

The Nez Perce Trail -- a summer road trip for history buffs

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The popular version of the Indians of the 19th century centres around the conflict in the U.S. where the Native Americans fought a losing battle for freedom. With the Nez Perce, the movie version isn't far wrong.

The last of the Indian Wars had a Canadian connection and following the trail of this particular fight will lead you thousands of kilometres through some of the best scenery of the northwest U.S. It is a story of courage and endurance that ends, as all lost causes do, with surrender.

The U.S. government wanted the Nez Perce to move from their homes in the Columbia Plateau of Oregon to a vacant lot in the ghetto of Kansas in the 1870s. Instead the Nez Perce ran, with 2,000 U.S. cavalrymen in pursuit. Cornered after five harrowing months, fighting 13 major battles and trekking 2,700 km while trying to reach the safe haven of Canada, Chief Joseph and what was left of his clan were taken prisoner just 60 km from the border, in northern Montana. A few dozen, mostly woman and children, did reach the sanctuary of Canada.

The Nez Perce National Historic Trail follows the same journey the tribe made. It is one of four connecting historic trails and each is on the Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies (www.drivethetop10.com). It gives visitors a chance to experience native American powwows, riderless horse performances, pipe rituals, traditional drum circles, trail rides as well as the chance to explore battlefields and old encampments.

A good place to start is at Nez Perce National Historical Park (www.nps.gov/archive/nepe/spalding1.htm and www.goidaho.com/Nez-Perce-National-Historical-Park) in Spalding, Idaho. It offers a fine museum collection, a movie on the history of the Nez Perce people and about 40 hectares of historic cemeteries and buildings.

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