Canada’s Original National Park

Canada’s most famous National Park has been inspiring visitors for over a century. This iconic wilderness is home to grey wolves, grizzlies and mountain goats that roam over vast tracts of forest, surrounded by snowcapped peaks, massive glaciers and emerald lakes. Here, limitless outdoor adventure and vibrant culture meet award-winning cuisine and postcard perfect accommodations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banff National Park</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banff</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canmore</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper National Park</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Louise</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things to do in Summer</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things to do in Winter</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants &amp; Dining</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Many places are known worldwide. Banff National Park is revered worldwide.

The reasons for this reverence are myriad, but all are rooted in the park’s spectacula­rly mountainous architecture.

Kathy Copeland, who lives in Canmore, near the park boundary, and is the co-author of Don’t Waste Your Time in the Canadian Rockies, the Opinionated Hiking Guide, has hiked in many of the world’s celebrated mountain ranges. Several times, when asked where she’s from, residents of those ranges have, in astonishment, asked her, “You live in the Rockies? Then why would you want to hike here?” The section below titled Look Up describes the mountainous architecture of Banff National Park.

The other reason Banff National Park lives in the consciousness of millions — including those who have never, and perhaps will never visit the park — is that it’s wild. Of the park’s 6,641 square kilometres (2,564 square miles), 96 percent is wilderness.

So the mountains of Banff Park are a natural fortress where feral creatures of all kinds — small and large, cute and frightening, hooved, clawed, and winged — still thrive. The fauna here is exotic, thus fascinating, to people who live where civilization has all but exiled nature. The section below titled Look Around describes the wild inhabitants of Banff National Park.

The events leading to the establishment of Banff National Park — intended to forever protect the mountains and the resident wildlife — is a captivating story. The section below titled Look Back describes the genesis of Banff National Park.
The Mountainous Architecture of Banff National Park

Some mountains, especially volcanoes — Mt. Fuji, Mt. Kilimanjaro, Mt Rainier for example — have what appear from a distance to be relatively smooth slopes. Like the chord progression in a traditional song, they break the horizon gently, rise unbroken to a crescendo, then gradually resolve back into the horizon.

Not so the Canadian Rockies. In musical terms, these mountains are avant-garde. They’ve abandoned not just chord progressions, but chords, scales, and rhythmic meters in favour of improvisation. The resulting shapes are fantastic. Infinitely varied. Jazz set in stone, lofted into the sky.

There were no mountains here 1.5 billion years ago. This was the north shore of a vast supercontinent surrounded by shallow, warm seas teeming with the earliest forms of multicellular life.

Between 140 million and 45 million years ago, two separate collisions of continental plates (moving slower than the speed of a growing fingernail) pushed up sedimentary rock — limestone, dolomite, shale, sandstone, quartz — from the ancient, ocean floor. Thrust skyward, it formed the Canadian Rockies, which are now a middle-aged mountain range.

In Banff National Park, there are many types of mountains: complex, irregular, anticlinal, synclinal, castellate, dogtooth, and sawback. But the structure most visitors soon think of as “classically Banff” are called dip-slope mountains. One side is steep, the other gradual. Mt. Rundle, looming above the southeast edge of Banff townsit, is a dip-slope massif.

Once built, mountains are immediately torn down. It’s slow, tedious work. Glacial ice is the patient, demolition-crew boss. Its erosional influence is evident in the U-shape of the Bow River Valley, and in the numerous hanging valleys issuing waterfalls. Though glaciers the world over are now mere fragments compared to their ice-age magnitude, and their power to erode has diminished, more than 1,000 of them remain in Banff Park.

Glacial meltwater also erodes mountains, and there’s a lot of it here. The Columbia Icefield, at Banff Park’s northern tip, is a hydrological apex. It feeds streams and rivers flowing into the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic oceans.

Before fully heeding the call of gravity, however, water tends to pool up in lakes, which in Banff Park can look surprisingly like spilled paint. You’ll see every blue-green shade in the Benjamin Moore Designer Classics colour palette. That’s because the water contains suspended rock particles (ground to dust by glaciers) that reflect sunlight.

All mountains are works in progress. But more than most, the Canadian Rockies have been immortalized in their present state by humankind’s favourite art form: film.

Hollywood turned its cameras on Banff Park before moving pictures had sound. Like a burly stuntman, the range has successfully stood-in for the Swiss Alps many times. Even the iconic, wild-west mystique that movies have permanently lodged in humanity’s collective brain is largely composed of imagery filmed in the Canadian Rockies.
LOOK AROUND

The Inhabitants of Banff National Park

The readily visible presence of wildlife is among the chief attractions of Banff National Park. Here, it’s surprisingly easy to see where you stand in the food chain. Discovering you’re several rungs down — by encountering a bear, for example — is both humbling and exhilarating. It’s also a healthy experience, given our species has the arrogant and harmful habit of erroneously thinking of itself as top dog.

But bears — grizzlies as well as blacks — are just one of many kinds of animals you might observe. Other creatures, ranging from tiny to huge, are more frequently visible. Watch for bats, owls, eagles (bald and golden), red-tailed hawks, osprey, falcons, jays, woodpeckers, bluebirds, Clark’s nutcrackers, ptarmigan, loons, herons, and mallards. Also be on the lookout for chipmunks, squirrels, weasels, otter, raccoons, skunks, deer, lynx, coyotes, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, caribou, and moose.

Elk frequent Banff townsite. In the evening, watch for porcupines waddling out of the forest and beavers cruising ponds. On alpine trails, you’ll likely see pikas and marmots. It’s a rare and fortunate hiker who glimpses a wolf, wolverine, or cougar.

You can, however, see all these animals in one place, at one time: beside the Bow River bridge, in the Banff Park Museum. It showcases a marvelous collection: more than 5,000 stuffed, mounted specimens. Even on a beautiful-weather day, and certainly on a rainy one, a visit to this indoor, wild-kingdom is enthralling.

LOOK BACK

The Genesis of Banff National Park

The town of Banff, Canada, is beside the Bow River, in a mountain sanctuary of startling beauty known as the Bow River Valley. The name Bow refers to the reeds that grew on the banks of the river. Natives used these reeds to make hunting bows. The Peigan name for the river is Makhahn, or river where bow weeds grow.

Evidence found on the shores of nearby Lake Minnewanka and Vermilion Lakes indicate human habitation 12,000 years ago. Archaeologists believe Athabaskan hunters and gatherers, tracking ice-age animals, were the first to arrive. Later, nomadic aboriginals traversed the mountains and followed the rivers east into the prairie, in search of bison. Many Native tribes crossed paths in the Bow Valley, including the Cree, Plains Blackfeet, Stoney, Kootenai, Tsuu T’ina, Kainai, Peigan, Siksika, and Sarcee. They lived in relative peace for thousands of years.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Stoney — who call themselves Nakoda and are relatives of the Assiniboine and Sioux from the east — considered these mountains their home and hunting grounds. They settled in the region because fish and wildlife were abundant, and because frequent chinooks (strong, warm winds rushing over the mountains onto the prairie) moderated the winter climate.
The Banff hot-springs ownership dispute was also settled that year when the Prime Minister declared it a public park. Though small — a mere 26 sq km (10 sq mi) — the reserve was Canada’s first national park. The original name was Rocky Mountains Park. Its boundaries were soon expanded.

To stimulate westward travel, the CPR built luxurious hotels in the Rockies, starting with the Banff Springs Hotel in 1888. Its massive size, romantic fusion of Scottish baronial and French chateau styles, and wilderness setting at the confluence of the Bow and Spray Rivers endowed it with a mythic aura that was, and remains, uniquely compelling.

“If we cannot export the scenery,” said the railway’s visionary president, “we shall import the tourists.” And they did, by carving out hiking trails, importing Swiss mountain guides to lead hotel guests onto the icefields and up the peaks, and advertising the Rockies as “50 Switzerlands in one.” They even hired British mountaineer Edward Whymper, the first to summit the Matterhorn, to climb in the Canadian Rockies then write newspaper and journal articles promoting the region.

Banff quickly became popular with wealthy European tourists, who sailed across the Atlantic on luxury liners then continued to Banff via train. Among them were kings, queens and movie stars.

Park visitation expanded beyond the aristocracy after 1911, when it became possible to drive a car from Calgary to Banff. Bus tours started in 1916. A Winter Carnival in 1917 initiated winter tourism in Banff. Carnival events included cross-country skiing, ski jumping, curling, snowshoeing, and skijoring in which ski racers were hitched to dogs. Banff’s sole industrial enterprise, the Bankhead coal mine at the base of Cascade Mountain, operated from 1903 until 1922. Meanwhile, continued road building furthered the town’s transition to a tourism-based economy.

The road from Banff to Lake Louise was completed in 1921. The first highway across the Rockies — linking Alberta and B.C. via Banff and Radium — opened in 1923. It connected routes from the U.S., creating what Americans called the “Grand Circle Tour.” Today more than 90% of park visitors arrive by private vehicle.

In 1930, Rocky Mountains Park was renamed Banff National Park. But the boundaries continued changing until 1949, when the park’s size was fixed at 6641 sq km (2564 sq mi). Banff’s downhill ski resorts — Sunshine Village and Mount Norquay — developed in the 1930s, firmly establishing the town as a winter resort.

By 1940, the Icefields Parkway pierced Banff Park’s northern reaches near the Columbia Icefield and connected the towns of Banff and Jasper. This and other park infrastructure was largely built during WWI by Slavic Canadian internees, and during the Great Depression through public works projects funded by the Canadian Unemployment and Farm Relief Act.

The Trans-Canada Highway was officially opened in 1962, making Banff even more accessible to tourists. And in 1985 the town’s fame was burnished by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), who declared all of the contiguous Canadian Rocky Mountain parks a World Heritage Site.

Starting in 1976, The Banff Center organized the annual Banff Mountain Film Festival celebrating mountain culture. Festival speakers have included Reinhold Messner, Yvon Chouinard, and Sir Edmund Hillary.
When Calgary hosted the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, several events were held at the Canmore Nordic Centre, a 20-minute drive from Banff, just outside the park’s east gate. Billions of television viewers worldwide were enamoured by the Canadian Rockies and, from then on, associated the name Banff with mountain splendour.

Today, nearly 4,000,000 people visit Banff National Park each year, contributing an estimated $6 billion to the economy. Almost half of them arrive in July and August. During summer, 20% of park visitors are Europeans, 35% are from the U.S., and 42% are Canadians (23% of which are Albertans). Most come to sightsee. Some spend a few nights in the park’s nearly 2,500 campsites. Only a small percentage set foot on the park’s 1,600 km (1,000 mi) of hiking trails.

According to the 2011 municipal census, the town of Banff has a population of 8,244, more than 900 of which are temporary residents. Those figures would be greater — far exceeding the reasonable limit of a national-park settlement — but Banff passed a need-to-reside law in the 1960s. Only persons employed in the town are allowed to live here.

So wilderness, not humanity, remains dominant in Banff National Park. And the park itself remains emblematic of what humankind has sacrificed for “progress” and, as a result, will always long for and revere.

**BANFF GONDOLA**

There’s a wall between the town of Banff and the wilderness to the south. It’s called Sulphur Mountain.

The town creeps toward it, then abruptly stops where the terrain tilts skyward.

Pine trees march all the way up: over the rocky crest, and down the other side. Hikers ascend trails switchbacking up both forested slopes. But their number is minute compared to the thousands of people daily who summit Sulphur Mountain via the Banff Gondola.

The ride up and down is among the most popular, commercial tourist attractions in Banff National Park because the upper gondola terminal affords a spectacular panorama comprising six mountain ranges; a vista reaching far up the Bow River Valley; an aerial view of the famous town below; and frequent encounters with bighorn sheep.

It takes eight minutes for each, fully enclosed, four-passenger gondola cabin to glide from the lower terminal, at 1583 metres (5194 feet), to the upper terminal, at 2281 metres (7486 feet). That’s a gain of 698 metres (2289 feet), which, given the severely steep incline, only the sturdiest of hikers can surmount within 1.5 hours.

Upon arriving atop Sulphur Mountain, it’s easy to spend an hour or more simply peering from the observation decks ringing the upper terminal. Some visitors stay longer, imbibing at the Altitude 1583 Patio, dining at the Panorama Restaurant, noshing at the self-serve Summit Restaurant, or grazing at Peaks Snack Bar. But the optimal Banff Gondola experience entails a short stroll to the northernmost viewpoint.

Cross the gondola platform and proceed onto the summit-ridge boardwalk. Follow it 0.5 kilometres (0.3 miles) to 2271-metre (7449-foot) Sanson Peak, an outlier of Sulphur Mountain. The stone building here is an historic, weather station.

Sanson Peak was named after meteorologist Norman Sanson, who hiked from Banff townsite to the top of Sulphur Mtn regularly, year round, much of his life. In winter, he trudged up in snowshoes. In 1945, he summited at the age of 84.

**ABOVE: A BIRD’S EYE VIEW OF SIX MOUNTAIN RANGES ABOARD THE BANFF GONDOLA**

**Round-Trip Fare**
- Adult (16+) $35.95
- Child (6-15) $17.95
- Infant (0-5) free

**One-Way-Down Fare**
- Adult $17.95
- Child $8.95

Constructing the gondola was the brainchild of John Jaeggi, a mountain guide who immigrated from Switzerland to Banff in 1924. Throughout the 1930s he noticed the number of hikers on Sulphur Mountain increasing. It was such a crowd-pleasing
viewpoint that he built a teahouse on the summit in 1940, when everything — even water for tea — had to be transported there on horseback.

Jaeggi later modified a trailer so it could accommodate passengers. Piloting a tractor, he pulled the trailer up the mountain to a halfway station from which people resumed ascending on foot to the summit teahouse.

By the 1950s, Jaeggi was advancing the idea of an aerial lift. He visited Switzerland to study the options then in use. He sought investors in Canada. He petitioned the Canadian government for permission. In 1957 he returned to Switzerland seeking a major investor and found one. Back in Canada, he finally won federal approval to build. The gondola — Canada’s first — began operating in 1959.

Since then, the gondola has been upgraded in various ways many times. A complete renovation of the upper terminal is now in the planning stages. The proposed expansion and improvements include a Canadian citizenship pavilion on the rooftop observation deck. The intention is to promote it as a place where Canadian immigrants can have their citizenship ceremony.

“A number of people become Canadian citizens in Banff,” said National Park superintendent Dave McDonough. “It’s an incredibly emotional, magical moment for those people.

“I think we can forever connect them to this place,” McDonough continued. “There’s nothing more impressively Canadian than the 360-degree views of this valley.”

Crowning Sulphur Mountain with a citizenship pavilion is certainly fitting given that John Jaeggi, gondola mastermind, was himself a Canadian immigrant.

VIA FERRATA

New attraction excites adventurers like Daymon Miller

Facing ones fears is a difficult thing to do. It takes determination, dedication and a certain amount of courage. These traits are something Daymon Miller is very familiar with.

Daymon is an accomplished 2nd degree black belt, Kyokushin Martial Arts instructor and avid mountaineer. “The correlation between karate and mountaineering is actually quite similar” he says. “The first time a student walks into the ring can be a very nerve-racking thing.”

Thriving in situations like this, there is no wonder why he is so excited about the latest and greatest attraction to hit Banff: Via Ferrata!

