

SHARED FROM TORONTO STAR TOUCH

July 23, 2016 edition,
THE CITY - Screen 5



STAYCATION

GUIDED TOUR TRAVELS THROUGH TORONTO HISTORY

Interactive journey leads participants from Toronto's Old Mill to the Humber Bay Bridge

HOLLY HONDERICH
STAR TOUCH

If you're looking for reprieve from summer in the city — the heat, the noise, the rush — some face time with nature may be just what you need. But you don't need to go far to escape Toronto's concrete jungle: the Redwing Institute's Culture and Nature Discovery Walks offer a quick escape into the great outdoors, just a few subway stops from downtown.

Beginning at the front doors of Old Mill Subway Station, the interactive three-hour tour winds through a series of connecting paths and parks to reach the Humber Bay Arch Bridge — where the Humber River meets Lake Ontario.

The tour was started by Lisa Gervais less than one year ago, shortly after founding the Redwing Institute, an experiential learning organization.

Gervais, who spent the first half of her career in digital marketing, launched Redwing as a source of educational programming — based in nature — that builds character strengths, self-confidence and creativity. Its mission, Gervais explained, is to inspire people to live to their fullest potential, using the outdoors as a classroom.

"I want people to know what their character strengths are," Gervais said.

The Culture and Nature Discovery Walks is the Redwing Institute's inaugural program.

Gervais hopes that the tour will introduce participants to the psychological benefits of nature.

She calls the tour Toronto's "best kept secret."

The tour is centred on Ontario's Indigenous culture — the historical significance of the Humber River Valley, and the customs and values of Indigenous peoples.

The walk is a full-sensory experience: Gervais employs music and food to enhance the journey.

The traditional teachings are melded with the research of positive psychology, which examines the sources of individual and community well-being. Drawing from this research, Gervais encourages participants to practise strategies of mindfulness throughout the tour.

To Gervais, such strategies — coupled with time in nature — are crucial in the prevention of mental illness.

“I think there's a real missed opportunity,” Gervais said, with respect to prevention. “Time in nature builds creativity and innovative thinking,” and contributes to stronger mental health overall.”

Gervais hopes to positively impact 100,000 people through Redwing Institute programming over the next five years.

Already, the walk has gained international recognition: the program was awarded the “Unique Experience of the Year” for Toronto, by the Luxury Travel Guide Global Awards 2016.

Gervais offers walks twice a day, seven days per week: 9:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Monday to Saturday, and 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Sundays. She currently leads around four walks per week, with between two and 12 people per walk. The guided tours are now available in English, French and Spanish.