

# Seat Sale: Battlefield Tours (or Just say NO to Contiki)

By Dave NEATBY

So you're thinking of taking a trip to Europe sometime, and you think it might be neat to go see Vimy Ridge, just to add a tinge of history as you bus along from Amsterdam down to Paris on your Contiki tour. You see the twin pylons of the Canadian Memorial and the giant obelisk of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, the French national memorial the next ridge over, from almost as far away as the Belgian border. As you get closer, the monument only becomes more impressive and tugs at your heart. When you arrive at the parking lot next to the small museum at the top of Hill 145, the highest point of Vimy Ridge (which is actually about 10-14 km long) where the Canadian monument now stands, your tour guide informs you that you have 10 minutes before departure. You have enough time to walk up to the memorial, look at the statues and read a few of the 11,285 names of Canadians who died in France during WWI but have no known graves. OR you have time to go to the small interpretive centre and learn a bit about why the battle was fought, why it is important to Canadians, and maybe talk to the Canadian guide who is working there to explain anything that wasn't covered in the displays or anything that crosses your mind to ask. OR you have time to go to the bathroom. You can only do one. Which will it be?

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Maybe being able to do only one will satisfy you. That's fine, nothing wrong with that, but if you wanted to do all three plus look at the two cemeteries on the site, walk along the path between the huge holes in the landscape caused by underground mines, and get a guided tour from



**Except for April/May, crops hide things like this machinegun nest on the Somme**

Canadian students of the underground tunnel open to the public, Contiki or another large bus tour company is not going to be your best option.

"Alright Mr. Disembodied-Cadre-contributing-guy," you say, "so how DO I go about seeing all this stuff? What should I know? Where should I go? How do I do it?"

You will need a pair of good boots, preferably waterproof (there are still pointy things sticking up in some places like rusty bayonets and barbed wire pickets), a tetanus shot would do you good (just in case), a waterproof shell (when it rains in northern France, you don't get much warning), and a camera (gotta get those memories!).

First things first, do some research. I'm not saying that you have to become an expert on both world wars, but the more you know about them, the less that any tour guides you might meet are going to have to tell you as background, and the less background they have to give you, the more stuff they can tell you that is REALLY interesting and relevant to what you're seeing. Also, try to make the war a little more personal to yourself. Talk to a veteran before you go and visit some of the places they talked about, ask them if there is anything that they would like a photo of, or if they would like you to visit a friend that didn't come back. Find a relative of yours, a friend, or someone who went to your church, was from your town, etc. and

visit their grave.

Resting places are not hard to find. The agency that oversees the commemoration of Canada's war dead is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They care for the resting places of soldiers and nursing sisters from Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, the West Indies and all the other colonies of the former British Empire, and also Polish, Dutch, Belgian, Russian, German, and soldiers from any other country who is buried in one of the Commonwealth cemeteries. Every soldier who lost their life serving with Commonwealth forces is commemorated by name. Even if a soldier's body was never found, there is a memorial with his or her name on it somewhere. You can find out where by going to their website, [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org). Type in the name, war, and any other information you have, and that soldier's record will pop up, along with the location of their burial or commemoration, and directions on how to get there. You can even get road maps with the locations of war cemeteries overlaid so that you can more easily find them.

You have to plan your own trip. There is no company that is going to go to all the important places you want to or should see at a price you can afford. If you're Canadian, there are number of areas that are going to be of interest to you. For the First

World War, you might like to visit the Ypres Salient (in Belgium), the area around Vimy Ridge, and the Somme (both in France). There are a lot more Second World War sites to visit, mostly because the fighting ranged over a much wider area, but Dieppe, the Normandy beaches, and the eastern Netherlands near Nijmegen and Arnhem are sites I visited and found them doable.

First World War sites are a lot easier to visit without a car. The memorials, cemeteries, and points of interest are very close together and there are usually small companies like Salient Tours that offer short van tours of places like the Somme and the Ypres Salient for people on a budget or who don't have a car. Just for an example, Salient Tours offers daily van tours of the Ypres Salient, the Somme, and the Normandy beaches. They offer tours of different lengths and different prices starting at easy to reach locations, you can pay in various currencies, at prices that vary between about 20 and 45 \$CDN. Though the majority of sites they visit are British, they do make a point of stopping at some Canadian sites.

For the Ypres Salient, go the town of Ieper (formally Ypres) in Belgium. The town is mostly Flemish, most of whom speak English, so if your French skills are a bit rusty, no problem. Here you'll want to see the In Flanders Fields Museum, buy some chocolate, sample the beer, take a battlefield tour, hopefully seeing the Canadian memorials at St. Julien, Hill 62, and Passchendaele. Be back in town for 8 pm, when the local fire department plays the last post under the Menin Gate, a Commonwealth memorial commemorating over 54,000 missing soldiers, 6,940 of whom were Canadians. This area was the scene of fighting from the beginning of the war almost to the end.

To visit the Somme, the best place to start is the French city of Albert, about an hour and a half north of Paris. The Somme was where the British forces suffered very heavy loss-