Having trained kids and adults for years, Daymon sees Via Ferrata as a possible stepping-stone for many people interested in rock climbing. “It is basically assisted rock climbing” he says. “It allows participants to try something new in a safe and secure environment.”

Led by accredited ACMG mountain guides, participants get to scale the side of Mount Norquay starting at the top of the mountain’s North American Sightseeing Chairlift.

“The views are unparalleled from up there, and match that with the fact that you climbed up there on your own accord is pretty outstanding! It is quite possibly the most rewarding activity we have available,” says Daymon.

New for the 2014 summer season, the Via Ferrata in Banff offers an experience unlike anything else in the province. The 2-hour Explorer route is the shorter of the two, however, it packs in all of the same expectations. Whether travellers challenge the suspension bridge or the built-in ‘holds’, Via Ferrata will cater to anyone who can climb a ladder.

As mountaineering was a key component of creating tourism in The Canadian Rockies, the Via Ferrata pays homage to the area’s history. “The guides that lead these tours are the same that can lead people up Everest,” says Daymon. “They are fully trained mountain guides, similar to the ones that were bringing people up to peaks in the early part of the century.”

Connected by a safety line throughout the entire route, one can see the similarities between this new activity and the climbers of yesteryear.

“CP Rail hired mountain guides to help people reach the peaks of these mountains. I can see little difference in what they are doing at Mt. Norquay.”

Above: The Via Ferrata – the first new activity in Banff National Park in recent history and a must-add to your bucket list.
THE BANFF CENTRE

Ask residents of Banff and Canmore how they feel about the Banff centre, and you’ll hear comments such as...

“I consider the Banff Centre one of the best things about living here.”

“Many people talk about seeing the most amazing performances of their lives in some monster stadium, in a huge city, often far from where they live. The best performances I’ve ever seen have been right here, in my town, minutes from my house.”

“No way would I have had so much exposure to the arts — drama, dance, opera—anywhere else. It would have been too difficult, expensive, time consuming. The Banff Centre is the next best thing to having performances staged in my living room.”

“Locals spend so much time in the mountains, we need the Banff Centre here to keep us cultured.”

It’s difficult to fathom how anything can influence life in the Bow Valley as much as the tumultuous topography does, but the Banff Centre makes a valiant attempt. Like an iceberg, it appears physically unimposing but has startling depth and breadth.

The Banff Centre calls itself “the largest arts and creativity incubator on the planet.” Each year, more than 8,000 artists, leaders and researchers from around the world participate in the Centre’s programs, which is why it can truthfully claim, “Art and ideas are born here every day.”

A FEW OF THE CENTRE’S OTHER STATISTICS...

- 450+ original performances, concerts, and exhibitions annually
- $3.46 million in scholarships, support, and financial aid provided annually
- 21,500+ attendance at the Banff Summer Arts Festival
- 17,000+ attendance at the Banff Mountain Festivals
- 81,000+ total annual attendance at Banff Centre events
- 330,000+ attendance in 40 countries for the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour

Conferences and leadership programs at the Banff Centre pollinate the world with inspiration, creativity and knowledge — the raw materials necessary to initiate change, mine potential, and solve problems.

But the Banff Centre’s white-hot, pulsating core burns on high-octane artistry. And it’s the arts, especially the performing arts, that come to mind when locals think of the Banff Centre. Because when the Centre commissions, supports and produces new creative works for the international stage, it first presents them here, on its own stages.

ABOVE: BANFF INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP IN JAZZ AND CREATIVE MUSIC 2013 (PHOTO COURTESY THE BANFF CENTRE)

LUMINARIES WHO’VE PERFORMED AND/OR TAUGHT AT THE BANFF CENTRE INCLUDE...

- Vijay Iyer, pianist/composer
- Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter/composer/music educator
- Esperanza Spalding, jass bassist/cellist/singer
- Chucho Valdes, pianist/band leader/composer/arranger
- Dave Douglas, trumpeter/composer
- Le Ballets Jazz de Montréal, jazz dance company
- Tracey Dahl, soprano
- Measha Brueggergosman, soprano
- Richard Margison, tenor
- Ben Heppner, tenor
- Aldo Parisot, cellist
- Michael Kim, pianist
- Jon Kimura Parker, pianist
- Shauna Rolston, cellist
- R. Murray Schafer, composer/music educator
- Krzysztof Penderecki, composer/conductor
- Joni Mitchell, singer/songwriter/painter
- Mikhail Baryshnikov, dancer/choreographer/actor
- Aszure Barton, choreographer/dancer
- Oliver Stone, screenwriter/film director
- W.O Mitchell, writer/broadcaster
- Michael Ignatieff, writer/historian/broadcaster
- Jane Urquhart, novelist/poet
Residents of Banff, Canmore, and even Calgary, are aware that a river of superstar talent flows through the Banff Centre, and they take advantage of it. They fill the seats at the intimate theatres and marvel at their good fortune, especially when they step outside during an intermission and look up at the town’s guardian peaks.

Few visitors, however, attend a Banff Centre performance, because almost none of the three-million-plus people who pass through Banff National Park annually are aware the Centre exists.

The Centre’s obscurity among visitors is partly due to its secluded location: near the edge of town, on the forested skirt of Tunnel Mountain. This will change, however, if the Centre continues on its current trajectory, propelled by the vision of President Jeff Melanson.

Previously with Canada’s National Ballet School in Toronto, Melanson accepted the top job at the Centre in 2012. Intending to innovate rather than caretake, he arrived with ambitious plans.

Melanson’s goals include radio stations, a TV channel, a publishing venture, more website offerings, and—perhaps by Canada’s 150th anniversary in 2017—moving the performance spaces into downtown Banff, opening new venues for the Centre, and giving the town an architectural boost and a shot of cultural adrenalin.

The billion-dollar plan—intended to make the Banff Centre as visible as it deserves to be — includes an array of new facilities: a Mountain Science & Culture Pavilion, a 300-seat theatre, a 1,000-seat theatre, a small, club-like space, and a downtown, visual- and digital-arts gallery.

“What it would do is take all of our presenting activity and make it really, really accessible to the public,” said Melanson. “It’s a game-changing project, because suddenly we have something of real architectural heft in Banff,” says Melanson.

Davos, Switzerland is the model Melanson has in mind. Though its population is comparable to Banff’s, it’s renowned as the site of the annual World Economic Forum. Can Banff be to the arts what Davos is to economics? That’s the flight path Melanson has charted.

Meanwhile, one of the first things any Banff visitor should ask is, “What’s on at the Banff Centre?” Visit www.banffcentre.ca to view the Centre’s monthly events calendars.

BANFF JAZZ

3 weeks May – June Current and future stars of jazz. Signature concerts with all-star faculty. Free performances. Late-night jams.

BANFF CHILDREN’S FESTIVAL

May long weekend Bouncy castles, crafts, stories, magical shows. Free, family swim. Barbecue lunch.

BANFF SUMMER ARTS FESTIVAL

Every summer Concerts, performances, art walks, exhibitions, film screenings, readings, new-media events.
Everything from the intimate to the spectacular.

BANFF MOUNTAIN FILM AND BOOK FESTIVAL

Late-October to early-November International competition for films and books about mountain culture, sports, and environment. Speakers, readings, seminars. Launched in 1976. Each year, the “Best of Banff” film tours the world.

WORDFEST

October The Banff-Calgary International Writers Festival is Alberta’s premier literary event and the third-largest festival of its kind in Canada.

MUSIC & SOUND CONCERT SERIES

Fall — October to December Winter — January to March Concerts featuring the Banff Centre’s international, artist-in-residence musicians.

BANFF INTERNATIONAL STRING QUARTET COMPETITION

Triennial The world’s most talented, young, string quartets perform in public for a distinguished jury.

EXHIBITIONS

The Walter Phillips Gallery is home to stimulating, contemporary art exhibits. Exhibitions curated by the Banff Centre’s Visual Arts departments are presented in the west lobby of the Eric Harvie Theatre, and in the gallery at Glyde Hall. Winners of the Banff Mountain Photography Competition are displayed in the Sally Borden Building.
Who is Banff?

Though Banff is sufficiently opulent that you can probe the limits of your platinum credit card here, the most popular activity is free: probing the opulent wilderness and, in the process, challenging your limits as an outdoor athlete.

For the most part, it’s a town where hiking boots are welcome attire. Where wealth is not conspicuous, but prowess on the slopes and at the crags is intimidatingly so. Chat up the locals, and you’ll find many are here for the same reasons you’re drawn to Banff’s real-estate ads. Take Albert Moser, for example.

Since 1980, Albert has been the proprietor of Banff’s exquisite French restaurant: Le Beaujolais. Every dish on his traditional French menu would please a sophisticated Parisian. So why is he here rather than in San Francisco or New York where his talent would earn him greater fame and fortune?

Albert loves the mountains. That’s not to say he gazes out the window at them. Albert climbs them, as often as he can, with the same verve and joy that he runs his restaurant. So do many of his staff. So do all the other mountain-mad locals.

Typically, people drift through life wherever the gravitational pull of circumstances keeps them in orbit between employment, family and friends. Banff is one of those rare places where a high percentage of the residents came — intentionally — from elsewhere.

They chose to live in Banff, then reshuffled their lives to make it possible. The town and its wilderness setting are intrinsic to who they are. And it shows. They live exuberantly. To a great degree, this exuberance defines Banff.
WHAT IS BANFF?

Though it has all the amenities, Banff is smaller, more intimate than a city.

And while it looks and feels like a village, it’s quite a bit more than that. You can be driving down Banff Avenue 90 minutes after accelerating out of Calgary, so it’s certainly not remote. Yet Banff, because it’s surrounded by a vast wilderness, looks and feels tranquilly distant from the rest of civilization.

Banff is very welcoming. More than three million people visit Banff National Park each year, and all but an unlucky few pass through the park’s namesake town. Yet Banff is also exclusive. Its population totals only 8,244 because of a need-to-reside law allowing you to live there only if you’re employed there. Mentally, you can put Banff in a tidy, little box, but it will always wiggle out. Rather than categorize it, better to appreciate its unique, multi-faceted personality.

"Banff is where the world of work and bills and deadlines falls away and I get to be the part of me I like best. Tweet The me that feels like a spirited, carefree, mountain wild-child." — Amber Karlsson

"Actually, I find the mountains intimidating. They’re stunning, but they affect me plenty just looking at them. I don’t have any need to be on top of them. I’m an artist, from New York. I stayed at the Banff Centre as an artist in residence. And for me, those overwhelming mountains were a huge inspiration. Until Banff, I’d never been anywhere that the scenery was such a dominant, ever-present force. It reached right into me and rearranged my thoughts and feelings about my work.” — Barbara Bresselsmith

"For me, Banff is home. I’ve never lived there and probably never will. But I’m a mountaineer, the Canadian Rockies are my home range, Banff Park is where I’ve done my most challenging and rewarding climbs, and the town of Banff is, essentially, the park’s capitol. Every time I drive into Banff, I stare up at Mount Rundle in awe. And every time I’m on Banff Avenue, I look up at Cascade Mountain, and I feel a little disbelief: Is this place real, or am I imagining it? I guess that explains it. If I could create the perfect town, in the perfect setting, I’d create Banff. It’s the home I always return to in my mind and, I guess, in my heart. It’s not where I reside, but it seems like my true home. I feel most excited to be alive when I’m somewhere near Banff.” — Oliver Levin

WHY SHOULD YOU VISIT BANFF?

The cliffs are sheer and soaring. The summits sharp and serrated. And there seems no end to their spiky multitude.

From a high vantage in Banff National Park, the horizon resembles a shark’s mouth: row upon row of acute incisors. These are the Canadian Rockies, guardians of an immense wilderness designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its “outstanding universal value,” “superlative natural phenomena,” and “exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.”

The heart of the range — an area larger than each of several American states — is protected by six contiguous national and provincial parks, where wolves, bears, elk, deer, caribou, bighorn sheep, mountain goats and their alpine brethren outnumber human residents.

Glaciers tumble down the mountainsides. Untamed rivers careen into the valleys. You could trek into this vastness and be swallowed by it, evading human contact for weeks. Or you could book an elegant room in a luxurious castle. Savour French cuisine, or Belgian chocolates. Sip a bottle of 1959 Chateau Haut Brion Premier Grand Cru. Indulge in exotic spa treatments.

You could also take your seat just a few feet from the stage in a venue smaller than some palatial homes and enjoy a Wynton Marsalis jazz concert, a Paul Taylor Dance Company performance, or a presentation by Dr. Jane Goodall.

That’s Banff. The mountains are cold, hard and unforgiving. But the town has pastry chefs, jewelry stores, and limousines. It makes for a galvanizing vacation — summer or winter. So, while the question Why Banff? has many answers, an important one to consider when planning your vacation is this...

Because only here might your après-aventure pleasures include admiring a $1700 cardigan at the Qiviuk – Jacques Cartier store, then glancing out the window to see a bull elk the size of a Ford pickup ambling down the street.
WHEN SHOULD YOU VISIT BANFF?

The easy answer is, whenever you want.

Peruse our list of Things to Do in Banff. You’ll see this is a genuine, year-round destination. But every Banffophile has a personal preference. Just within the Leavetown staff, we have votes for every season:

“Spring is my favourite season in Banff. Time to peel off all the warm layers, paint my toes, and start wearing sandals. People are cruising around on bikes and excited about camping and hiking. The trees turn green, flowers blossom, animals come out, and birds are chirping. Days are getting longer. Evenings are spent on patios. [Even if it’s not quite warm enough, it feels great after a long winter!] The smell of spring in the air motivates everyone to get out and enjoy all the outdoor activities Banff offers.”
— Gaylene Gomez Leavetown Destination Expert

“Summer is an amazing time of year in Banff. Love the long days & rich colours. Seems like summer here last forever. All that time allows me to go on really big dayhikes, high into the mountains. Taking in the mountain vistas, walking through a huge, open meadow full of alpine flowers, with the warm sun on my back. That’s one of my favourite activities here, and it’s only possible in summer.”
— Moya Kelly Leavetown Destination Expert

“I love fall in Banff. Summer is always so frenetic with activities and visitors that fall gives me permission to relax and take life a little easier. My two little dogs get me out walking the trails every day, so I notice the fresh mountain air becoming crisp again, and the bursts of yellow all over the slopes as the larch, birch and poplar trees change color. It’s a great excuse to bundle up in my fleece and head outside to enjoy the fantastic mountain vistas, which I think are at their most majestic when highlighted by the first hints of snow. My favourite hike in the fall is the easy climb from Moraine Lake to Larch Valley, where the trees turn a beautiful shade of gold right before dropping their needles. With the famous Ten Peaks and the azure water of Moraine Lake, this could be the most beautiful place on earth.”
— Jules Tough Leavetown Chief Finance & Operations Officer

“Coming from Quebec and being an avid skier, I always appreciate the excellent snow, and long ski season at the Big 3 ski hills: Lake Louise, Sunshine and Norquay. And I love the deep-powder snow. I call it hero snow, because you feel like a hero skiing in such forgiving conditions. In Banff, a day on the slopes is always a joy! I’m also excited about backcountry skiing, using skins. It’s my new winter activity. There’s nothing like getting into remote, picturesque backcountry in winter.

