

In central Alberta, one hour East of Edmonton, lies the small town of Vegreville. The large Ukrainian population celebrates its heritage every year in July by presenting the Vegreville Ukrainian Festival. And this year is very special because 2025 is the 50th anniversary of the World's Largest Free-standing Pysanka. At 31 feet high and 18 feet wide, it towers over the landscape of the town and surrounding area.

My daughter and I write Ukrainian decorated eggs (called Pysanky) in the traditional wax resist method. We have attended and exhibited at various festivals and bazaars in Southern Ontario. In 2023 and 2024 we were vendors at the One Of A Kind Show in Toronto. But to showcase our Pysanky in Vegreville – that would be something amazing. Vegreville is one of the most prestigious Ukrainian Festivals in Canada, rivaling Dauphin, Manitoba.

We had talked about going to Vegreville, but life always got in the way of our plans. However, this year as we scanned the internet information, and read about the anniversary celebrations, we turned from the laptop, looked at each other and said in unison, “Let’s go!” And so, our Great Canadian Adventure began.

I googled the best route to take from Southern Ontario, through Northern Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and finally Alberta – 3,351 km. I printed 9 pages to map out our itinerary, showing major cities along the route – Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and ultimately Vegreville. I also found smaller towns – Wawa, Terrace Bay, Dryden, Brandon, Maidstone which were roughly halfway between each of the major cities. Stopping every couple of hours for rest and gas would be a necessity. We calculated it would take about 3 days to drive. So very early on a Tuesday morning in July, we packed up

my SUV with my pysanky and my daughter's pysanka jewelry supplies and displays, as well as miscellaneous personal luggage we would need for 2 weeks. It took about 4 hours to drive to Sudbury. Of course, we had to stop to take pictures at the Big Nickel that Sudbury is famous for. And that is when we noticed that the landscape was changing. From the relatively flat terrain and built-up cities we were used to in Southern Ontario, we now drove through solid walls of rocks – magnificent rock formations. The highway cut through the mountains of rocks. At one rest stop, I took a picture as we parked beside a wall of rocks which dwarfed my car. That wall was like a 3-storey building. We could see where the cutting tools had sliced through the mountain and marveled at the precision of the workers who created such a picturesque route. Such a landscape continued through our adventure to Thunder Bay and beyond. Boulders as big as cars stood guard on either side of the highway. And trees, mostly coniferous, grew on these rocks, clinging to the meagre soil that had formed over the years. We were so excited whenever we saw the resident wildlife – a black bear ambled by the edge of the forest, a long-legged majestic moose stood by the highway, a light golden-coloured lynx, his stubby tail pointing straight up, jumped in front of our car, and a timid looking deer stood and stared as we drove past.

On the first night, we had not planned our trip very well because we found ourselves in a place with no motels, just a small strip mall with a Walmart store and large parking lot. This was about ten o'clock at night and we did not relish the thought of driving through the mountains without any streetlights. But in the parking lot at least there were flood lights, and we saw a few other cars parked. Apparently, this was the gathering place for travelers such as we. My daughter wisely explained this was where many people spent the night and partied. I have never spent the night in a parking lot, trying to get comfortable enough to sleep in a car. I do not recommend it.

Even with the seat moved back, it is not comfortable, and not enough leg room. But this was our Canadian adventure I told myself. Relax. Adapt. So, I did. After a restless, semi-sleepless night, we woke up and since Walmart opened early, we were able to stretch out and refresh ourselves to plan the next leg of our journey west.

As we drove across the time zone into Manitoba, we noticed the landscape was changing again. Less rocks, hills and forests and more flat land. We had crossed into the Prairies. Everything we had heard and read about the countrysides stretching into the distance was true. Miles and miles of fields of crops and all so flat.

Our country is so amazing. Our Canadian adventure revealed that to us. In just a few short kilometers, the scene changed so dramatically. Where there were trees, forests, and remarkable formations of rocks, there now was just monotonous sameness. Houses, barns, and some trees could be seen in the distance, but they were few and far between. The continuously level countryside dominated our vision, although we did see some little prairie dogs. And in Manitoba, a coyote crossed the road right in front of us.

And so, we just kept driving and stopping whenever we came to a bit of civilization or a gas station which invariably had a Tim Horton's. We joked that our goal was to visit every Tim's we could find along our route. I always filled up on gas even when I still had half a tank. We never knew when the next gas station would appear; it could be 500 km before we came to a town again.

Winnipeg to Regina was a 6-hour drive with a short stop at Brandon, then just over 2 hours to Saskatoon. All along the highway, the same scenery extended out and the same green

fields unfolded far into the horizon. Not much to see so we spent the time-sharing secrets, laughing at silly jokes, and listening to an Audible book series – book 1, then book 2, then book 3 and so on. We were able to plan a little better this time and found motels along the way where we could sleep in comfortable beds, shower and recuperate for the next day's adventure.

Finally, on the afternoon of day 3, we saw a sign for Vegreville. We had previously booked a nice sounding Inn where we would be staying for the 3 days of the Festival. However, imagine our shock when we received an email on the day we arrived stating our reservations had been canceled because our Inn was closed. They provided no explanation. Further to our dilemma was that due to the popularity of the Festival, the other hotels and motels were all booked up. No room at the Inn. After searching some websites, the closest hotel with availability was in Edmonton, an hour away. We pondered our situation as we drove along a main road and then noticed a "Vacancy" sign. We took a chance, drove into the motel parking lot, and sure enough, were able to book a 3 day stay. Our expedition was saved, and the adventure continued.

Vegreville is a nice town founded in the late 1800's, with a population of 5,689. But the designers of the town lacked imagination when naming streets – they were all numbers. We just had to remember that the main street was #49. The Festival was held in an area with a large field for food trucks, open stadium for Ukrainian dancers and a hockey arena for the Vendor Marketplace. They had a contest for pysanky displays. I won 1st prize for my display of 5 pysanky, ranging in size from a quail to an ostrich egg, and 2nd prize for my pysanky showing ten different techniques. The 3 days of making new friends, learning about the early Ukrainian

settlers and sharing our heritage with visitors to the Vegreville Festival, was well worth the lengthy trip.

The drive across Canada was an enjoyable and fun adventure. But it was much more than that. We saw a beautiful land with so many special attributes, not only the mountains and rocks and flatland prairies, but also the people we met along the way, so friendly, so welcoming. It made me proud to be a part of this great country of Canada. And this trip was also an opportunity for a bonding of mother and daughter. No matter what our differences, we supported each other with a special love. We laughed, we talked, we shared things that only mother and daughter understood. But also, we were best friends who shared the adventure of a lifetime.