



# ...Travellin' Round

by Bruce McIntosh,  
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## Embracing France's First World War History

This past spring I was the Tour Manager for a group of Scouts and Guides from London and Strathroy who travelled to northern France on a trip organized as a working holiday for the youth and their adult chaperones. Their mission was to plant maple trees in some of the small towns in the area near Vimy Ridge prior to the April 2017 celebrations marking the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this historic battle of the First World War. The maples that these young people planted will serve as living memorials to those brave souls who fought at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Upon arrival in Paris, we boarded our motor coach and travelled for a couple of hours to the 74-acre Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial.



Bruce McIntosh



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This memorial is a tribute to all of the Newfoundlanders who were killed at this site when they made their unsuccessful attack on July 1, 1916 during the first day of the Battle of the Somme. This is the largest battalion memorial on the Western Front. At the heart of the memorial is a great bronze caribou, the emblem of the Royal Newfound-

land Regiment. Our history lesson here came to life through the stories relayed to us by our Parks Canada interpreter and our local guide Faye Domonkos owner of Living Memory Tours, a Canadian woman who studied French and history in Paris. Faye led our group to the statue of the caribou, through the preserved trench lines, to the small memorials and cemeteries contained within the site, while relating how this regiment was almost completely wiped out.

The small city of Arras, France was the perfect hub from which to explore the Vimy area, as well as many other important First and Second World War sites. My base for the week was the Holiday Inn, centrally located across from the train station, adjacent to the convention centre and a few blocks away from Arras's Grand Place. When one thinks of Europe, visions of its multitude of outdoor cafes come to mind, and there was certainly no shortage of them surrounding the Grand Place in Arras. A number of historic homes offering bed and breakfast accommodation are also close to Grand Place.



**Embracing France's First World War History (Continued)**

Planting 500 maple trees in two days is a monumental task, but our eager group of Guides and Scouts handled the project with ease as we travelled from site to site, including towns such as Carency and Neuville-Saint-Vaast. At each stop, the group was met by local school children who came out to help. A few days later, we returned to each of the sites for a Dedication Ceremony and Reception. This was probably one of the most amazing days that I've ever experienced when leading a tour group. Crowds would greet

us with thunderous applause, the mayor welcomed us and thanked the group, trees were dedicated and a plaque unveiled, the national anthems of both Canada and France were played and refreshments were offered. Although the crowds were large and the roads were clogged with cars, traveling from town to town was no problem. We were V.I.P.'s, on a tight schedule for the day, and our convoy included the mayor of each town, our motor coach, and cars of a few other distinguished guests, all accompanied by a police escort. Every-

one felt like the leader of a country or a superstar who gets whisked from town to town in a special motorcade.

With tree planting and ceremonies complete, we spent a full day visiting such sites as the Tyne Cot Cemetery, and Brooding Soldier Monument. At the John McCrae memorial in Essex Park Cemetery, the Scouts and Guides recited the poem "In Flanders Fields" in perfect unison. Many were so overwhelmed they had tears rolling down their cheeks. Later that evening we attended the Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium, the other highlight of the day. Special arrangements had been made so that our group could lay a wreath at this ceremony which is held here every evening at 8:00 pm.

Our last two days were spent in Paris where we enjoyed an elegantly served luncheon in the dining room on the first level of the Eiffel Tower, and later, an evening dinner cruise on the River Seine.

It truly was a privilege to be the Tour Manager for this group of disciplined and hard-working youth. Not only did they make their chaperones proud, they gained the respect and admiration of the French people and local government officials as well. While walking through Ypres, our local guide, Faye, and myself had local shop owners tell us what a pleasure it was to serve the polite young Canadian group that was in town for the evening. We could not have been prouder to be Canadian and have had the opportunity to be associated with this group. I'm sure these group members will return to France some day to show their families the trees they planted.

