

In the Theatre of the Magnificent

by

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Swooping and soaring like Valkyries above the swirling whirlpools of the Reversing Rapids, what stories the seagulls tell — what sights they've seen! For thousands of years, these ghost-like sentinels have circled above the rocky gorge, where every day, the St. John River and the Bay of Fundy take centre stage in a three-act drama — high, slack and low tide — a performance that's unique on Earth.

The stage is always changing in this grand theatre of nature where, hundreds of millions of years ago, a series of complex geological events took place and ancient continents collided. Framing the gorge through which the St. John River rushes and the remarkable eight-meter tides of Fundy rise and fall, are two rock formations, each representing the geology of a different continent and a different geological era. Soaring from one side of the river to the other, the seagulls transcend a chasm of time in the Earth's history that staggers the imagination.

Several natural features, including the narrowing of the St. John River, the shape of the gorge and an underwater ledge, helped create Reversing Falls or, as some prefer to call it, the reversing rapids. The most important element, however, is the head-on collision that takes place between one of Eastern Canada's biggest rivers and the world's highest and most powerful tides. At high tide, waves and rapids as big as a small house roar through the gorge. At slack tide, for 30 minutes or so every six hours, the current is calm and tranquil.

When the Pharaohs ruled Egypt, Aboriginal Peoples gathered here. At night, when their campfires illuminated the deep, dark river, their drums echoed through the gorge. For the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet Peoples, this was a spiritual place as haunting and mysterious as the swirling whirlpools around which they carefully paddled their canoes during slack tide. At high tide, they stood on the rocky shore and watched in awe as the river rolled past. That's you standing on that rocky shore now, experiencing the same performance.

One hundred billion tons of water pours into the Bay of Fundy from the Atlantic Ocean every 12.4 hours, an amount equal in volume to all the water that flows in every river on Earth in a 24-hour period. On average, 10 million gallons of water per minute race into the bay through the 110-metre opening that stretches from one side of the river to the other. With a current that moves between 25 and 30 knots, this is a place where nature commands respect.

At high tide, the water from the bay becomes higher than the river, which causes the St. John to reverse. The rapids this creates are at their peak during high tide, after which the level of the bay drops, and the upstream flow into the river gradually lowers until the level of the bay equals that of the river — slack tide. As the waters continue to drop toward low tide, the river empties freely into the bay, and the full flow of the St. John thunders through the narrow gorge once more.

Swooping and soaring far above; what stories the seagulls tell — what sights they've seen! As you stand there listening to the roar of the rapids, the very ground seems to shudder. Looking across the swirling maelstrom before you, you hear echoes. Is it the beating of your heart you

hear, or the sound of distant drums? Or maybe that's the sound of ancient continents colliding in the theatre of the magnificent.