Some of the best trails and terrain are just beyond our doorstep, in Kananaskis Country.”
— Jay Gould Leavetown Destination Expert

“I guess because I’m originally from Australia, where we don’t have the dramatic changes of season, that’s what I love most about Banff weather. But my favourite season here is spring. After the black-and-white softness of winter, everything explodes back into colour and life. Spring in Banff gives a sense of reawakening and excitement of warmer days to come.” — Melissa Callaghan Leavetown Destination Expert

“Fall is special in Banff. The sky turns deep blue, the air is crisp, the trees turn a gorgeous yellow and orange. Tweet As an avid pilot, this is one of the best seasons for flying and looking down on the the colours changing across the landscape. Fall is also a shoulder season in the rocky mountains, so it’s a quieter time to do one of my favorite mountain biking trails: along Lake Minnewanka. And fall is festival time here, which is exciting. That’s when we have the Highland Games in Canmore, the Banff Mountain Film Festival, and the Festival of Eagles.” — Mike Liverton Owner, Leavetown

WHERE IS BANFF?

The town of Banff is in the lower right-hand corner of Banff National Park, which is in the lower left-hand corner of the province of Alberta, which is near the lower left-hand corner of Canada.

By car, Banff is 850 km (528 mi) — a long day’s drive — inland from the Pacific Ocean, at Vancouver, British Columbia. It’s 400 km (250 mi) southwest of Edmonton, via Jasper and the Icefields Parkway. And it’s 128 km (80 mi) west of Calgary. Flight times to Calgary International Airport (YYC) are 80
minutes from Vancouver (YVR), three hours from Los Angeles (LAX), and less than four hours from Chicago (ORD).

Most people reach Banff by driving the Trans-Canada (Hwy 1) from Calgary, where 1.2 million people live near the Bow River. Just 45-minutes beyond the city limits, the prairie abruptly ends as you pierce a wall between worlds: the Canadian Rockies.

Within an hour you’ll pass Canmore — gritty coal-mining hamlet turned contemporary resort village. You’ll glimpse it, however, only if you tear your gaze from the towering peaks that gird the Bow River Valley. Just beyond Canmore, enter Banff National Park. And fifteen minutes after passing the park’s east gate, you’ll reach latitude 51° 10′ 39″ N, longitude 115° 34′ 24″ W. Welcome to Banff, highest community in Canada: elevation 1383 m (4537 ft).

“How did you manage to live in Banff?”

It’s a testament to the town’s unique magnetism that many people, soon after arriving in Banff for the first time, find themselves longing to live here, and wondering how it might be possible.

For most, the flame of longing dwindles to embers of fantasy that forever glow and flicker but never spark them to actually move. A surprising number, however, find a way to reside in or near Banff and proudly say, “I live here.”

Some are young. Many are Quebecois, Aussie, Kiwi, or Japanese. Their energy, determination and flexibility earn them a trophy year working in Banff. With the enthusiasm born of gratitude, they work the ground-floor jobs necessary to keep a resort town thrumming. They contribute to Banff’s international tang.

Others were a bit older when they visited Banff and found it kindled an epiphany. They were living established, complex lives elsewhere, so uprooting and moving here was a monumental task. But they were so moved by the mountains, they couldn’t resist. And they’ve remained here ever since.

So, when you meet a local, ask “How did you manage to live in Banff?” You can expect an inspiring glimpse into someone who’s lived an exceptionally ardent life. For example...

MOVED BY THE MOUNTAINS

Shortly after graduating with a master’s degree in management and marketing, Lukas Prochazka left his home in the Czech Republic and landed entry-level tourism jobs at Yellowstone and Grand Canyon national parks, in the U.S.

“Young people working in places like that love the outdoors,” Lukas explained. “They’re constantly talking about the best places for hiking and climbing. When I was there, everyone was talking about Banff. From that, I decided I wanted to live in Banff.

“I didn’t choose Canada as a country,” Lukas continued. “I chose Banff specifically, because of everything I’d heard about it. I wanted to live in a national park, in the mountains. And I was willing to do almost anything to make that happen.

“So after going through the immigration process in the Czech Republic, I flew from Prague to Calgary, went directly to Banff, and started looking for work. I was 27 years old.

“I got a job as a bellman. I parked cars and carried people’s luggage. And I read the book Don’t Waste Your Time in the Canadian Rockies, the Opinionated Hiking Guide, by Kathy and Craig Copeland. In my first two years in Banff, I hiked nearly all the Premier and Outstanding trails in that book. And I loved living in Banff.

“As of last week, I’m a Canadian citizen. I have the management job I wanted, with Banff Lake Louise Tourism. I’m promoting the place I love as a vacation destination, sharing my passion for this place with people from around the world. And I get to be in the mountains all the time. I’ve probably done more than 250 hikes and scrambles here.”

New Canadian citizens are welcome to bring their “holy book of choice” to the citizenship ceremony. A photo of Lukas at his ceremony shows him smiling, taking the Oath of Citizenship, holding a copy of Scrambles in the Canadian Rockies, by Alan Kane.

HOLIDAY ON HORSEBACK

How Julie Canning helps travellers ‘giddy up’

It’s been a remarkable journey for Holiday on Horseback co-owner Julie Canning. After arriving in Banff 14 years ago, she served as the executive director of the Association for Mountain Parks Protection and Enjoyment until becoming the president and CEO of Banff Lake Louise Tourism in 2003. Now, she has embarked on a new adventure as the co-owner and operating partner of Holiday on Horseback.

“Getting into tourism actually wasn’t intentional for me. It was something that evolved over time, but really was a natural fit,” said Canning. “I’ve always been a strong believer in the
travel industry. I think it’s important for people to experience different cultures. To me, it’s a way to foster understanding of our fellow humans.”

That’s why she’s thrilled to now be part of Holiday on Horseback, which has been taking visitors deep into the backcountry of Banff National Park for 52 years. Travellers can stay at the luxurious Sundance and Halfway Lodges or they can venture off-the-beaten path. Cookouts, sleigh rides and carriage rides can also be on the agenda.

"We’re a company that embodies the spirit of the Wild West. And for me, that means no two days are ever the same. It’s pretty fun to wake up in the morning and think: giddy up! Let’s go!," said Canning.

"Today I’m going to ride out into the backcountry as part of my work. That’s pretty cool."

Canning’s enthusiasm for her new role at Holiday on Horseback is clear. And since she’s been competing in horses for the last 10 years, this was the ultimate opportunity for her to really tap into what she loves to do.

Travellers who explore Banff National Park on horseback get a unique opportunity to experience the raw beauty of the park. Riding allows visitors to more easily spot wildlife while accessing areas they might otherwise not have a chance to see.

It’s also a way to explore the Rocky Mountains in a manner that captures the pioneer spirit of the area. Many of the first settlers in what’s now Banff National Park ventured through the area on horseback, which was the most efficient way to travel at the time.

But what was a vital mode of transportation back then has become an exciting trip for travellers today. And Canning is proud to be able to help others experience it.
The day before these words were written, a Canmore resident went for a walk and saw a herd of elk swimming across the river that flows through town.


Her short video of these splendid creatures is a succinct, eloquent summary of why Canmore is extraordinary. Here, you’re surrounded by forests and peaks that stretch far beyond sight and remain undeveloped, thanks to national- and provincial-park protection.

You become accustomed to wild animals sharing the town with you. Sometimes entire herds of them, such as those swimming elk. You realize “resident” applies to them as much as it does to you. You step out of a grocery store or bank in downtown Canmore, you look up, and — even if you’ve lived here all your life — you gasp at the perpetually astonishing sight of mountains soaring skyward from the backyards of homes.

You step into any of several art galleries on Canmore’s Main Street, and you marvel at the works of local artists whose brushes seem to have been guided by the hand of Nature herself. You walk past the yoga studio on Main Street, and you glimpse people doing tadasana (mountain pose) while gazing calmly through windows granting them an inspiring view of the very summits whose strength and endurance they’re modeling.

You walk a single block beyond Main Street, and you reach the river where those elk were swimming. A river whose birthplace — a sprawling, glacier-tentacled icefield — is but a couple-hour drive away. You walk a little farther, and trails beckon you into the forest, inviting you to ascend the slopes of the mountains that, shortly before, you were staring up at in awe. Elsewhere, certainly in most big cities, people live as if nature were an archaic, irrelevant abstraction. In Canmore, nature prevails.

They chose to live in Banff, then reshuffled their lives to make it possible. The town and its wilderness setting are intrinsic to who they are. And it shows. They live exuberantly. To a great degree, this exuberance defines Banff.
Jeff Mah is also a Canmore artist. His art is teaching. His medium is the human body. He’s a nationally-recognized yoga instructor, and the owner of the Canmore Yoga Lounge, on Main Street (www.theyogalounge.ca). We asked him how the town’s mountainous nature influences life here.

“In Canmore, people really appreciate being in a beautiful mountain environment,” said Jeff. “They moved here because of it. They came with the conscious intention of really living a mountain life: on their bikes, on their skis, in their hiking boots. And they want to come home from these pursuits and still be in the mountains, able to look up, see them, feel them.

“A strong element of Canmore culture today sprang from the 1988 Olympics, when the nordic-skiing events were held here, at the Canmore Nordic Centre,” Jeff continued. “Ever since, a huge percentage of Canada’s winter Olympic athletes have lived and trained here. Seeing all these super-fit people inspires the rest of us. It’s infectious.

“Other towns are certainly influenced by their mountain environments, but Canmore’s unusual. Here, we don’t have a world-class downhill ski area. We have a world-class cross-country ski area.

“Many downhill ski-resort towns, like Whistler, indulge in a flashy, hedonistic atmosphere. The ethos of cross-country skiing is the opposite. It’s much more contemplative. More real. More honest. You go to Whistler to party. You come to Canmore to live.

“Another way to gauge the presence of nature in Canmore is through the reactions of first-time visitors — people who come here from places where nature is trussed and muzzled.
Gord Stermann has been welcoming visitors here since 1987. He owns and runs White Mountain Adventures, which offers guided hiking, heli-hiking, snowshoeing, ice walking, mountain biking, road biking, wildlife viewing, and more [www.white-mountainadventures.com].

“People are blown away by the raw, physical beauty of this place,” said Gord. “It’s beyond anything most of them have ever seen. They realize this is as amazing as it gets.

“The entire time they’re here, many of them just can’t get over what they’re witnessing. It’s a lot like staring into the Grand Canyon for the first time. There’s so much, it’s so overwhelming, they can’t get their heads around it.

“I’ve had people come here, even from beautiful places like Washington state, and within days they’re saying, ‘Oh, I want to live here. I have to live here. I’m going to become a Canadian citizen.’

“We recently hosted a group of Germans on a winter-activity program,” said Gord. “These were very experienced hikers, people who’d hiked in the Alps. On their first day here — an easy, introductory day — we took them on a four-hour hike just within and around Canmore, on all the paths and trails we have here. And they absolutely loved it. They were thrilled.

“I understand why,” Gord concluded. “because I still vividly remember how I reacted shortly after I arrived here more than 30 years ago.

“It was late in the evening, and I walked down to the engine bridge, the pedestrian-only bridge, over the Bow River. I was looking up at the mountains, staring into that deep, deep, deep blue just before the sky turns black above the peaks.

“I thought to myself, ‘Okay, this place is incredible. I’m staying.’”

CANMORE NORDIC CENTRE - WORLD CLASS CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

Cross-Country Skiing

Every four years, when the Winter Olympic Games are broadcast on TV, hundreds of millions of viewers watch spandex-clad skiers swiftly snake through snowy forest like a human slinky.

In 1988, when Calgary was the Olympic city, the sleek skiers who held the world’s gaze were gliding the trails of the Canmore Nordic Centre. Witnessing the event in person that year was Sara Renner, a twelve-year-old Canadian.

In 2006, Renner and teammate Beckie Scott won the silver medal in the women’s team-sprint event at the Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy. That same year, Chandra Crawford — in her rookie season on the Canadian national team — won the gold medal in the women’s 1.1-kilometre cross-country sprint.

If you combined the Olympic and World Cup medals these women have won, they’d fill a satchel that would strain your arm. All three women trained in Canmore for years, continue to call the town home, and often ski at the Nordic Centre. Perhaps you’ll see one of them while you’re there.

They can be difficult to identify, however, because many real-life superhero action figures will likely be whooshing past you in a blur. Canmore is home to most of Canada’s best cross-country and biathlon skiers. They train at the Nordic Centre. And all the world’s best cross-country skiers occasionally convene at the Centre, because World Cup Races have been commonplace here since 2005.

That’s the year extensive re-development prepared the Centre for future, international events and made it one of the most desirable, enjoyable, and inspiring places to cross-country ski on our planet. Not just for elite skiers. For everyone.

That’s as is it should be, given the Centre is actually a public park. Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park is its full name [www.albertaparks.ca/canmore-nordic-centre]. It offers more than 60 kilometres of trail, groomed and track set to accommodate all levels of classic and skate skiing. It has snowmaking capability on 20 kilometres of strenuous, competition trail. And it keeps 6.5 kilometres of trail illuminated nightly until 9 p.m.

The Centre’s day lodge, open daily 9 a.m to 5:30 p.m., does far more than sell passes, answer questions, and provide washrooms. It has lockers, showers, a café, and a spacious lounge warmed by a crackling fire. Next to the day lodge, you’ll find Trail Sports [www.trailsports.ab.ca], where you can rent skis, purchase clothing and equipment, and arrange for expert instruction or guiding.

Ski season lasts a full six months at the Centre, usually mid-October through April. Snow farming helps maintain the fall and spring snow base. It involves gathering snow into a huge pile, keeping it covered with saw dust to minimize summer melt, then clearing the saw dust and redistributing the snow on the trails.

“Six-month ski season” also means “six-month fatbike season,” because the Canmore Nordic Centre was one of the first cross-country ski areas in the world to recognize fatbiking as a sport, establish a code of conduct for winter cycling, and welcome fatbikes — those increasingly popular mountain bikes outfitted with enormous tires and capable of negotiating snow.
Simpson lives within view of the Centre and frequently pedals there himself.

"From the cycling perspective, it’s a Mecca," Simpson said. "Visitors rave about how lucky we are to have this in Canmore."

"There are enough trails here that you can ride every day for a week and not repeat the same trail over and over. People can’t believe how much choice there is here. It’s so extensive, everyone seems to have their own routes and loops that they love and share with each other. Each time you go, you can create your own adventure.

"And you always know what you’re getting into," Simpson continued. "That’s rare in cross-country mountain biking. We expect it in downhill skiing. Ski resorts have a skill-based ranking system: green, blue, black. Well, the Nordic Centre offers that to cyclists: trails that are signed, named and rated.

"A family can come here, and maybe dad will ride a green trail with the youngest child, and mom will ride a blue trail with the older kid. Or friends can split up, with stronger riders going for more challenge, and others taking it easier.

"At most mountain-biking areas, people are kind of wandering into an abyss," Simpson explained. "The trails are unsigned, so they come back saying, ‘I don’t know if I found that trail you told me to ride. I ended up on all this double track, and…’

"Here, they come back saying, ‘Yeah! I found that trail you recommend, the one called Killer Bees, and I turned right at that log, just like you said, and it was amazing!’

"Elsewhere, when you recommend a mountain-biking trail to someone, you’re shoe-horning them into an experience that might be way too much for them, or not enough," Simpson said. "You’re hoping it’ll be okay, and praying they can find their way back.

