



These photographs take a look at Nistowiak Falls from a variety of perspectives. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

Paying a visit to Saskatchewan's most famous waterfall

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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A trip to Nistowiak Falls is ideal for those who want to get into the wilderness, but not go too far. It's the most famous waterfall in Saskatchewan, both because of its beauty and accessibility.

Less than 20 kilometres from the end of the road at Stanley Mission, most visitors get there by canoeing down the legendary Churchill River, or travelling by motorboat. Most of the route lies within the massive Lac La Ronge Provincial Park, with several spots for wilderness camping along the way. If you're not prepared to travel on your own, local outfitters and tour operators run excursions.

The starting point is the historic community of Stanley Mission on the banks of the Churchill River, about 80 kilometres north of La Ronge. Those planning an overnight or longer trip can stop at the Northern Store in town to arrange for vehicle safekeeping.

A nice part of this trip is that there are a couple of other worthwhile places to see before you even get to the falls. Immediately across the river from the boat dock in Stanley Mission, Holy Trinity Anglican Church stands impressively on a point jutting into the Churchill River. The Victorian era gothic revival church was built between 1854 and 1860 during the fur trade, and is the oldest building still standing anywhere in Saskatchewan. It's a reminder that in Saskatchewan's early years, the focus was on the north rather than the south.

A little less than halfway along the

route lies Stanley Rapids and Little Stanley Rapids, on opposite sides of an island. As the river narrows approaching the rapids, a cliff face just above the water has an impressive set of ancient pictographs — among the most easily accessible major rock painting sites in the North. The red ochre paintings depict a thunderbird, bison, a caribou-like figure, human figures, and other designs.

Many local people take motor boats through the main Stanley Rapids, but those canoeing or boating on their own should head to Little Stanley Rapids. A short wooden ramp system with sliders makes it easy to pull your boat across without even unloading.

There's a great place to camp on the downstream side of the portage, and another on the island in Drope Lake just south of the portage.

Soon after Drope Lake, the river narrows and makes a fairly sharp C-turn through Frog Narrows. When water levels are high, fast water along this stretch could be powerful enough to make it a bit of a struggle to paddle upstream on the return trip. Immediately after Frog Narrows is a tiny, picture-perfect island that has been used for camping for years.

Nistowiak Falls is not on the Churchill River itself, but along the short Rapid River that connects Iskwtikan Lake with the Churchill. In a kilometre or so along the narrow gorge, the water plunges 17 metres, with the biggest drop on the falls itself. The river is so powerful because it drains massive Lac La Ronge into the Churchill River.

The easy portage trail starts at Jim's Camp, a fishing lodge at the outlet of the Rapid River, and winds through the forest for about one kilometre. The brink of the falls offers the best vantage point, or if water levels are low enough, you might be able to get out on the rocky outcroppings partway down for close-up views.

Besides the waterfall, the entire



canyon with its non-stop whitewater is photogenic. When water levels are high, a great wall of mist rises from the base of the falls.

It's also worthwhile walking upstream to the end of the portage to a set of rapids above the main

falls. These have been dubbed Airplane Falls because of an incident in the 1960s when a float plane landed here to pick up forest firefighters. Before the pilot could start the engine, the current pulled the plane over the rapids. Fortunately,

the plane became grounded on the shore just before plunging over the brink of the main falls.

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