



Regal Resorts, Rugged Rockies

by Mary Bergin

When a call to the wild beckons, consider responding two ways: Rough it by day. Relax when night falls.

Within Canada's pristine and untamed national parks are lavish accommodations with amazing views of the Canadian Rockies. Consider this a reward for exploring the backcountry on your own or joining guided tours to hit the highlights.

Get to know two parks during one vacation by flying into Calgary or Edmonton, both in Alberta. Then rent a car and prepare to be wowed by the glistening glacial waters and magnificent mountains of Jasper and Banff national parks. Jasper, the size of Jamaica, is Canada's largest. Banff, open since 1885, is the country's oldest national park.

Picturesque Parkway

Expect incredible views along 142 miles of Highway 93, the Icefields Parkway, which links and meanders through these two natural jewels. The route follows the Continental Divide and cuts into one of the highest concentrations of glaciers south of the Arctic Circle.

The entire stretch of two-lane road and surrounding area became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984. It is enchanting and relatively desolate; the number of crossroads can be counted on one hand.

Stop for lunch at the Columbia Icefield Centre, learn about the area through exhibits and relish tremendous views of Athabasca, Stutfield and other glaciers. Pull over at Bow Summit, the parkway's highest point, for a gander at the intense blue-green and glacial-fed Peyto Lake.

Beautiful Banff

Within 25 miles of Peyto Lake is Banff's Lake Louise, home to the elegant Chateau Lake Louise, established during railroad development in 1890. "If we cannot export the scenery, we shall import the tourists," declared railway founder William Van Horne.

Enjoy a leisurely afternoon English tea while gazing at the gorgeous lake mountain landscape. Let a masseuse ease tired muscles after mountain biking or whitewater rafting. End the day with champagne and strawberries.

People who live inside of Canada's national parks can own a home or business, but they lease from Parks Canada the land on which the structure sits. Lake Louise has a year-round population of 8,500, but an influx of tourists swells the total.

Banff's 120 miles of hiking trails include a 3.6-mile path along Johnston Canyon, formed after a landslide about 10,000 years ago. Gentle, snakelike twists and 30-foot-high catwalks make this one of the park's most popular hikes.

The hopeful, for more than a century, have made their way to Banff Upper Hot Springs, to lounge in the thermal waters of a restored 1930s bathhouse. The mineral waters (a mix of sodium, magnesium, bicarbonate, calcium and sulphate) average 101 degrees, 35 miles south of Lake Louise, in the town of Banff.

Another Jewel: Jasper

Delicate patches of "witch's hair" (*Alectoria sarmentosa*) sway on tree branches at Jasper National Park, and that's a good thing. This moss-lichen thrives only where the air is pure.

Unsolved mysteries abound in this acreage. One of the most famous involves Maligne Canyon, perhaps a part of this hemisphere's largest cave system. Nearby Medicine Lake, four miles long in summer, inexplicably "disappears" during fall and winter. Researchers investigate their hunch on why this happens by examining how dyed water moves, underground, from one point to another through the ecosystem.

Interpretive tours of this area, on foot or horse, are popular. Trout—from rainbow and brook to cutthroat and bull—make the area a paradise for fishing. Miette Hot Springs, the hottest in the Rockies, gurgles one hour north.

When tired of adventure, Jasper Park Lodge is a fine alpine retreat. What began as tents near a railway in 1915 today thrives as an enclave of comfortable cabins and chalets with modern amenities. On the premises are multiple restaurants, shops, a golf course and spa services.

The extremes of Banff and Jasper, both natural and manmade, combine to create an exceptional experience for a certain breed of traveler—one who connects with nature, values the finer amenities of life and can truly appreciate the rare and wonderful interconnection of the two.

Know Before You Go

For more about Parks Canada properties: www.pc.gc.ca, 888.773.8888.

For more about Alberta tourism: www.travelalberta.com, 800.252.3782.

The significantly smaller Yoho and Kootenay national parks also are in this part of Canada.

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