Acadians find they can go home again

Editor's Note: Today's final installment of The Advertiser's series on the history of the Acadians focuses on their upcoming reunion, Congres Mondial Acadien and Retrouvailles '94, Aug. 12-22 in New Brunswick, Canada.

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After 400 years of travelling the New World, the Acadians are going home for a few days, anyway.

And as the classic rock tune says, "What a long, strange trip it's been...."

It was 1604 when the earliest Acadians, led by Pierre De Monts, first laid eyes on the virgin forests of what is now New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. That is where their descendants will return Aug. 12-22, for the Congres Mondial Acadien and Retrouvailles '94.

By all accounts the event, held in celebration of a unique history, could be a history maker in itself. The schedule already includes a long list of family gatherings and reunions, concerts, food festivals, cultural and economic exchanges, even a conference for Acadian women. And the official itinerary says nothing of the many private moments participants will experience, as they visit the places where their New World history began.

One might be tempted to view the Congres as an attempt at closure, as an effort to finally wrap up the Acadians' 400-year old saga. But if anything, the conference - as described by its president and chairman Andre Boudreau - will serve instead to open the door to the future, to the next 400 years of Acadian experience. He described conference goals this way:

"To provide an opportunity to renew the ties that unite Acadians throughout the world. The conferences' general theme is Acadia in 2004. They (conferences) offer an opportunity for Acadians to celebrate their cultural vitality, to evaluate their experiences and to reflect on their hopes for the future. The conferences wish to trace the way to the Acadian communities' evolution in 2004, when the Acadians, very much alive despite many changes, will celebrate four centuries of existence."

A look at the conference calendar for Congres Mondial reveals that the event, like the history it celebrates, is rich with diversity.

The schedule of meetings, to be held at the Universite de Moncton and the Community College of Dieppe, includes:

Women's Forum in Acadia, Aug. 13, when participants will discuss "their challenges, their struggles, their experience... their contribution to the Acadian awakening, their need for solidarity and... the expression of their Acadian identity."

Communications Conference, Aug. 17-19, planned to develop "a better understanding of the identity shared by all Acadian communities."

Culture and Heritage Conference, Aug. 17-19, "an exploration of the past and the present, that will lead to the future."

Economic Conference, Aug. 17-19, during which participants will attempt "to develop partnerships that promote their social and economic development between Acadian business communities throughout the world."

Education Conference, Aug. 17-19, with an equally lofty goal: "In order to integrate a world perspective in teaching, we have to investigate our roots and to understand the role of education in the nation's survival and liberation."

But the conferences are only part of the plan. The event will begin Aug. 12 with The Frolic, a huge outdoor concert to be held near Cap-Pele, New Brunswick. Then, on Aug. 15, the Tintamarre will be the center of the official "Acadian day of celebration," which will be observed locally at Acadian Village as well as in Canada. There will also be a Cuisine Experience International Craft Show, Acadian Film Festival, Atlantic Acadian Youth Festival, and more.

On a more personal level, more than 70 family reunions have been planned to coincide with the Congres Mondial Acadien. Perhaps it will be a chance for some distant branches of families, separated in 1755 by Le Grand Derangement, to finally regain a sense of one another.

So, how does one travel to such a unique cultural event? Not to worry. Several travel agencies have planned tours and are offering package deals to fit almost any traveller's needs.

B & B Tours International, the official touring agency for theCongres Mondial Acadien, is offering five separate coach tours, ranging in price from $279 to more than $1,159. One B & B tour agent told The Advertiser that about 400 Louisianians have already signed up for B & B tours to the Congres. Even more tours have been booked by B & B originating in Belgium, Quebec, Saskatchewan and other regions. Several local travel agencies are also offering travel itineraries.

For more information on Congres Mondial Acadien events, tours, and accommodations, contact B & B at 1-800-565-5118, or local travel agencies:

ASIElite, 237-8747
Associated Travel, 233-5521
Bayou Travel, 233-6996
International Tours, 233-3972
Summit Travel, 235-8000
Wayfarer Travels, 233-4550