

35

Canadian Rockies

NATURAL HIGH

Epic mountain views, bucket-list wildlife and the promise of real adventure made **Mike MacEachern** fall hard for this corner of western Canada

The big blue: Peyto Lake in Banff National Park at sunset

Clear winner: Maligne Lake in Jasper National Park. Opposite, a grizzly bear in Banff National Park; and Glacier View Lodge, set against the epic backdrop of the Columbia Icefield



I fell in love on a layby, somewhere on the highway to Banff. It happened as a grizzly bear came towards my parked car, lolloping through the long shadows cast on the road by lofty spruce and fir. Through a crack in my passenger window I heard something: her growly basso profundo. Then a cub, all dewy fur and dripping snout, ambled out of hiding. It laboured through the sedge, then somersaulted and sprang, like a slinky toy. Instinctively, I inhaled, then jolted for my camera – spilling hot coffee down my jeans. What a morning. What memories. What a moron.

The Canadian Rockies have a tendency to turn people – myself included – into giddy chumps. No Attenborough documentary

can prepare you for its spectacles, certainly not witnessing a mother grizzly and baby Boo-Boo. And that's just one on a long list of reasons why, five years on from that first grizzly encounter, I've returned several times. The Rockies are Canada's epic backyard, a place of summery woods, flint-crested peaks and heart-stopping lakes; of crumpled glaciers and hidden valleys. Boundless national parks evoke half-forgotten memories of *The Call of the Wild*. True adventure awaits.

And yet you don't have to leave the safety of your hire car to spot bucket-list animals, such as bears, moose or elk. The Rockies encompass four national parks – Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Yoho – each wildlife-packed and spooling across Alberta and neighbouring British Columbia. Every time I visit, I see something new, or experience a one-off thrill that is worth the nine-hour flight from London to Calgary alone. Spotting black bears by the roadside: that's a must. Canoeing across ultramarine lakes to an empty beach fits every romantic ideal of beauty. Other adventures include hiking into deep, dark woods; sleeping in a tent under stars far from city light pollution; and toasting marshmallows

by a campfire. Though from personal experience, I suggest you avoid the local speciality, Rocky Mountain oysters: deep-fried bull's testicles.

If you want to cram in as much as possible, the area can only really be conquered by car or camper van. Canada is *huge* and seeing it takes time. The classic Rocky Mountains route – a round trip from Calgary to Jasper – covers more than 800km. Allow time for picturesque Banff and luminous Lake Louise and a trip easily chews up 10 days. Ideally, share the driving and spend some time in the passenger seat – at times, the scenery will fill your eyes with tears.

Of course, you want all this majesty to yourselves. Which is why I insist you avoid the over-stuffed parking lots and travel in late spring or autumn – not summer. Banff and Jasper are home to some of the most beautiful beaches on the planet, and waters are ready for cannonballs as early as May. Autumn brings extra magic with sunburst foliage; plus you won't find as many tour buses in October as September.

At home in the UK, with a large-scale map of western Canada rolled out on a desk, start to plot your perfect route. All the scenic drama is west of Calgary – where you should fly into and hire a car from – so circle Banff as your first stop. Spend at least two days here, preferably more. The Rocky Mountains' gateway town is set within a national park and here nature spills over into everyday life. Whitetail deer catch rays on residential front lawns, and it's easy to spot elk and bighorn sheep while canoeing the smoked-glass Bow River, which slaloms south of town. Just before my last trip, I heard two wolves were spotted hot-stepping it down Banff Avenue.

Most of all, I love this town because of the locals and their undying devotion to the outdoors. Pop into bakeries between your Cub Scout activities and you'll meet baristas with base-camp beards, yeti-haired park wardens and goggle-tanned helicopter pilots. Bike-friendly streets, a film festival – rescheduled and coming to the UK this autumn – and bygone-era lodges such >

NO-DRIVE? NO WORRIES

The bus tours aren't all bad – if you really can't self-drive, they let you hit the highlights car-free. The Brewster Express (www.banffjaspercollection.com; £45 one way) runs coach transfers from Calgary to Banff, then try Discover Banff Tours (banfftours.com) for half-day scenic tours, including Lake Louise (about £53).