CANMORE NORDIC CENTRE WINTER TRAIL MAP:
http://www.albertaparks.ca/media/476736/cnc_brochure_winter_2010.pdf

CANMORE NORDIC CENTRE TRAIL GROOMING REPORT:
http://www.albertaparks.ca/media/476736/cnc_brochure_winter_2010.pdf

CANMORE NORDIC CENTRE WEBCAM:
http://www.canmorealberta.com/webcams/canmore-nordic-centre

MOUNTAIN BIKING

By May, the Nordic Centre snowpack is melting rapidly.

The sea of snow retreats, leaving shrinking islands of white. The forest floor reappears, dries, and hardens. Mountain bikers eagerly eye these changes until, suddenly, it’s open season for cyclists.

Cranking furiously, they fan out across the Centre, thrilled to once again be riding there. And not just riding, but exploring, because the Centre’s 60-kilometre mountain-biking trail system is among North America’s longest. It’s also one of the best maintained and signed, as well as most varied and scenic.

Kevin Simpson, owner of Rebound Cycling [www.reboundcycle.com] in Canmore, fully appreciates the Nordic Centre. His business supports and relies on it. He often urges people to ride at the Centre, and later witnesses their wild-eyed enthusiasm. Plus,
“Here, that’s not an issue. They can start on a blue trail and soon have the chance to ease off onto a green trail, or pump it up another level on a black trail.”

Simpson, better than most, knows how unusual the Nordic Centre is, because he travels throughout North America as a consultant to other bike shops.

“I always try to ride in the towns I visit,” he said, “but I usually spend a lot of time and energy just figuring out where the trail is that someone’s sent me to. Even after finding it, I often wonder along the way if I’m still on it. It’s a route-finding mission. The riding experience takes a back seat to navigating.

“At the Nordic Centre, you always know you’re in the right place. You really can’t make a mistake here. So your entire ride, every pedal stroke, is a joy.

“Maintenance is another thing that keeps the riding fun at the Nordic Centre,” Simpson elaborated. “There’s an ongoing commitment to cycling here. This is one of the few places I know of that embrace mountain biking so completely that they have people working every day to ensure high-quality user experience.

“So I see lots of people who come back from riding here for the first time and say, ‘Was that really supposed to be free? Because I didn’t pay anyone. How can all those trails be maintained and signed... and free?’”

CREATING REMARKABLE MEMORIES, ONE TOUR AT A TIME

Providing travellers with thrilling – even life-changing – experiences is just part of the job for Jo-Anne Kobelt.

As the manager of tourism operations for the Canmore-based Alpine Helicopters, she gets to see the awe-struck look on passengers’ faces once they’ve returned from a high-altitude tour of the Rocky Mountains.

“We had a lady come in the other day and say this wasn’t the highlight of my trip, it was the highlight of my life,” said Jo-Anne. “I love being able to provide those kind of memories for people.”

A helicopter tour allows travellers to see majestic places like the Three Sisters Peaks, Mount Assiniboine Glacier and Marvel Pass. Gazing out at all this pristine beauty is often a profound experience for many passengers.

ABOVE: EXPLORING THE VAST TERRAIN WITH ALPINE HELICOPTERS

But there’s one group of visitors in particular that Jo-Anne will never forget.

In 2010, Alpine Helicopters had the privilege of flying Deanna and James Henderson to the top of Mount Charles Stewart just north of Canmore, where the young couple held their wedding ceremony amid three feet of freshly fallen snow.

James died just a few days later, finally succumbing to cancer. Their mountain wedding ceremony provided the couple with a spectacular way to celebrate their love, knowing that James’ time was limited.

About a year later, Deanna flew again with Alpine Helicopters. This time to spread James’ ashes. Jo-Anne still keeps the thank-you card she received from Deanna on her desk. It serves as a reminder of the raw and powerful experience that the Rocky Mountains can provide.

In fact, Jo-Anne often sees the deep emotional impact that flying through this spellbinding terrain has on people.

"The vastness of this mountain range is pretty amazing. We get a lot of clients who come back in tears,” she said. “They’re so overwhelmed by what they’ve seen.”

Most of the people who book a tour with Alpine Helicopters are veteran travellers who have already seen their share of stunning scenery during past trips. But exploring the Rockies from above is completely different, said Jo-Anne.

While some passengers are excited and love to pepper the pilot with questions as they stare wide-eyed out the window, others are completely silent – left speechless by the hypnotic beauty that surrounds them.

And when the helicopter lands, and the travellers leave with looks of amazement on their smiling faces, Jo-Anne is reminded just how special her job really is.
From Banff townsite, drive northwest on the Trans-Canada. In about 45 minutes, you’ll reach Lake Louise village. After detouring to see the actual Lake Louise — an astonishing sight that for many is the Canadian Rockies — proceed north onto the Icefields Parkway.

Seriously. Do it. If you’re this close, continuing up the Parkway is a citizen-of-planet-Earth requirement. Failure to comply is tantamount to saying “I’ve no interest in witnessing the scenic equivalent of Egypt’s Pyramids, Arizona’s Grand Canyon, or China’s Great Wall.”

The 230-kilometre [143-mile] Parkway follows the spine of the Canadian Rocky Mountains. It links Banff National Park with Jasper National Park. Views of lakes, rivers, cascades, forests, glaciers and peaks are nonstop. If you turned off every time you felt the urge to gawk, the drive would take days.

There are, however, four places where apathy fines should be imposed on those who don’t get out of their cars to take a closer look: Bow Lake, Peyto Lake, the Athabasca Glacier (a tongue of the massive Columbia Icefield), Sunwapta Falls, and Athabasca Falls.

After admiring the wilderness and motoring through it, your journey ends at an island of civilization: Jasper townsite, near the top of Alberta’s ragged, lower-left edge, in the middle of Jasper National Park. Ringed by more than a dozen lakes, near the confluence of the Miette and Athabasca rivers, at the base of the Colin, Maligne, Trident, and Victoria Cross ranges, the town of Jasper presides over the serene, Athabasca River Valley.
The town is small, comprising only 5,236 residents, and will remain small, because it governs itself with remarkable self-restraint. The townspeople control municipal matters. The federal Department of Canadian Heritage oversees land-use planning and environmental issues. Plus it has a “need to reside” policy: to live there, you must work there.

So what began as a frontier outpost remains one — not for lack of opportunity, but out of reverence toward its surroundings. Viewed from this perspective, Jasper is a paragon of civic humility.

Still, there are numerous restaurants, hotels, shops — everything travelers need, and much of what they might want. There’s even a trace of luxury. And what Jasper doesn’t have, you won’t miss. You’ll be grateful it’s not there. No glitz. No hype. No buzz. No multi-story buildings to block your view. No designer-label boutiques to distract your attention. No tourist throngs to raise your blood pressure. Because Jasper has foresworn the “growth at any cost” mentality that afflicts most of North America.

Instead, it has peace, contentment, authenticity, which are deeply endearing to visitors in search of the genuine Canadian Rockies and can be powerfully inspiring to anyone searching for hopeful examples in our increasingly go-go, grasping, gluttonous world. World? What world? Jasper feels far removed from all that constitutes most people’s everyday worlds. No wonder. The Chiclet-size town is engulfed by the largest, most northerly, most remote park in the Canadian Rockies.

Jasper Park, comprising 10,878 square kilometres (4,200 square miles), attracts fewer than two million visitors each year, while Banff Park, comprising 6,641 square kilometres (2,564 square miles), attracts more than three million annually. Thus most of Jasper Park’s 100 backcountry campgrounds and 1200 kilometres (660 miles) of hiking trails are generally tranquil.
You prefer scalding-hot water? Head to Miette Hot Springs, where the 54°C (130°F) outdoor pool feels as if it could melt your bones, so it will certainly soothe your weary muscles and joints. From the north end of Jasper townsite, drive north on Highway 16 for 42 kilometres (26 miles). Turn right onto Miette Hot Springs Road and follow it 17 kilometres (10.5 miles) to the road’s end parking lot.

Now here’s a Jasper legend on which your thoughts can drift away while the rest of you is floating dreamily at Annette Lake or Miette Hot Springs. Due to its sprawling size and wilderness integrity, Jasper Park ranks among the world’s great protected ecosystems. Large mammals — elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, caribou — roam freely here, which ensures a thriving population of carnivores: bears, mountain lions, wolves and… the elusive bigfoot?

English-Canadian explorer David Thompson was the first European to visit the area where Jasper townsite was eventually founded. Known to natives as “Stargazer,” he passed through in 1810 on his historic mapping expedition to the Pacific Ocean via Athabasca Pass.

It was here that Thompson saw the footprint of a massive animal that he was unable to identify. He wrote in his journal, “The sight of the track of that large beast staggered me.” That proves nothing, of course. But Thompson was among the world’s most knowledgeable and experienced explorers, so it does give one pause.

Reports of giant apes roaming North American forests have long persisted. The Nuxalk Indians of present-day Bella Coola, B.C., called the creature “boq.” Natives on Vancouver Island called it “matlox.” The Coast Salish called it “sésqec,” which is the closest etymological root of “sasquatch.”

Whether or not Jasper has ever been home to the towering bipedal hominoid referred to as Gigantopithecus blacki remains a mystery. What is evident to anyone who’s probed the park’s backcountry, however, is that it’s sufficiently big and untamed that it feels like it could accommodate many such creatures.

Given how far humanity has distanced itself from the natural world, that’s a good feeling.

ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

Endless Roadside Beauty

This is the stuff that postcards are made of. Stunning vistas of crag, forest and glacier surround the 232-kilometre Icefields Parkway as it winds through the heart of the Canadian Rocky Mountains. There are few places on Earth where you can soak up so much natural beauty from the comfort of your car.

Sparkling blue lakes, thunderous waterfalls and a ceaseless horizon of sky-piercing mountains await drivers along every twist, turn and rest-stop along this legendary road. Travelling this route also makes spotting bighorn sheep, elk, bears and other wildlife surprisingly easy.

The sights along the Icefields Parkway, which stretches from Lake Louise to the town of Jasper, are endless: here are a few of the must-see attractions every driver should pull over for.

Peyto Lake Viewpoint: kilometre 40

The scenery here seems almost too beautiful to be real. Heading north on the Icefields Parkway, just past Lake Louise, travellers can take in incomparable views of Peyto Lake at the Bow Summit Pass. This might be the most photographed vista along the entire Parkway.

This glacier-fed lake shines emerald green during the summer due to the minerals that seep into the water. But these views are equally as enchanting in the cooler months, when the lake turns a sparkling blue that pops against the dark green of the surrounding forest.

Mistaya Canyon: kilometre 71

A quick hike from the edge of the Parkway takes you down into Mistaya Canyon — a narrow crevice that’s been carved into limestone terrain by the surging waters of the Mistaya River.

Fascinating rock formations, such as spiraling potholes and sheer canyon walls, add to the Zen-like beauty of this spot. Find a place to perch yourself and listen to the crashing water below while soaking up the landscape. Wander upstream and the steep cliffs disappear, giving you a clear view of the roaring river.
Columbia Icefield: kilometre 127

Welcome to the Parkway’s main attraction. From the moment you step onto the massive Columbia Icefield, it feels as if you’ve just been transported to an alien world layered in crusted snow and impossibly thick ice.

The Columbia Icefield spans 325 square kilometres, making it the largest glacier in North America outside of Alaska. It’s known as the “Mother of Rivers” because as it slowly melts it contributes to important river systems such as the Athabasca, Slave, Saskatchewan and Fraser. Plus, the Columbia Icefield also feeds eight other major glaciers.

Head to the visitor’s centre first, which features an interpretive facility that serves as the starting point for icefield walks and tours.

Goat Lookout: kilometre 192

Travellers are often first lured to this highway stop-over by the panoramic views of the Athabasca Valley. But the Goat Lookout offers more than stunning scenery. Mineral deposits near the lookout attract an abundance of wildlife, especially goats and bighorn sheep. That makes this area an especially tranquil spot to stretch your legs, enjoy a picnic and watch for the Rockies’ most iconic creatures.

Athabasca Falls: kilometre 199

Fast, powerful and achingly beautiful, the Athabasca Falls is arguably one of the most popular waterfalls in Jasper National Park. And it’s located just off the Icefields Parkway. At just 75 metres tall, this is a relatively short waterfall.

But what the Athabasca Falls lack in height, it makes up for in pure force: an incredible volume of water crashes over these cliffs, carving into the quartzite and softer limestone below to create potholes and other unique rock formations.

THE FAST, POWERFUL AND BEAUTIFUL ATHABASCA FALLS

FOR ITS SHEER STRENGTH ALONE, THE ATHABASCA FALLS DESERVES A SPOT ON EVERY TRAVELLER’S ITINERARY.

This is just for starters.

The short list above only begins to delve into the array of attractions, viewpoints and hiking trails tucked along the Icefields Parkway. You could spend days exploring the natural wonders along this road.

But it isn’t the only Rocky Mountain route with mesmerizing scenery. Here are three other amazing drives in the Bow Valley that are worth making a detour for.

Tunnel Mountain Drive

This scenic five-kilometre loop begins near the Town of Banff and takes travellers past Hoodoos and sweeping valley views. The Tunnel Mountain Road has been upgraded recently, making it much smoother to drive on.

You’ll find plenty of well-marked viewing platforms that provide those picture-perfect Rocky Mountain photo-ops. For an unrivaled view of Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel and the Bow Falls, be sure to take a trip around Surprise Corner.

Bow Valley Parkway

Cruise down 51 kilometres of pure tranquility. The entire Bow Valley Parkway stays within sight of the stunning Bow River,
which twists past lush forests and rocky outcroppings. The ambience here is unspoiled and pristine, despite the steady traffic in the summer.

This road starts at Lake Louise and parallels Highway 1 before rejoining it about six kilometres west of Banff. The Bow Valley Parkway provides easy access to itinerary-topping attractions, such as Johnston Canyon, Hillsdale Meadow and Castle Mountain.

Watch for deer, elk and other wildlife while on the road or stop at one of the myriad of interpretive displays for a quick break.

According to comprehensive gate and arrival studies conducted by Parks Canada, about 90% of visitors are driving themselves around the national parks. That statistic came as a big surprise to entrepreneur Rick Bulich.

“I was shocked to see that this number was so high, says Rick. “But if you take a moment to reflect on the numbers, it actually makes perfect sense.

“Driving yourself in your own car, a rental or an RV, gives you the freedom to enjoy your sightseeing on your own schedule and to stay longer at the places you love. It also allows you the opportunity to find something unexpected.”

This inspired Bulich to develop GyPSy Guide – audio tour guide apps for scenic drives. The apps are designed for people who want enjoy the stories, tips and advice that a professionally trained tour guide uses to enrich your experience, while still allowing visitors to enjoy the freedom of independent travel.

“After you download a GyPSy Guide tour app, it uses your phone’s GPS location abilities to play the commentary automatically as you drive. It’s like listening to the radio, only this radio knows where it is and talks to you about what you are seeing.

“Visitors are thrilled to find that GyPSy Guide does not even require a network or data connection to tour. It only uses GPS signal, and GPS signal is free, no matter whether you are from Canada, the USA the UK or anywhere.”

