geography you’ll find when coming in from Calgary via Hwy 9. It’s a formidable and

steep looking piece of land that we were a little intimidated by as we approached it. The U-shaped canyon is full of striped formations and bumpy hills, all begging to be explored, and we couldn’t wait to see what the formations looked and felt like up close.

Despite the dramatic vista, the canyon was actually quite easy to hike down into it (and my often-grumbly kids didn’t have to do the upward climb until the very end). Once at the bottom, the kids got their wish and saw the otherworldly rocks up close, feeling the grit between their fingers and wondering out loud about the dinosaurs whose fossils are likely buried within the hills.

GOOD TO KNOW

Despite having to go in and out of the canyon, Horseshoe is an easy hike suitable for anyone who is physically able to take

on a typical outdoor walk, with a little bit of elevation. Each arm of the canyon is about five kilometres long, so give yourself at least two hours.

The bottom of the canyon was bit muddy, and we were glad that we’d brought our hiking boots so the kids could happily explore the squishier parts of the canyon floor. Fresh bottles of water were also a must in Drumheller’s desert-like heat—without any trees for shade, we worked up a sweat as we roamed. Since our car was far above in the parking lot, our pack full of fruit and granola bars helped us to recharge as we took a break, lounging on those iconic badlands bumps and hills that felt a world away from the highway.

A GREAT COMBINATION

For something even more accessible, the self-guided Badlands Interpretive Trail is



“The canyon looks so different from down here. It’s fun to see everything from a completely different viewpoint.” —Ruby, age 14



WHEN TO GO

Horseshoe Canyon and the Badlands Interpretive Trail are free to hike. Both routes are best experienced in the late spring, summer, and early fall months.



MORE TO EXPLORE The trails at Hoodoo Provincial Recreation Day Use Area, 15 minutes from Drumheller on Highway 10, lead hikers through the ancient sandstone pillars.