High and mighty:
Banff Avenue
at twilight.
A backpacker
hiking in the Plain
of Six Glaciers



as Buffalo Mountain Lodge (crmr.com; doubles from £175, room only) and Banff Ptarmigan Inn (banffptarmigan.inn.com; doubles from £101, B&B) gentrify the place a little – but, thankfully, not too much.

Some people love Banff best during the long midsummer weeks, when the silty-blue lakes and evergreen forests are painted-in and the sun sets late. But I prefer the town just after spring has sprung. The surrounding mountain ski resorts Sunshine Village (skibanff.com) and Lake Louise (skilouise.com) can be thrilling in May's diffused light (and thanks to the altitude, slopes are still open). You can combine days on the piste with evening bear-watching safaris, when the park's grizzlies and black bears are recently out of hibernation. If it hits ice-cream weather, up to 24C or so, the hiking trails thaw and dozens of bears fan out from Banff and nearby village Lake Louise, 40 minutes away. The best trails feature distant views of granite-faced Mount Assiniboine, dubbed the Matterhorn of the Rockies. It makes you think: how does anyone get any work done?

For the next night or two, Lake Louise makes a good base; it has day trips on tap, too. Try snakes-and-ladders hikes to Fairview Mountain, the Plain of Six Glaciers, or Lake Agnes Tea House and Big Beehive. Some treks are rugged and hazardous, but the nearby Moraine Lake shoreline trail is suitable for almost anyone with boots in the cupboard. In fact, this 1.5km footpath is perhaps my favourite, anywhere. Portrait-posing peaks, an exquisite lake, a smattering of bushy firs: it's got the full Rockies tick-list.

Before the stars gather, I always make time to creep into the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise hotel for afternoon tea (fairmont.com; from £34). It's an old-fashioned affair with a square-on view of the world's most photographed lake – one that has seen me pressed up to the glass, gawping. If the prices are too much to stay (from £176, room only) opt for nearby Deer Lodge (crmr.com; doubles from £69, room only).

The road north from Lake Louise, onto the Icefields Parkway, is strewn with swathes of birch and conifer that seem to go on forever. Sometimes elk romp onto the highway, causing momentary gridlock, but – if this >

DON'T MISS

Lake Louise is rightly famous for its luminescent blue colour – but arguably even more photogenic is Moraine Lake, an hour's drive away back towards Banff. Parking is extremely limited in peak months, so take the Parks Canada shuttle (£6) from Lake Louise to guarantee a visit.

IDEALLY, SHARE THE DRIVING AND SPEND SOME TIME IN THE PASSENGER SEAT — AT TIMES, THE SCENERY WILL FILL YOUR EYES WITH TEARS



happens – it simply gives you time to consider the sigh-triggering Vermilion Range and axe-cleft valleys. At times like these, the highway feels not like a road at all, but a child's imaginative crayoning of one. One minute you're staring at a woodland caribou with an antler rack as wide as a bus, the next parked-up for an hour-long hike to diamond-blue Peyto Lake.

Forget the sat nav for the next drive – the time to Jasper from Lake Louise may read as just three hours, but you'll need two days to see this stretch properly. There are few roads here, even fewer services, so this is not a trip to be rushed. The parkway is all about enjoying the spectacular landscape on a whim – stop to climb a razor-edged hill spotted in the rear-view; or picnic in a valley, ragged as a seismogram. Fuel up and pack the boot with provisions from Lake Louise's The Village Market before you set off.

Even if you're rushed en route to Jasper, you can't miss the Columbia Icefield – a series of massive, interconnected, ancient glaciers, a *Game of Thrones*-esque frozen wilderness writ large. In theory, you can play at Shackleton and Hillary here, leaving the valley's moonscape of moraine behind to self-explore gnarly ice crags and crevasses, but unless you're experienced with this sort of thing, I'd recommend a late-afternoon guided glacier walk (May to October; icewalks.com, £68). Afterwards, stay at Glacier View Lodge (www.banffjaspercollection.com; doubles from £280, room only) – it's your only choice until Jasper, unless you have a camper van or tent.