The GyPSy Guide tells you stories about the things you are seeing, suggests places that you must stop at and experience, and fills you in on little-known spots that most buses drive right past in order to stay on schedule.

"The first recorded car to travel into Banff National Park was in 1912, and for a 100 years after that it was just fine to drive around, enjoying the stunning scenery, and maybe take a guide book to read what’s suggested for the drive,” says Bulich.

"What GyPSy Guide does is add a whole extra dimension to your experience, by providing interesting and entertaining commentary that speaks to you at exactly the time when you can make that decision to turn off for that waterfall, or scan a section of rockwall where mountain goats are commonly seen.”
Rock climbing is all about holds — bumps, cracks, crevices, nubbins — any feature on a rock face that a climber can cling to with a hand, a toe, a finger, even a knee or an elbow.

Holds allow progress on a climbing route. Some holds are crimping — achingly small. Others are juggy — comfortably big. Lake Louise village is to Banff Park visitors what a hold is to rock climbers: a tiny but solid handle allowing progress into the great wilderness beyond.

The hold that Lake Louise grants you might be advice at the Lake Louise Visitor Info Centre. It might be a tentsite at the huge, front-country campground, a room at the modern, spacious youth hostel, or a suite at the venerable, luxurious Post Hotel. It might simply be a chocolate chip cookie at Laggan's Bakery, a pastrami-on-rye at the Trailhead Cafe, a mug of Dark Intense 5 at the Javalanche Cafe, a guidebook at The Viewpoint bookstore, or a bag of groceries at the Village Market.

For nearly every visitor who passes this way (about a 45-minute drive on the Trans-Canada, northwest of Banff townsite), Lake Louise also provides a shot of inspiration to continue exploring Banff Park. It’s like one of those exceptionally good holds on a rock face that renew a climber’s confidence and desire. That’s because one of the most inspirational sights not just in the Canadian Rockies but worldwide is here: the Lake Louise.
To be precise, the lake itself is not the sole source of inspiration, though the water is as vividly turquoise as a Navajo necklace. There’s also the lake’s setting: a sheer-walled, horseshoe of soaring mountains, including the dominant, glacier encrusted, 3464-metre (11,365-foot) Mount Victoria.

Counter-balancing this dramatically feral scene with the full weight of civilization is the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, standing just a few, deferential steps back from the lake’s northwest shore. Though fittingly grand and elegant, the hotel isn’t so much a sight itself as it is a superb vantage. From plush suites, guests gaze across the lake, into the cirque.

No motorboats are permitted on Lake Louise, so the serenity is broken only when the Chateau sends its lederhosen-attired alpenhornist to boom out a few notes so deep and loud you half expect the sound to trigger an avalanche.

You can, however, rent a canoe on Lake Louise, where paddling is a supernal experience. With the hotel at your back, you might imagine yourself a Voyageur, gliding deeper into the majestic unknown with each dip of your paddle. But if you’re aware the lake is 91 metres (300 feet) deep, and the water temperature never exceeds 3.9° C (39° F), you’ll appreciate that humanity is within screaming distance should you capsize.

Thomas Wilson, a horse packer for the Canadian Pacific Railway, became the first non-native to witness the lake. Wilson was guided there by a Stoney Indian whose tribe had long referred to it as the lake of little fishes.

Wilson’s tribe, as we all know, habitually ignored Native place names. He called it Emerald Lake, but it was later officially renamed Lake Louise, in honour of Princess Louise Caroline Alberta, fourth daughter of Queen Victoria of England.

The hotel’s first iteration, built by the CPR in 1890, was a rustic lodge for fishermen, hunters, and alpinists. In 1899, the railway replaced it with a larger hotel and hired Swiss guides to usher novices onto the peaks. In 1925 they further expanded the hotel and gave it the august name, Chateau Lake Louise.

Swiss guides are no longer firmly handing corseted ladies over crevasses, but a network of trails now enables hikers to guide themselves high into this celebrated, mountain enclave. So hang on to a few of the superlatives that leap to mind when you first clap eyes on Lake Louise. Save them for your hike. Don’t Waste Your Time in the Canadian Rockies, the Opinionated Hiking Guide, describes precisely where to invest your trail time, where not to, and why.

If you don’t succumb to spectacle overload while hiking above Lake Louise, afterward drive a few minutes to an equally inspirational sight: Moraine Lake. It’s wedged between aptly-named Mount Temple, and the famous Ten Peaks whose visage graced the Canadian $20 bill from 1969 to 1979.

Once Lake Louise has inspired you to continue exploring the great wilderness beyond, you have many options, one of which is paramount: Drive north on the Icefields Parkway to Jasper townsite. It requires only 3.5 hours behind the wheel, but take longer. Much longer. For scenic wattage, it competes with any highway, anywhere.
The Parkway follows the Continental Divide, threading the gap between massive peaks, within view of so many glaciers you’ll soon stop counting. You can overlook the impossibly-teal water of Bow and Peyto lakes. You can recoil from thundering torrents at Sunwapta and Athabasca falls. And you can stare up at the Columbia Icefield — a frozen mass the size of a sprawling metropolis.

When botanist David Douglas arrived here in 1827 (yes, the man for whom the Douglas fir is named), he wrote, “On beholding the grand dividing ridge of the continent, all that we have seen before disappears from mind.”

Will what you see here eclipse what you’ve seen before? It’s possible. Little has changed since 1827, except that you’ll be motoring on pavement, whereas Douglas clip-clopped along via pack train.

ABOVE: THE BLUE WATERS OF LAKE LOUISE
Of humanity’s roughly 6,500 languages, few people speak more than one. But regardless where you go on this planet, you’re fluent in the local weather. There are weather differences everywhere, of course. But these are merely accents, dialects, vernacular. You always understand and know how to respond to what the sky is offering, or throwing at you. You’ve seen it before and probably, to at least some degree, you’ve experienced it.

So there is no truly foreign weather. What awaits you in Banff will be only a variation of what you’re familiar with. Glance at these two charts, and you’ll know how slight or substantial a difference to prepare for:
LOOK OUT THE WINDOW

Want to see what the weather’s doing right now in Banff?

You can take a look, with the help of two, aerial webcams: www.explorerockies.com/banff-webcam

The first overlooks Banff townsite. The second looks north, up the Bow River Valley, deeper into Banff National Park. As for the Banff weather forecast, we recommend...

- Banff Townsite
  www.theweathernetwork.com/outdoors/parks/caab0614
- Canmore
  www.theweathernetwork.com/weather/canada/alberta/canmore%20
- Lake Louise Village
  www.theweathernetwork.com/outdoors/parks/caab0622

"The main thing about Bow Valley weather is that it’s sunny a lot. And sunshine, as you know, is a huge benefit for anything you want to do outside.

“We also get frequent chinooks here in the Rockies. In the Alps they’re called foehns. It’s a warm wind that sweeps through and dramatically raises the temperature in winter. And we get chinooks fairly regularly, so it usually doesn’t stay really cold long enough to feel oppressive.

“The combination of sun and chinooks also just makes the weather here very interesting. And it certainly makes it more enjoyable than the weather in most other places at this latitude.

“Actually, it’s so interesting that it’s hard to forecast. The weather forecasts here are often wrong. Usually it’s drier than what they predict. It makes me think this must be one of the hardest places in the world to forecast the weather. It seems the models just don’t work for the Bow Valley.

“So, regardless of the forecast, I just get out there and go for it. Sometimes it’s better than expected. But often it’s just different, a surprise, which keeps it interesting.”

Will humbly refers to himself as simply “a local adventurer,” but he outgrew that title before most kids could navigate a tot lot. Visit www.willgadd.com to learn more about him.

ABOVE: AN ODE TO BANFF WINTER (PHOTO COURTESY BANFF LAKE LOUISE TOURISM/PAUL ZIZKA)

YIN-YANG CLIMATE

Ice climbers are denizens of deep winter, when waterfalls are frozen solid enough to ascend.

Paraglider pilots are creatures of summer, when heat-driven thermal updrafts allow them to soar high and far. So it’s revealing that Will Gadd — one of the world’s most daring ice climbers, as well as one of the world’s most accomplished paraglider pilots — resides in Canmore, Banff’s neighbouring town.

So how does an extreme, outdoor athlete, whose passions are lofted or grounded by the weather, feel about the weather in the Bow Valley? Here’s what Will has to say:

ABOVE: SUMMER SIGHTSEEING AT PEYTO LAKE (PHOTO COURTESY BANFF LAKE LOUISE TOURISM/PAUL ZIZKA)

THE FOREVER FORECAST

Though Banff weather is notoriously challenging to forecast, there are facts and long-established trends you can generally rely on when scheduling your Banff vacation or planning outdoor activities in Banff National Park:
• Banff basks in more than 300 days of sunshine per year. When employers in nearby Calgary advertise job opportunities, they state that Alberta is Canada’s sunniest province, and Calgary the nation’s sunniest, major city.

• At the end of June, you’ll have 16.5 hours between sunrise (5:30 a.m.) and sunset (10 p.m.) to play outdoors in Banff. Carpe diem.

• Wearing sunscreen and UPF clothing is necessary in Banff year-round to avoid sunburn, because the UV rating is always high.

• The chinook winds described by Will Gadd (see above) can rapidly boost winter temperatures high enough that it feels like spring. These “islands of winter warmth” usually settle in for several days and sometimes last a week or more.

• Although snow is possible any day of the year in Banff, the snow that sticks tends to start falling in November. December is Banff’s snowiest month.

• Atop the continental divide, Sunshine Ski Area is annually flocked with an average of 9 metres (30 feet) of snow. Natural snow is so consistently abundant here that there’s little need for snow-making.

• Because Banff is well inland (a long day’s drive from the Pacific Ocean at Vancouver, B.C.), the humidity remains low year-round. In winter, you don’t feel the cold as much: no bone chill. In summer, you don’t feel the heat as much: no sweat-soaked swooning.

ABOVE: A FINE DAY TO BE SHOELESS IN BOW LAKE (PHOTO COURTESY BANFF LAKE LOUISE TOURISM/PAUL ZIZKA)

OUTDOORS ALWAYS

Banff residents are always outdoors.

Everyone has favourite seasons, but no season is unanimously dreaded and resented. Bad weather is a frame of mind, not an atmospheric condition. Depending on your outdoor-activity preferences, any season can be prime time in Banff.

Take hiking, for example. In Banff, keen hikers begin probing trails as early as May, and continue until late October. Some years, on certain trails — if the post-January snowfall was light, and the spring temperatures warm — you can hike to dramatic scenery by Mother’s Day. Likewise, if winter is slow to arrive, adventurous hikes can be possible well past Halloween. And if you cherish solitude, love cooler temperatures, and seek unlikely accomplishments, these shoulder-season hikes could be the ones you enjoy most. Thus you might view the calendar like this:

Granted, most hikers see it differently. June, July, and August are warmest. By late July, most trails in Banff Park are snow-free. That’s when you can expect to be striding over rock, not ice, on the high passes. Yet that’s also the most popular time to hike here. If having many more options is worth sharing the trails with many more hikers, you’ll view the calendar like this:

Skiing is the activity that dominates the other six months. The 2013-2014 season at Lake Louise — largest ski area in the Canadian Rockies — ran from early November to mid-May. So, envision a tranquil ski lodge, no lift lines, and a bargain pass clipped to your jacket. Imagine feeling you own the slope. Picture yourself carving voluptuous turns without glancing over your shoulder. You’re smiling? Then here’s your ski calendar:

continued on next page...
The majority of skiers, however, want all of the mountain available: the highest lifts, the steepest terrain, the longest runs. For them, the deeper the snow, and the more powder, the better. You’re among them? January, February, and March — the most popular months for skiing in Banff — are most likely to fulfill your dreams of infinite white. For you, snow conditions trump crowd size. So your ski calendar is as you’d expect:

**THE WEATHERMAN**

**Between the Bow and Spray Rivers, immediately south of Banff townsite, is Sulphur Mountain.**

If you ride the Banff Gondola — and you should — it will sweep you to the summit in eight minutes. After admiring the mountainous panorama, and gazing at the town far below, you’ll notice a boardwalk following the ridgecrest north. Follow it and quickly arrive at Sanson Peak, crowned with a stone building: a former meteorological observatory, built in 1903.

The peak is named after meteorologist Norman Sanson, who first climbed it (wearing snowshoes) in 1896 to study the weather. Once the observatory was constructed, it became his mountain-top office. Between 1903 and 1933, he climbed up and down more than a thousand times to record weather data. His last ascent was in 1945, at age 84. The gondola was built 14 years later, in 1959.

**THE WEATHERVANE**

Nobody vacations in Banff intending to stay indoors.

You come here to be outdoors, in one of the world’s wildest, grandest mountain ranges. In other words, you come here to be in the weather far more often, for much longer periods than at home. And that makes you the weathervane: Your response to the weather will affect your Banff vacation more than the weather itself. So... a few suggestions to help you remain receptive and positive:

**Think** — Whatever the weather, think “This is great,” then find a way to make it so, because there’s always a way, especially in Banff.

**Watch** — Mountain weather can be spectacular. Watch and enjoy.

**Expect** — Expect the current weather to continue. Often, the weather you’ve got is the weather you’ll get, at least for a while.

**Wear** — Properly attired, any weather can be tolerable. If you didn’t bring weather-wise clothing, you can buy it in Banff.

**Go** — Regardless of the weather, go, do what you planned. See what happens. You might be happily surprised — if not at the weather, then maybe at yourself.

**EXPERT REASON FOR OPTIMISM**

Rod Plasman is a Canmore-based hiking guide whose long experience studying and grappling with weather has earned him respect as a local expert on the subject.
His seminars at the Alpine Club of Canada arm hikers and mountaineers with a practical understanding of the Canadian Rockies climate.

“People visiting Banff in winter are often pleasantly surprised to find our weather is much nicer than it is farther east, for example in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, eastern Montana, the Dakotas, or Minnesota,” says Rod.

“It can even be much warmer in Banff than it is in eastern Alberta.

“The really cold air tends to settle east of the mountains. So if you go a little farther west, into the mountains, you might find it’s considerably warmer.

“Temperature inversions are also common here in winter. If you gain elevation in the mountains, you might find it’s sunnier and warmer than in the valley bottoms. It can be quite surprising.

“As for summer, don’t be discouraged by the up-slope conditions that are a regular feature of our weather,” Rod explains.

“In other words, rain in Banff townsite doesn’t necessarily mean rain throughout the area.

“If moisture arrives from the east, the mountains can stop it from creeping west. Though it’s raining in Banff when you leave to go hiking, you might soon drive right out of it. When you arrive at the trailhead in Yoho or Kootenay parks, you might have a rain-free day on the trail.”
THINGS TO DO IN SUMMER

YOU CAN’T DO EVERYTHING IN BANFF. WHALE WATCHING, FOR EXAMPLE, IS NOT ON THE MENU.

Nor is touring vineyards, running with bulls, haggling in ancient bazaars, or marveling at ornate temples.

But when you seriously ponder what activities might be unavailable to you here, you realize the list is astonishingly short. And it occurs to you there’s so much you can do here, the phrase “You can’t do everything in Banff” actually refers to the near impossibility of doing it all during one visit. So, feast your imagination, then plan your trip:

1. Hiking

Dozens of easy-to-access hiking trails, in a vast, spectacular wilderness of peaks, forests, glaciers, lakes, rivers, streams, and abundant wildlife. This unique combination distinguishes the Canadian Rockies as North America’s premier vacation destination for hikers.

