

4,000 KILOMETRES  
6,000 YEARS OF HISTORY  
500 PETROGLYPHS  
2 COLONIAL FORTS  
17 STUDENTS 4 CULTURES  
**ONE COOL TRIP**

A Grade 8 class from Lethbridge, Alta. — the 2017 winners of Canada's Coolest School Trip — dives into Nova Scotia's ancient Mi'kmaq and colonial past on a tour of historic sites and a national park

**BY JOANNE PEARCE**  
**WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELCI MACDONALD**





**THE WELL-LIT ACADIAN** Memorial Church stands like a beacon in the surrounding darkness of the Grand Pré, N.S., landscape. It's a fitting stage for the drama that is about to unfold.

"This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks, bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight." Students Chelsea Oyebola and Caleb Hoffmann are inside reading from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie" (about the 1755 expulsion of Acadians from the Maritimes), at times giggling at the romantic lines.

It's with selections from the famous epic that the 2017 Canada's Coolest School Trip begins for 17 Grade 8 students from Lethbridge Christian School in Alberta. After the performance, the group walks out to a statue of Evangeline near the church, cracking glow sticks to light the way.

The students are here in Nova Scotia because their video on Waterton Lakes National Park won the annual Canada's Coolest School Trip contest, beating classes across Canada who had created and promoted their own one-minute videos celebrating Parks Canada sites. All were vying for votes and judges' attention — but more importantly, the grand prize of an all-expenses-paid trip hosted by Parks Canada in partnership with Canadian Geographic Education, Historica Canada, the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Air Canada and Halifax's Ambassadors Gray Line.



Allison Overbeeke, the teacher of the winning class, says she found the confidence and teamwork demonstrated by her students inspiring — one even tried to contact Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for the video's promotion. "They would say to me, 'When we go to Nova Scotia...'" and I would cautiously say, "if we go," says Overbeeke. "But they just shined. I've taught for 30 years and never experienced anything like this opportunity."

**"IT LOOKS LIKE A ROOT BEER FLOAT,"** says 13-year-old Isaiah Gee as the group reaches frothing Mill Falls, on the Mersey River in Kejimikujik National Park. It's an apt description, as the water is tinged reddish-brown by tannins in the sediment carried down from wetlands.

The previous day had been spent at Fort Anne National Historic Site playing cricket, being inducted into founder of New France Samuel de Champlain's "Order of Good Cheer" and becoming the first people in 400 years to sleep in one of the habitations at Port Royal. But day three is about the Acadian woodlands and rich wildlife of the national park and historic

site, and learning about its importance to the local Mi'kmaq. Kejimikujik protects 426 square kilometres of land and the cultural landscape, with more than 500 individual stone carvings telling the story of the Mi'kmaq ancestors. The name of the park itself is a Mi'kmaq word now interpreted as "land of fairies."

The students laugh and dare each other to cross the creaking boards of a pontoon bridge on the Mersey River, and after lunch, interpreters teach them about Mi'kmaq life and how to use a throwing tool called an *atlail*, used in hunting for launching metre-long wooden darts at prey. In the afternoon, the group is bused to a site with Parks Canada's oTENTiks — ready-to-go tent-cabin hybrids — and sets up camp.

By evening, the students are ready to wind down with a campfire on Kedge Beach. It is a peaceful gathering. The fire crackles as Ursula Johnson, a multidisciplinary Mi'kmaq artist and finalist for the prestigious Sobey Art Award, plays her flute for the group. The sun is setting and the sky is clear, and an almost-full moon hangs above as a traditional herbal tea is passed around and a Mi'kmaq legend about two



sisters falling between the stars and the Earth is dramatized for the class.

When the time comes to return to camp, the students decide to brave the trail without flashlights. As they stumble back, the only sounds are giggling and the cheeping of spring peeper frogs.

**AN IMPROMPTU STOP** the next morning takes the group to Peggys Cove. In the bus, faces and cameras are glued to the windows. The students have successfully traded their wide swaths of prairie grass for the deep-blue Atlantic Ocean.

"I had never seen the ocean before!" says 14-year-old Ethan Enns when he later reflects on the experience. "To see how much water there is and that much space was amazing. And seeing the lighthouse was really cool!"

The site holds special significance to the group, as pictures of Nova Scotia and Peggys Cove hung in their classroom while they prepared for the video competition. With just 15 minutes to explore the coast, they take a class photo in front of the lighthouse to commemorate the stop before

continuing on to Halifax's Citadel National Historic Site. There, the students break for a lunch set on cream tablecloths with Mackenzie tartan runners — a nod to Francis Humberston Mackenzie, who had raised the 78th Highlanders Regiment that was stationed in Halifax by the late 1860s.

As the class tours the citadel afterward, guide Sergeant Philip MacIsaac, who is dressed in a scarlet doublet and Mackenzie

**'I HAD NEVER SEEN THE OCEAN BEFORE!'**

tartan kilt, takes them to the barracks' orderly room (which was for administrative purposes), saying he needs some volunteers. Mark Van Hierden and Caleb Hoffmann's hands shoot up. They're given parchment paper and pens and, following MacIsaac's instructions, sign their names in big swooping loops.

"OK! You've now signed up for the British military," says the sergeant, who

Clockwise from **OPPOSITE**: Interpreters show the students how to raise a flag at the Halifax Citadel; standing at attention in 78th Highlanders uniforms; a lesson in shingle-making at Port Royal; a Mi'kmaq drumming circle near the settlement. **PREVIOUS PAGES**: An impromptu class picture at Peggys Cove.

then ensures the class looks the part. In the tailor shop, they learn about the history of the uniforms the soldiers would have worn. Each rank and position in the military had its own colours to distinguish positions, explains MacIsaac, who adds that soldiers would have competed with each other in fashion: the further the rakish tilt of the hat, the more stylish you were. Some of the students tilt their hats.

After a ghost tour through the rest of the citadel, the troop spends the night just as the soldiers would have: in the barracks. Despite the gloomy jail-like cells, they report that they are unafraid (although a plank falling later in the evening makes everybody jump).

**ON THE FINAL DAY** of the trip, the class takes a short bus ride to visit Halifax's Maritime Marine Museum of the Atlantic. There they tour a *Titanic* exhibit and learn how to communicate using the international naval flag systems and Morse code.

While some find the exercises challenging, others later say nothing was harder than having to put up with the rain that pours down during their free time. With this true Halifax send-off, the group heads to the airport.

Back in Lethbridge, Overbeeke and her students hang a framed copy of the photo at Peggys Cove outside their classroom. "I wouldn't mind if we got another trip to go back!" says 13-year-old Chelsea Oyebola.

And maybe these young travellers will return some day, drawn back to the East Coast to trace the memories of their Nova Scotia adventure. 🌐



Read more about the experiences of the winning class during the 2017 Canada's Coolest School Trip at [cangeo.ca/sep17/ccst](http://cangeo.ca/sep17/ccst).