After the icefield, the highway is an ocean of ice on rock, granite on snow. Fields of moraine glitter in the sun. Mountain goats scramble up stony slopes. A duo of cacophonous waterfalls (Sunwapta and Athabasca) and an out-and-back, half-day hike along the silent Poboktan Pass Trail await. Flooding the windscreens are glaciers and waterfalls that, ultimately, flow north through boreal forest and tundra to the Arctic Ocean. Part of me finds it overwhelming just thinking about it; the rest fizzles like a shaken Dr Pepper at the prospect of returning.

For some, the end of the parkway, frontier Alpine town Jasper, is the best bit. I adore kayaking from its Curly Philips Boathouse for a paddle across Maligne Lake (www.banffjaspercollection.com; from £23 per hour); or a moderate five-hour hike to Edith Cavell Meadows for hanging glaciers and cathedral-height rock faces. The sense of space encourages stargazing – another unspoilt natural resource is the night sky. Kayaking, hiking and astronomy are hardly revolutionary concepts, but spread over two to three days they'll offer a thunderous climax to your 10-day itinerary.

Got more time – and want a taste of a Canadian city? The coffee-table book gorgeousness continues in sublime Vancouver, another scenic drive 800km to the west; you'll find a buzzy restaurant scene, sandy beaches and world-class ski resort Whistler. Or return to Calgary, where you started – this prairies hub is Canada's cowboy central and ensnares me like a lasso.

Amid the emptiness, the agelessness, the isolation that the Canadian Rockies offer, you'll connect with all these places in your own way. Watch the shifting sunsets and bumbling bears. Surround yourself with unknowable summits; feel at peace. The world has never been smaller and yet, when I'm here, I always feel part of something bigger. ■

Out of this world:
Mount Assiniboine
set against the
dazzling Milky Way

THE BEST TRAILS FEATURE DISTANT VIEWS OF GRANITE-FACED MOUNT ASSINIBOINE, DUBBED THE MATTERHORN OF THE ROCKIES

PHOTOGRAPHS: AWL IMAGES; GETTY; ROBERT HARDING; SUPERSTOCK

Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

Non-stop flights to Canada from the UK are plentiful. You should be able to get a ticket on **BA** or **Air Canada** from Heathrow to Calgary, from about £500 return, or try **WestJet** or **Air Transat** from Gatwick. Flights within Canada can be expensive, and in some instances – including peak summer season – returns from Toronto to Calgary can cost nearly as much as your London-Canada airfare. Keep this in mind when planning any cross-country itineraries. UK citizens are required to buy an Electronic Travel Authorization (eTA) to visit Canada; these cost £4 online (canada.ca), are valid for five years and must be applied for before departure.

Go packaged

A number of tour operators specialise in the Canadian Rockies, including **Abercrombie & Kent** (abercrombiekent.com), **Audley** (audleytravel.com), **Canadian Affair** (canadianaffair.com),

Canadian Sky (canadiansky.co.uk), **Cox & Kings** (coxandkings.co.uk) and **Virgin Holidays** (virginholidays.co.uk). Expect to pay about £2,000pp for a two-week fly-drive.

Extend your stay

There's plenty more to see in western Canada if you've two or three weeks. After landing in Calgary, take a (canyon) hike in the Badlands – a desertscape of buried dinosaur bones, spiked with strange rock formations known as hoodoos. And at the end of your trip, in Jasper, set off for Vancouver aboard the **Rocky Mountaineer**, a two-day luxury train journey past forested mountains, rushing rivers and rugged plains (rockymountaineer.com; from £1,060pp, including one-night's hotel). **Via Rail's** The Canadian is a more economical version, with onboard sleeping space (viarail.ca; from £302 for four nights, from Toronto to Vancouver). Alternatively, carry on driving to the west-coast city, and take in British Columbia's world-class Okanagan Valley wine region en route.