2. Backpacking

Throughout Banff National Park are backcountry campgrounds inviting you to pitch your tent and become a temporary resident of a mountain wilderness so uniquely beautiful it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

3. Camping


4. Mountain biking

Banff National Park encourages mountain biking on 190 km (118 mi) of trails. Nearby Canmore has a reputation among mountain bikers as the Moab of the north.
5. Road cycling

Local road cyclists frequent the Lake Minnewanka loop, and Highway 1A (between Banff and Lake Louise village). The Legacy Trail is a dedicated bike path linking the towns of Canmore and Banff.


6. Rafting

Whitewater rafting opportunities abound in and near Banff National Park. Several companies offer guided trips on the Bow, Kicking Horse, and Kananaskis rivers. Options range from a few, gentle hours, to challenging multi-day trips.

7. Kayaking

Dip your paddle in the placid Vermilion Lakes, or be nimble and quick in the latte-froth rapids of the Bow, Kicking Horse, and Kananaskis rivers.

8. Canoeing

Canoeing on Lake Louise, or its neighbour Moraine Lake, is a quintessentially Canadian experience.

www.fairmont.com/lake-louise/promotions/canoeing

9. Rock climbing

From short, easy, entry-level sport climbing, to multi-pitch big-wall climbs that challenge black-belt climbers, Banff National Park ranks among the world’s most inviting and exciting places to snug-up a pair of rock shoes.

10. Horseback riding

For as long as people have traveled in the Canadian Rockies, horses have been with them, often under them. And the tradition of horseback travel lives on. www.horseback.com

11. Fishing

Fly fishing, spin casting, lake trolling, ice fishing... They’re all popular in Banff and Canmore for good reason: The fish are big and plentiful, and so is the scenery. www.banff-fishing.com

12. Golfing

Dedicated hikers trek long distance to witness the kind of scenery you’ll enjoy while playing the Fairmont Banff Springs Golf Course. www.fairmont.com/banff-springs/golf

13. Skateboarding

Views of Cascade Mountain, Mount Rundle, and Sulphur Mountain make Banff Skatepark one the world’s most scenic places to free ride. It’s open daylight hours, spring through fall.

14. Scuba diving

Submerged beneath Lake Minnewanka is an historic village where divers explore the remains of 19th century technology. www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/activ/plonge-diving.aspx
15. Hot-springs soaking

The discovery of natural hot-springs at the foot of Sulphur Mountain led to the creation of Canada’s first national park. Today, Banff Upper Hot Springs invites you to “soak in some history.”

16. Helicopter touring

Flightseeing — levitating, zooming and hovering like a hummingbird — is certifiably thrilling in the Canadian Rockies. www.alpinehelicopter.com

17. Meadow gazing

You don’t have to hike to stand atop the Continental Divide and gaze across a see-forever alpine meadow carpeted with brilliant wildflowers. Ride the White Mountain Adventures shuttle bus from the Sunshine Ski Area parking lot up to Sunshine Village. www.sunshinemeadowsbanff.com

18. Strolling Banff Avenue

Cascade Mountain, looming just beyond the north end of Banff Avenue, is one image that forever remains in the mental gallery of every Banff visitor. The restaurants, pubs, art galleries, and outdoor stores along the avenue are sufficiently distracting that each time you return to the sidewalk, you’re again enthralled with the iconic street view.

19. Castle admiring

Known as “the castle in the Rockies,” the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel is indeed an enormous, brooding castle beside the Bow River, within earshot of rollicking Bow Falls. Even if you don’t stay there, you’re welcome to admire it inside and out. www.fairmont.com/banff-springs

20. Ambling Main Street, Canmore

Canmore — gritty coal-mining hamlet turned contemporary, mountain-resort village — has an authentic, eclectic, vibrant Main Street where locals often outnumber tourists.

21. Scenic motoring

National Geographic magazine named the Icefields Parkway one of the “10 Greatest Drives in the World.”

22. Cruising

The Banff Lake Cruise plies fiord-like Lake Minnewanka — the largest lake in Banff National Park. www.explorerockies.com/minnewanka

23. Skywalking

Witness glaciology in action from a cliff-edge, glass-floored observation platform high above the Sunwapta Valley. www.glacierskywalk.ca

24. Gondola riding

Let the Banff Gondola whisk you 698 m (2,292 ft) to the upper terminal on Sulphur Mountain, at 2,281 m (7,486 ft), where you’ll overlook the town and a huge swath of the Bow River Valley. www.explorerockies.com/banff-gondola/

25. Museum prowling

The Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies houses 4,000 works, both historical and contemporary, by artists inspired to live here and interpret the wilderness. www.whyte.org

26. Spa indulging

The Willow Stream Spa, at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, is where the international moneyed class gets steamed, rubbed, soothed, wrapped, waxed, fluffed and buffed to perfection. www.fairmont.com/banff-springs/willow-stream

27. Ice exploration

Brewster Ice Explorers, designed specifically for glacial travel, take passengers atop Athabasca Glacier, near the border of Banff and Jasper national parks. www.explorerockies.com/columbia-icefield

28. Entertainment at the Banff Centre

Find out who’s on stage at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts, where musicians, dancers, and actors from around the globe come to study and perform. www.banffcentre.ca
ABOVE: OPERA AS THEATRE AT THE BANFF CENTRE (PHOTO COURTESY THE BANFF CENTRE)

29. Photography

Mountains that resemble terrestrial jazz. A gleaming white, winter snowpack. Abundant sunshine. Frequent, outerspace-blue skies. Psychedelic wildflowers. Lakes the colour of Navajo jewelry. Diverse, thriving wildlife. How can you not return from Banff with the best photos you’ve ever taken?

30. Dining

The range of cuisine in Banff reflects its status as a travel destination with an international clientele. Your choice of restaurants include French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Mexican, East Indian, Korean, Greek, as well as American and Canadian.

31. Yoga

You’ll find ample opportunity to practice in the Bow Valley. In Banff, visit Rocky Mountain Yoga. In Canmore, visit the Yoga Lounge, where you’ll gaze at the Three Sisters peaks during your tadasana. Both are thriving studios that welcome drop-in visitors. www.banffyoga.com www.theyogalounge.ca

CHINOOK RAFTING

For Chris Burnham, watching someone fall in love with rafting is an absolute thrill.

“There is something special about seeing someone go from slightly nervous to head-over-heels in love. It’s as if they not only conquered their fear, but also discovered a new sport and created a memory they will never forget.”

Chris first tried rafting as a Scout at age 10. Since that time, he has spent the majority of his life on the water. A certified rafting examiner and instructor, Chris has also achieved both his Swiftwater Rescue and Emergency First Responder designations, all testament to his life-long dedication to the sport.

As owner and operator of Chinook Rafting, a rafting company that has been in The Canadian Rockies for over 30 years, he prides himself on this team’s successes. “Yes we have an outstanding safety record, and yes we have a team of guides with a ton of experience, but it is the results that I am most proud of,” he says.

The ‘results’ Chris is talking about are the smiles on the thousands of people he has taken out on his tours.

“Safety and experience are the most important aspect of a rafting company and it is something we do not take lightly. It can be a difficult decision when selecting a tour provider you can trust.” With experience and safety covered, his goal is to turn as many people onto rafting as possible. Fortunately, this hasn’t been a difficult task for Chinook.

“We see time and time again that people who look at the wild pictures taken from a tour tend to become a little apprehensive about rafting. However, this is a completely natural reaction and, luckily, we have just the cure,” he says with a grin.

Pristine canyons, sky-high mountains and clean glacier-melted water are just the tip of the iceberg in what Chinook offers its visitors. The Horseshoe Canyon, with its Class 3-4 rapids, are sure to get your heart racing while the Kananskis River’s Class 2-3 rapids are guaranteed to get you wet.

“This is definitely not a float trip,” says Chris. “Although the rapids are tamer, it is an experience that will still get even an adrenaline junkie smiling.”

Chris goes on to explain that both sections of these rivers are actually ‘dam-controlled,’ meaning there is a consistency found here that other outfitters only dream of.

“It allows us to maximize the river features and become very familiar with its characteristics. With a consistent water flow, we not only know the river like the back of our hand, but we also are able to provide the same consistent experience that thousands of other visitors have already enjoyed.

“It eliminates any condition concerns and ensures that participants get the same level of excitement each time.”

EVENING WILDLIFE SAFARI

Rose Maunder focuses on fun & preservation
Rose Maunder has seen her fair share of bears. In fact, you can mention just about any animal that lives in Banff National Park and, chances are, Rose has seen it. Migrating from the east coast of Canada, Rose came to Banff over a decade ago. And almost from the moment she arrived, Rose knew she was here to stay.

“It’s just such a beautiful place” she says.

As the Operations Manager for Discover Banff Tours, Rose plays a key role within one of the area’s most successful tour operators. “When I first came here, I was amazed with how many animals can be found right next to us humans. It is very unusual to see such a high number of both co-habitating in such a small footprint”.

Responsible for ensuring the quality of the tours, Rose prides herself on being able to be a part of the balance found in Banff National Park. “When I came here and fell in love with this place I knew that a) it needs to be protected and b) it needs to be shared. As challenging as that may sound, it is really not that bad.”

BELOW: WILDLIFE SAFARIS WITH DISCOVER BANFF TOURS

Focusing on wildlife management and education, Rose’s mission at Discover Banff Tours is to ensure that guests are not just ‘wowed’ but also educated.

By setting a high bar for her Interpretive Guiding Team, she explains that “it is imperative we highlight the very best here in Banff while also touching on how we can preserve this area for future generations.

“For example, on our Evening Wildlife Safari, we aim to get our participants into some great wildlife viewing positions while educating them on how they too are part of the equation.”

From wildlife management to emphasizing important messages like ‘don’t feed the bears’, Rose and her team have been able to help thousands of visitors not only walk away with some stunning pictures, but also gain a sense that they are now part of the conservation effort found in the national park.

“It brings me so much joy when a guest tells us that they not only got some great photos, but also learned something and plan to share it with others. It is truly a rewarding job!”
THINGS TO DO IN WINTER

1. Skiing and snowboarding

Lake Louise, Sunshine, and Norquay offer a combined 8,000 acres of terrain. The Banff ski-and-boarding season is consistently among the longest in North America. And the powder often falls light and dry for days. www.skibig3.com

2. Cross-country skiing

Track-set skiing is available at six locations within easy reach of Banff townsite. And a short drive away is the Canmore Nordic Centre, home to Canada’s national cross-country and biathlon teams, where you’ll find more the 60 km (37 mi) of groomed trail ideal for classic- or skate-skiing. www.canmorealberta.com/visitor-info/canmore-nordic-centre

3. Backcountry skiing

Every summer, millions of people drive the Icefields Parkway just for the scenery. In winter, the mountains squeezing the Parkway like a vice are riddled with “highway lines.” You can summit a peak, then ski alpine slopes dropping through glades to the pavement.

4. Dog sledding

Learning to drive a swift, handcrafted sled pulled by a team of gorgeous, healthy, eager, powerful huskies, on a perfectly maintained trail, through the Canadian Rockies backcountry, beneath a blue-bird winter sky is a rush. www.snowyowltours.com

ABOVE: DOG SLEDDING IN JASPER (PHOTO COURTESY TOURISM JASPER)

5. Tobogganing

Rent a toboggan in Banff and take it to the Spray Meadows Hill toboggan run. It’s just behind the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel. Or, for a smaller, slower hill suited for toddlers, try the
Cascade Ponds run, beside the Lake Minnewanka Road.

6. Ice Fishing

Heated huts. All the warm clothing you might need. Plenty of hot beverages. Then the hefty, lake trout you’re sure to catch is cooked to perfection and served to you for lunch. Such is ice fishing on Spray Lakes, mid December through early April. Perhaps not the deprivation and suffering you expected? [www.banff-fishing.com](http://www.banff-fishing.com)

7. Ice Climbing

Banff National Park has more waterfall-ice-climbing objectives than are available in most entire countries. Routes vary from popular and accessible, such as Cascade Falls (III, WI 3) and Johnston Canyon (WI 3-5), to remote challenges, such as those on the Trophy Wall: Terminator (V, WI 6), Sea of Vapors (V, WI 6), and The Auger Sanction (V, WI 6).

8. Sleigh Riding

The dreamy, romantic image most of us have of a horse-drawn sleigh ride in winter is precisely what you should expect of the experience in Banff: warm, cozy buffalo robes, hot chocolate, snow-laden trees, towering, frosted mountains everywhere you look, and friends or family snuggled up next to you. [www.brewsteradventures.com](http://www.brewsteradventures.com)

9. Scenic Motoring

National Geographic magazine named the Icefields Parkway one of the “10 Greatest Drives in the World.”

10. Snowshoeing

Dozens of easy-to-access trails, in a vast, spectacular wilderness comprising peaks, forests, glaciers, lakes, rivers, streams, and abundant wildlife. This unique combination distinguishes the Canadian Rockies as North America’s premier vacation destination for snowshoeing.

11. Curling

Mid-October through March, four sheets of curling ice are available at the Fenlands Banff Recreation Centre.

12. Hot-Springs Soaking

The discovery of natural hot-springs at the foot of Sulphur Mountain led to the creation of Canada’s first national park. Today, Banff Upper Hot Springs invites you to “soak in some history.”

13. Strolling Banff Avenue

Cascade Mountain, looming just beyond the north end of Banff Avenue, is one image that forever remains in the mental gallery of every Banff visitor. The restaurants, pubs, art galleries, and outdoor stores along the avenue are sufficiently distracting that each time you return to the sidewalk, you’re again enthralled with the iconic street view.

14. Castle Admiring

Known as “the castle in the Rockies,” the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel is indeed an enormous, brooding castle beside the Bow River, within earshot of rollicking Bow Falls. Even if you don’t stay there, you’re welcome to admire it inside and out. [www.fairmont.com/banff-springs](http://www.fairmont.com/banff-springs)

15. Ambling Main Street, Canmore

Canmore — gritty coal-mining hamlet turned contemporary, mountain-resort village — has an authentic, eclectic, vibrant Main Street where locals often outnumber tourists.

16. Museum Prowling

The Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies houses 4,000 works, both historical and contemporary, by artists inspired to live here and interpret the wilderness. [www.whyte.org](http://www.whyte.org)
17. Spa Indulging

The Willow Stream Spa, at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, is where the international moneyminded class gets steamed, rubbed, soothed, wrapped, waxed, fluffed and buffed to perfection. www.fairmont.com/banff-springs/willow-stream

18. Ice Skating

One of the "ten most beautiful ice-skating rinks in the world," is how CNN Travel described the Lake Louise rink in front of the Fairmont Chateau. And it’s free of charge. The Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel also has a free-of-charge outdoor rink where they keep a fire blazing, and you can cozy up in a heated shelter. And, whenever conditions allow, you’ll find a cleared, skating oval on the Bow River.

19. Gondola Riding

Let the Banff Gondola whisk you 698 m (2,292 ft) to the upper terminal on Sulphur Mountain, at 2,281m (7,486 ft), where you’ll overlook the town and a huge swath of the Bow River Valley. http://www.explorerockies.com/banff-gondola/

20. Photography

Mountains that resemble terrestrial jazz. A gleaming white, winter snowpack. Abundant sunshine. Frequent, outer-space-blue skies. Psychedelic wildflowers. Lakes the colour of Navajo jewelry. Diverse, thriving wildlife. How can you not return from Banff with the best photos you’ve ever taken?

21. Entertainment at the Banff Centre

Find out who’s on stage at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts, where musicians, dancers, and actors from around the globe come to study and perform. www.banffcentre.ca

22. Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival

All things mountain — cultures, adventure, sports, nature, conservation, exploration — stuffed, like a down sleeping bag, into one exhilarating week. The film festival tours the world, thrilling audiences everywhere. Experiencing it here, where the mountain-freak tribe gathers each year? Incomparable.

23. Dining

The range of cuisine in Banff reflects its status as a travel destination with an international clientele. Your choice of restaurants include French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Mexican, East Indian, Korean, Greek, as well as American and Canadian.

24. Yoga

You’ll find ample opportunity to practice in the Bow Valley. In Banff, visit Rocky Mountain Yoga. In Canmore, visit the Yoga Lounge, where you’ll gaze at the Three Sisters peaks during your tadasana. Both are thriving studios that welcome drop-in visitors. www.banffyoga.com  www.theyogalounge.ca

ABOVE: DINING OUT AT THE MAPLE LEAF GRILLE IN BANFF (PHOTO COURTESY BANFF LAKE LOUISE TOURISM/PAUL ZIZKA)

SKIING IN BANFF

Banff has three ski resorts: Norquay, Sunshine, and Lake Louise.

Their collective stats — number of lifts, amount of vertical, total terrain, etc — are internationally competitive. But don’t plan your next ski vacation based on sterile calculations.

Think of Banff’s resorts as the Big Three — not just because that’s what they call themselves — but because, together, they have three attributes that promise you a primo skiing or boarding experience. In combination, these three attributes do not exist elsewhere. No brag, just fact.

1. Less Commercialism

When you ski Banff, you’re skiing in a national park. And not just a national park, but Canada’s flagship national park. Surrounding you is a swath of protected, mountain studded, forest carpeted, glacier capped, alpine-meadow-strewn wilderness bigger than a tectonic plate.

Just how wild is this place? Be glad it’s winter, when bears
hibernate. Otherwise you might see a gondola-size grizzly mowing the ski-slope grass.

Condo-covered mountainsides do not exist here. Development is severely limited, as it should be: like an untrained dog on a tight leash. While riding the lifts, you’ll see no commercialism unless you’re browsing the web on your smart phone.

Okay, granted, we’re talking lift-served skiing and boarding. Is it truly pure? No. But it’s as pure as it gets on this planet. Just you, the snow, and the Canadian Rockies.

ABOVE: INCREDIBLE SCENERY AWAITS AT SUNSHINE VILLAGE

2. Superior Conditions

Nobody knows Banff skiing more intimately than Mike Meilicke, owner of Gear Up Sports Rental, in Canmore. Mike began skiing at the age of six and is now a CSIA level 3 ski instructor with 44 years of experience on the slopes. He first skied Norquay, Sunshine, and Lake Louise 35 years ago.

Just to wind him up, we asked Mike a question we already knew his answer to. “Don’t you ever get bored skiing here?”

“Bored? Skiing here?” Mike was incredulous. “I’ve skied more than 70 days here this year. And today was just as challenging and interesting and enjoyable as ever. No, I’ve never been bored skiing here. In fact, if someone told me I couldn’t ski anywhere else but here for the rest of my life, I wouldn’t have a problem with that.”

“Why not?” we asked.


“Natural snow is so much softer, more forgiving, much easier to ski on. We don’t get those ski-chattering, consolidated-ice conditions that are common on man-made snow. Skiing on natural snow allows you to be much more playful. Plus it’s way easier on your joints.

“And we’re at pretty high elevation here, so it stays cold, which keeps the natural snow soft. We don’t have the freeze-thaw-freeze-thaw conditions that create ice.”

To keep Mike extolling the advantages of Banff skiing, all we had to say was, “Go on?”

“Well, there’s also the terrain, of course,” Mike said. “Much of our terrain here is alpine. We’re skiing bowls, chutes, couloirs. It’s wide open. No limitations. Totally long enough and steep enough to challenge skiers who are expert, or beyond expert.

“But we also have lots of terrain that accommodates beginner and intermediate skiers. The fall lines are nice and true and easy to ski. We don’t have many off-canter fall lines. A lot of thought went into cutting green and blue runs here that are inviting, and safe, and fun.”

At this point, we didn’t have to say anything to keep Mike talking about his favourite subject.

“Oh, and the views! The scenery here is incredible. Again, that’s because you’re skiing at high elevation: 2400 metres or more. You’re way above treeline, so you often have a 360° view of mountains that go on forever. The scenery is huge, amazing. It’s hard to stop staring at.”

ABOVE: SKIING MT NORQUAY – THE BEST KEPT SECRET IN THE ROCKIES (PHOTO COURTESY BANFF LAKE LOUISE TOURISM/PAUL ZIZKA)

3. A Longer Season

Dave Honeyman is a recipient of the Canadian Ski Coach of
the Year award. Not only has he coached winning skiers at the national and international levels, he’s coached coaches whose skiers became national and international competitors.

Clearly, Dave knows skiing. So we asked him, “Why Banff? What distinguishes the skiing here from that at other, famous ski destinations?”

“Well, it’s April 21,” Dave said, “I’m standing outside in Banff. I’m wearing shorts. I’m comfortable. And I’m looking at snow. Lots of it. The visible snowline extends all the way down into treeline.

“That’s the answer. This place has one of the longest ski seasons in North America. And the length of our ski season consistently rivals that of any ski area, anywhere.

“Banff ski areas are usually the first to open on our continent,” Dave elaborated, “and we ski strong here until June.”

While conversing with Dave, we glanced at the Sunshine Village website. As if we needed further proof, there it was in proud, bold type at the top of the home page: “Wide Open Until May 19.” Then we peeked at the Lake Louise Ski Resort webcams: white, everywhere, every mountain, every run, top to bottom.

“Some seasons here,” Dave continued, “I’ve skied 170 days. That’s nearly half a year! On average, I’d say we get 30% more skiing than is typically possible elsewhere. And that extra 30% isn’t marginal skiing. It’s great skiing.

“So, here we are in Banff in late April, and the ski areas are in prime condition, full service, and… almost nobody! Where are all the vacationers? They’re home, mulching their lawns. They don’t know that they’re missing the best skiing of their lives, in perfect weather. Only the locals are enjoying it.

“But ski coaches, competitors, officials and sponsors are well aware of Banff’s long ski season,” Dave added. “Lake Louise is the only venue in the world that hosts both mens and ladies World Cup downhill events year after year. That’s because our early-season conditions are a near certainty.

“So if you plan a ski holiday in Banff before December, you’ll be skiing for sure. And you’ll be loving the skiing.”

**STATISTICS FOR BANFF’S BIG THREE SKI RESORTS**

**Mt. Norquay**
- Season Length: November – April

**Lake Louise**
- Season Length: November – May
- Hours of Operation: Sun-Fri: 9 am – 4 pm, Saturday: 9 am – 5 pm (front-side)
- Vertical: 991 metres (3,250 feet)
- Base Elevation: 1,646 metres (5,400 feet)
- Peak Elevation: 2,637 metres (8,650 feet)
- Acreage: 4,200 acres (1,700 hectares)
- Average Snowfall: 454 cm (179 in)
- Trails: 145 marked runs + back bowls

**Sunshine Village**
- Hours of Operation: 9am – 4pm
- Gondola Hours: 8am – 5:30pm Mon-Thurs (weekends extended)
- Vertical: 1,070 meters (3,514 feet)
- Base Elevation: 1,660 meters (5,440 feet)
- Peak Elevation: 2,730 meters (8,954 feet)
- Acreage: 3,358 acres
- Annual Snowfall: Up to 9 metres (30 feet)
- Trails: 107 runs

**JOHNSTON CANYON ICE WALK**

How this frozen beauty inspired Jonathan Welsh

With more than 4 million visitors arriving in Banff every year, the odds of at least a few people staying behind – and settling in the area – are pretty good.

That was the case for Jonathan Welsh, owner of Discover Banff Tours. “I came for the skiing and never left,” says Jonathan, who originally came from England as a ski-instructor.

After a season of guiding visitors around the ski resorts, he realized Banff National Park did not have many options for winter sightseeing tours.

“Although skiing is the number one winter activity, there are always visitors that want to explore the spectacular scenery beyond the ski hills,” says Jonathan. Seeing an opportunity to showcase the Canadian Rockies to its visitors, Discover Banff
Tours opened in 1999 providing smaller, more personalized tours. “We continue as a company to be guided by our mission: providing memorable vacation experiences,” says Jonathan.

Discover Banff Tours has recently been recognized with the Canadian Tourism Commission “Signature Experience” designation for their unique winter tour, the Johnston Canyon Icewalk.

“It allows visitors from all over the world the chance to experience frozen waterfalls, ice formations in a winter wonderland setting without needing special training or equipment. If you can walk, you can icewalk,” says Jonathon.

With its towering limestone cliffs and frozen waterfalls, the Johnston Canyon Icewalk has been the highlight of many people’s holiday. “It is an absolute joy to see the reviews of people who went on the tour. It confirms that there is a lot more to do out here than just ski”

Extending on the popularity of the Johnston Canyon IceWalk, Discover Banff Tours now offers an Evening IceWalk Tour. Outfitted with a headlamp (a complimentary gift for all tour participants), visitors are able to see this magnificent canyon lit by handheld spotlights at night.

“It’s the perfect après ski activity as it does not interfere with the ski day and allows the group to do something special that people might not feel comfortable about doing on their own”.

“Providing visitors with unique experiences is one thing, but providing a safe environment, complete with a professional guide, that is one of the reasons this experience has taken off so quickly,” Jonathan says with pride.
ACCOMMODATIONS

BANFF AND CANMORE ARE MOUNTAIN-BORN TWINS. LIKE MOST SIBLINGS, HOWEVER, THEY LIVE QUITE DIFFERENT LIVES.

They’re close, separated from one another by a mere 25-minute drive. And their settings are comparable.

Both are on the Bow River, surrounded by cloud-clawing peaks, so there’s no winning the debate about which is more marvelous. Banff is a speck more convenient if you’re pursuing activities in Banff National Park. Canmore is a fleck closer to all that Kananaskis Country offers.

Otherwise, depending on your basis for comparison and your preferences, each has only slight advantages over the other. Unless you’re asking yourself, “Where should we stay?” That’s when the personalities of Banff and Canmore sharply contrast.

“Banff is within the national park,” said Leavetown founder and CEO Mike Liverton, “so development has been tightly restricted, and rightfully so.

“One of the restrictions is a need-to-reside rule: to live there, you must work there. So you don’t have people elsewhere owning homes and condos in Banff and renting them out to visitors.

“And Banff has guidelines that severely limit short-term vacation rentals. There aren’t many, and some of those are unlicensed. If you find one, ask to see the license, or it’s possible your booking could be cancelled, leaving you no place to stay.”
“Curbing growth has preserved the scenery and the wildlife,” Liverton explained. “You won’t see houses crawling up the mountains. But that’s why the accommodation is concentrated. Banff Avenue has a long stretch of big hotels and lots of souvenir shops. And the town primarily caters to package tours, offering mostly hotels and holiday suites.

“Motorcoaches are constantly coming and going, dropping visitors for a one- or two-day stay, then busing them on to the next stop on their tour. Banff is definitely a tourist town, with a fast pace, high-volume atmosphere.”

“What most of us think of as ‘family accommodation’ is rare in Banff,” said Liverton. “For families who want to stay there, we recommend Hidden Ridge Resort, Rocky Mountain Resort, or the Fox Hotel & Suites. Families are comfortable there, because they offer more than just hotel rooms.

“Canmore is just outside Banff National Park,” Liverton continued, “so it evolved quite differently than Banff. When Calgary hosted the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, the cross-country ski events were held at the Canmore Nordic Centre. Suddenly, Canmore received international attention, and real-estate development surged.

“But Canmore focused on providing accommodation suitable for longer stays: a week or more, instead of just a night or two. Canmore has only a few large hotels. Instead, it has a great range of condo resorts, which are ideal for families, because they offer full kitchens and up to three bedrooms.

“In Canmore, many people who live elsewhere own condos here and rent them out. Most of these properties were built fairly recently, so they’re quite modern. And there’s enough of them that prices are definitely cheaper than in Banff.

“So Canmore has more comfortable, better-value accommodation for families. Plus, it’s a more family-friendly town. Residents are very active — walking, running, cycling — but the pace is less frenetic, more relaxed than in Banff. And visitors here enjoy being among more locals, rather than only with other tourists.”

For a more luxurious stay in Canmore, Liverton recommends Falcon Crest Lodge, Stone Ridge Mountain Resort, or Solara Resort and Spa.

But what about that cabin in the woods you’ve always dreamed of? Can you rent one in Canmore?

“We do work with a handful of residential properties,” said Liverton, “but there’s very little tourist-home zoning in Canmore, and there’s nothing you can rent short term that fits the description of a cabin in the woods. Most of the cabins that existed are gone, because the land was so valuable it was redeveloped.

“But the mountain scenery above Canmore has been preserved, much like in the national park,” Liverton concluded. “That’s the bright side of zoning restraints and development limitations that prevent you from finding a stand-alone house to rent for a week or two in Canmore.”

...
MOUNTAINS ARE GLOBAL TRAFFIC COPS. THEY CHANNEL THE FLOW OF EVERYTHING: WATER, WEATHER, WILDLIFE, PEOPLE.

“You,” they say, “proceed this way. And you? Go around.” That’s why, by today’s swift-travel standards, most mountain towns are awkwardly located, thus isolated.

Banff and Canmore are unusual in this regard. Though embedded in the mountains, they’re not barricaded by them. For mountain towns, they’re conveniently located and easy to access. From Canmore, it’s a smooth, nearly straight, one-hour drive — via the Trans-Canada Highway — to Calgary, a city with a major airport and a population surging past 1.2 million.

That’s the course of the Bow River. It sweeps out of the mountains and glides through Calgary. In the opposite direction runs a different kind of current: a steady stream of positive influences including metropolitan sophistication, expectation of quality, innovative thinking, professional expertise, and urban dynamism. It keeps Banff and Canmore constantly refreshed — evolving in ways other mountain towns do not.

All this, plus readily available international flights, has enriched the Banff/Canmore populace with worldly experience, open minds, good taste. And the results are deliciously obvious when you take a seat at one of the many, superb restaurants gracing either town.

In the fall of 2013, Calgary food critic John Gilchrist released the eighth edition of his bestselling book, My Favourite Restaurants: Calgary, Canmore and Beyond. Previous editions were subtitled Calgary, Banff and Beyond. This time, Gilchrist wanted to focus attention on the superb culinary skills coalescing in Canmore.

Gilchrist believes Canmore has an “exceptional” food scene — superior to that of many larger Alberta cities. “It’s because of the international draw of Canmore,” he said, “and so many
people passing through and visiting and owning their lovely condos – everybody wants good food. And the chefs themselves see the potential and have opened a lot of interesting restaurants.”

Highlighting Canmore in his new book, however, was not a demotion for Banff. Gilchrist profiles and recommends numerous Banff restaurants, including the Banffshire Club, Barpa Bills, Coyotes, The Eddie, Silver Dragon, Three Ravens, and Sleeping Buffalo.

But he acknowledges that Canmore restaurants “tend to have a bit more edge than Banff, which has good restaurants, but they are a bit more focused on the resort-town style. I don’t want to cast any negativity on Banff at all, but there’s greater potential for growth in Canmore.

“In Banff, there aren’t that many more places you can put a restaurant, whereas in Canmore you can grow,” Gilchrist concluded. “When people want to be creative and more interesting in the food they do, they’ve typically opened in Canmore.”

The Trough

One of Canmore’s creative, growing restaurants is The Trough [http://www.thetrough.ca], owned by mother-son team Cheryl and Richard Fuller.

“Richard used to work on white-glove, six-star cruise ships,” said Jen Ivison, bartender and floor manager at The Trough. “He and Cheryl bring that level of care and service to everything here.

“I’ve worked at The Trough for three years,” Jen said, “and I still love it. There’s a level of sophistication and elegance here that gives the atmosphere a little buzz. But this is a mountain town, where ‘fine dining’ has to allow people to be comfortable, to show up in hiking boots. And some do.

“It’s the same with the staff,” Jen continued. “We have full wine service, but the server might be wearing jeans. We have a very high level of professionalism, but we’re colourful characters, too. And we know how to adapt. We have only ten tables. One table might want to have a quiet, romantic evening. The next table might want to be entertained. We make that happen for them. We’re very sensitive to guest needs.”

The Trough’s diverse menu ranges from cauliflower and cumin arancini (chickpea and tomato puree, sautéed kale, seasonal vegetables), to Brome Lake duck breast (Rohess speck mushroom risotto, spiced pear jam, seasonal vegetables). Jen describes The Trough’s cuisine this way: “In summer, to get the table of your choice on a Saturday night, you need to make reservations about three weeks in advance.

“You might get lucky if you just pop in, but usually the number of people we have to turn away would seat the restaurant three times over.

“That’s why we’re renovating,” Jen adds. “It’s going to be stunning. We’re adding 26 seats. And it’s going to be al fresco, with heaters of course, so you can dine outside eight months a year.”

Details

725 9 St, Canmore, AB T1W 2V7
1-403-678-2820

Above: Amuse Bouche at the Trough

Crazyweed

Talk about restaurants in Banff and Canmore, and you’ll hear Crazyweed mentioned early and often — in adoring detail, by people who swoon at the memory of their last meal there. Owned by chef Jan Hrabec, housed in a contemporary, angular box with a sod roof, Crazyweed [www.crazyweed.ca] has the crackling, electric atmosphere you’d expect at the latest L.A. bistro to catch a meteoric, word-of-mouth ride to fame.
The first thing you’ll notice: It’s loud. But that’s the sound of a full house of guests loving where they are, enjoying each other, and raving about the food. If you don’t mind having to raise your voice to be heard by your companions, you’ll love it too. Because Hrabec and her team are seriously talented and determined to please — which they do, consistently. Skim the reviews. You’ll see hundreds of comments like these:

“BEST RESTAURANT IN ALBERTA”

“We eat there every time we are in town. They are nice, and the location is great, but the food is absolutely incredible. I have never had a morsel there that I didn’t think was fantastic.”

“A FABULOUS FIND”

“Called in for a quick lunch. Stunning. Excellent place, fabulous food. A must if you go to Canmore.”

“WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE”

“Delighted with our experience at the Crazy Weed. A large mixed group ALL enjoyed the environment, the great service, and the fantastic food. A real pleasure, so we made sure we visited more than once during our stay ... oh and the wine selection is excellent.”

“If you have any interest in food, right now it doesn’t get any better than this.” - Calgary food critic John Gilchrist said of Crazyweed.

For lunch at Crazyweed, we recommend the chile-grilled shrimp taco salad, or the lamb meatball hot-pot. For dinner, try the spicy truck-stop noodles, the ahi “kachumber” ceviche, the housemade red-beet gnocchi, or the red seafood curry bowl. And take your time perusing their vast, eclectic wine list.

Details
1600 Railway Ave, Canmore, AB T1W 1P6
1-403-609-2530

Below: Putting on the Finishing Touches at Crazyweed

Spice Hut

The food: wow! The atmosphere: hmmm. Because of the latter, Spice Hut (1310 Bow Valley Trail, 403.609.9997) isn’t a restaurant you’d expect to be cited in a Pantheon including The Trough, Crazyweed, and Tapas. It occupies a former Smitty’s — a bland, national-chain eatery — and Spice Hut’s tight-budget makeover fails to hide that discomfiting fact.

But Spice Hut — like locally beloved hole-in-the-wall restaurants everywhere — concentrates solely on cooking. Theirs is the most authentic East Indian food ever served in the Bow Valley. Portions and prices are keep-'em-coming-back generous.

And when your server graces your table with steaming plates of Spice Hut’s veggie pakora, chicken jalfrezi, lamb korma, daal makhni, or palak paneer, and the aroma wafts upward? Your eyes will close. You’ll smile. And suddenly, you won’t notice the atmosphere. You’ll be in Agra. Before returning to Canmore, order desert: either a warm, gulab jaman, or a chilled, mango lassi.

Details
1310 Bow Valley Trail, Canmore, AB T1W 1N6
1-403-609-9997

Rocky Mountain Flatbread Company

You can taste ethics. Shortening the distance between crop and cutlery reduces transport time, cuts resource use, provides fresher ingredients, and results in more flavourful food.

That’s not the only reason Rocky Mountain Flatbread Company (www.rockymountainflatbread.ca) pizza will almost certainly be a candidate for the best you’ve ever eaten. These folks have pizza PhDs. But ethics are one of their staples. Their website lists two-dozen “farm friends who work hard to provide us with the tastiest ingredients.”

Two locations in Vancouver and one in Canmore gave RMFC the heft to launch a regional, sustainability program in 2007. Called EarthBites, it helps schools teach students to understand, value, and participate in local agriculture.

Through EarthBites, thousands of kids have learned how to grow and eat with the seasons; how to raise funds for school gardens; and how to organize school markets.

EarthBites partnered with Canmore Community Gardens to create a school farm on Canmore Collegiate High school’s roof. It produced 780 lbs. of veggies its first season. The
entire harvest was sold at the Canmore farmers’ market.

Now, about that pizza...

We recommend the Genoa Salami: organic tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese, oregano, Genoa salami, sliced mushrooms, marinated cherry tomatoes, kalamata olives, shaved red onions, and bocconcini cheese, finished with fresh basil.

Or try the Farmers Market: organic tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese, crimini mushrooms, local kale, butternut squash, roasted red peppers, topped with pesto and goat cheese.

**Details**

838 10 St, Canmore, AB T1W 2A7
1-403-609-5508

**Tavern 1883**

One of Canmore’s newest restaurants is Tavern 1883 [www.tavern1883.com], whose name honours the year Canmore was founded. Owners Joe Gregory and Heather Harrison, and general manager Jesse Sanderson are serving “proper” food in a casual, family-friendly setting. They’re also offering weekend entertainment. Their big, bright tavern attracts a largely local crowd.

Visitor alert: you’re welcome, too, and you’ll find Tavern 1883’s century-old building just two blocks off Main Street. Come for sweet potato fries, wild arugula and quinoa salad, fried pickles and banana peppers, fresh-ground lamb burgers topped with chili-tomato jam and mint aïoli, Key lime basa tacos topped with mustard-seed slaw and mango, kale and butternut squash cannelloni, and other innovative, hearty, pub fare.

**Details**

709 9 St, Canmore, AB T1W 2V7
1-403-609-2000

**Below: Tavern 1883’s Juicy Burgers**

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**Tapas**

Wendy Simpson was a Calgarian who frequented Canmore on weekends and often dined at Tapas. She sampled other Canmore restaurants, but dinner at Tapas became synonymous with the mountain town she loved. Frequenting Tapas, she got to know the manager and the staff. And when the opportunity arose seven years ago, she purchased the restaurant and moved to Canmore.

Simpson’s title at Tapas — “Owner + Diner” — tells this story in poetic shorthand. She’s not a typical restauranteur. The foundation of her ownership is emotional. She loved eating there, so she bought the place.

And the love lives on — for Wendy and her customers. Tapas [www.tapascanmore.ca] was voted Most Romantic Restaurant in the Rockies. Exquisite food, a soothing atmosphere, and impeccable service certainly contribute to the romance. But it springs from the restaurant’s traditional, Spanish style of dining: many small portions of various dishes: some hot, some cold. It stimulates sharing and conversation, because you’re not focused on consuming your own ("Mine! All mine!") large plate of food.

“It’s just really fun," Simpson said. “Friends, family, conversation, plenty of time, lots of great food, wonderful wines, craft beers. It’s not just eating. It’s a rich, social experience. It’s what dining should be, usually isn’t, but always is here."

Whether you’re on the Mediterranean-style deck, or inside on a high-back leather chair among Spanish murals, Tapas will treat you to a slow-food extravaganza. Simpson recommends everything on the menu, of course, but when nudged to order for us, she said “Try the beef carpaccio. It’s herb-crusted, triple-A beef with fried capers, lemon aïoli, and manchego cheese. And the sliced chorizo sausage with sweet and sour figs. And our garlic gambas — prawns sautéed with garlic and thyme. They’re all amazing.”

**Details**

633 10 St, Canmore, AB T1W 2A2
1-403-609-0583

**Would you like some more?**

Banff, too, has a surfeit of superb restaurants. Our favourites include...

*continued on next page...*
Nourish Bistro

The acronyms “V” or “WF” in parentheses, strewn throughout a restaurant menu, are a thrilling sight to some. Though they’ve yet to lift fork to mouth, they know they’ve found one of those rare restaurants that understand how they choose to eat: vegan, or wheat-and-gluten free.

The majority, however, upon realizing they’ve tripped over a restaurant that takes nutrition seriously, draw back slightly in suspicion: “But...what will it taste like?”

Nourish Bistro [www.nourishbistro.com] is successfully chipping away at all that misguided doubt by serving food anyone can love, regardless that it’s genuinely healthy.

Their tapas-inspired serving style is encouraging. No need to commit to a single plate of food that’s entirely your responsibility. At Nourish, you can share with your companions. Grazing lightens the atmosphere: “Do you guys mind if I have the last yam tender?”

Nourish nachos, for example, are unquestionably unique and, as the menu suggests, arguably the galaxy’s best, thanks to more than 27 ingredients, including strawberries, ten types of beans, garlic dills, and melted, aged cheddar.

Their “gourmet falafel” is indeed gourmet: Spiced, oven-baked chickpea and fava-bean falafel, with garlic dills, cucumber, tomatoes, red onion, roasted red peppers, and field greens, served in a garlic-hummus tortilla, topped with dill yoghurt, and seasoned tomato crunch.

Melissa Martin, of Winnipeg, had this to say about her dining experience at Nourish:

“As hard as it is to leave the beauty of Banff, it might be even harder to leave Nourish. We had a spectacular meal at this charming bistro, from the whimsical ‘tenders’ [root veggies grilled like chicken tenders], to the decadent mac & cheese, which we ordered vegan. Even my experienced, vegan-cook boyfriend couldn’t figure out how they made it so good. The raw, vegan, lemon-lavender cheesecake was absolutely sublime.

“Service was warm and very laid-back — setting just the right atmosphere for a relaxed night out in Banff — and very attentive. We saw our server navigate some, ahemm, very special food requests from another customer with total grace as well, and this was even just ten minutes before they closed.

“The only shame of our experience was watching a couple walk in, sit down, then leave before eating when they learned the desserts were vegan. How unfortunate for them that they missed out. For the record, this reviewer is an omnivore, too. If you let the veggie focus deter you, well, your loss. This is glorious food in an utterly delightful, little spot.”

Details

211 Bear St, Banff, AB T1L 1A8
1-403-760-3933

Eden

At the Rimrock Resort’s [www.rimrockresort.com] aptly named, five-diamond restaurant, you’ll enjoy an intoxicating dining experience even if you don’t order a flight of wines to accompany your six-course meal.

Eden’s menu is traditional French with New World accents and Asian flair. The amuse gueule, for example, is a smoked salmon tartare, served in a small dish nestled in a glass bowl in which a live Japanese fighting fish languidly swims in what the staff will assure you is Evian water.

Details

The Rimrock Resort Hotel, 300 Mountain Ave
Banff, AB, T1L 1J2 1-403-762-1865

Banffshire Club

The Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel [www.fairmont.com/banff-springs] signature dining room serves Canadian cuisine as distinct as the castle-like hotel itself. For an appetizer, try the diver-caught scallops. Follow it with the shoots and lattice salad (English peas, fava beans, pea tendrils, garden rhubarb, lemon, and golden canola).

And for your main course, savour the line-caught Vancouver Island albacore tuna, with baby artichokes and lavender essence, or the Broek Acres Berkshire pork rack, with kale kimchi, cauliflower and cherry-miso butter sauce.

Details

The Fairmont Banff Springs, 405 Spray Ave
Banff, AB, T1L 1J4 1-403-762-6860

Coyotes Southwestern Grill

Owners Trudy Allan and Kathy Johnson live in Banff, because they love playing in the mountains, which demands abundant energy, which requires healthy nutrition. Since 1993, Coyotes (www.coyotesbanff.com) has been serving foods as close as possible to their natural states, achieving maximal taste with minimal processing and refining.
Coyotes is especially popular with vegetarians, because it offers far more than the typical, one or two, perfunctory, meatless options. Their spicy, black-bean burrito is always excellent. So is their southwestern polenta with ratatouille. The Santa Fe-style blue-corn chicken enchiladas, and the orange-chipotle prawns earn “thumbs up” reviews from carnivores.

Details
206 Caribou St, Banff, AB T1L 1A2
1-403-762-3963

Eddie Burger Bar

The restaurant’s home page greets you with a disarming, “Hi! I’m Eddie! Let me build you your dream burger!” And it’s a promise the restaurant (www.eddieburgerbar.ca) fulfills with gourmet burgers as creative and sumptuous as it’s possible for burgers to be. The Eddie Presley, for example, comprises AAA Alberta beef, jalapeño jack cheese, double-smoked bacon, fresh tomatoes, peanut butter, lingonberry jam, and crisp lettuce served on Eddie’s signature, pretzel bun. The Kiwi starts with a lamb patty, includes sautéed onions, gouda cheese, roasted garlic aioli, cranberry mustard, crisp lettuce, and arrives on a brioche bun. For a small bump in price, Eddie invites you to “go big” with an extra patty, or “go organic” with locally bred, certified-organic beef.

Details
137 Banff Ave, Banff, AB T1L 1B7
1-403-762-2230

The Post Hotel

From Banff, it’s a short, scenic drive to Lake Louise village, where you can dine at the Post Hotel. Imagine Daniel Boone in top hat and tails. That’s the Post (www.posthotel.com), whose frontier-chic décor leaves no doubt you’re in the far-north wilds yet whose four-diamond restaurant has a wine list the size of a phone book: 25,500 bottles.

The Post Hotel restaurant earned “Best Food in the Americas” status on the Condé Nast Traveler Gold List.

Details
200 Pipestone Rd, Lake Louise, AB T0L 1E0
1-403-522-3989