

THE BANFF AREA OFFERS MANY ACTIVITIES FOR THE OUTDOOR ENTHUSIAST INCLUDING CANOEING, HORSEBACK RIDING, HIKING, BIKING AND RIVER RAFTING.



BANFF / LAKE

CANADA'S ALPINE PLAYGROUND

Banff National Park has become synonymous with what is arguably the best powder skiing in the world, but it's not just a winter wonderland. Opportunities for adventure, discovery and fun in the western Canadian wilderness hardly melt away when the ski lifts stop revolving.

The area's array of things to see and do, paired with plenty of vacation amenities and unmeasured beauty, has made late-summer Banff's peak visitation season—not bad for a snow-skiing destination.

Outside of ski season, pilgrims to the region otherwise known as “the hiking capital of Canada” can

exchange their ski poles for walking sticks. From summer until mid-October, when many roads hibernate beneath the white stuff, this alpine playground is rich with hiking and riding trails, mountain bike routes, waters to carry rafters and paddlers, wildlife-viewing opportunities and rustic backcountry lodges. Though it's no bustling Vail or Aspen, Banff also has a civilized side: world-class resorts, picturesque alpine castles, full-service spas, attractive shops and unique restaurants do their part to make even the most hard-core urban dweller feel at home.

By Andrea Berninger



LOUISE



People come from all over the world seeking the Banff experience, whether it's in the restaurants, shops and cultural activities, or adventures in the wilderness.

Like many famous places on the Western continent, Banff has railroad roots. The word "Banff" (pronounced "bamph") comes from Banffshire, Scotland, birthplace of two Canadian Pacific Railway tycoons. Just 120 years ago, three railroad workers happened upon a cave containing hot springs on the eastern slopes of Alberta's Rocky Mountains. From that humble discovery was born Banff National Park, the 2,500-square-mile section of the Canadian Rockies that encompasses the Town of Banff, Lake Louise, Moraine Lake and other sub-destinations.

These days, it doesn't take as much work—or luck—to find Banff. From Calgary, the closest major airport, travelers can drive to the park in less than 90 minutes. Pack your layers when preparing for a vacation in Banff; Canadian Rockies weather is predictably unpredictable due to the elevation and rugged topography. Summer is generally warm with low humidity and light shining until almost 11 p.m. In fall, days are still pleasant with the air turning crisp and cool after sundown.

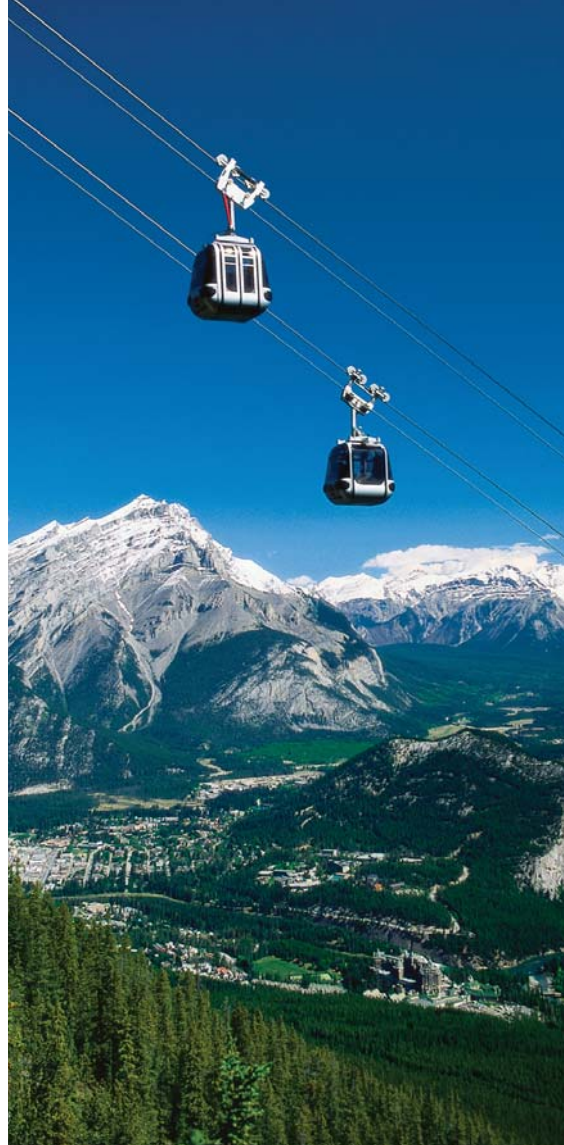
Canada's first and the world's third national park is home to a spectrum of distinctive natural features. Natural hot springs, Canada's longest cave system, and more than 1,000 glaciers underscore the strikingly beautiful mountains, meadows, forests and waterways within Banff's borders. Year-round residents include elk, bighorn sheep, moose, mountain goats, grizzly bears, wolves and Alberta's southernmost herd of endangered woodland caribou.

With more than 1,000 miles of trails, more than any other mountain park, visitors can go as deep into the wilderness as they dare on foot. Route distances and difficulties range from a one-hour jaunt up a mountain to a month-long backcountry excursion into the most remote regions of the park.

If you're still breaking in your hiking boots and want to give your legs a break, Banff can be taken in by arranged helicopter, airplane, all-terrain vehicle or boat tours as well as the ever-popular automobile. The glacier-dotted Icefields Parkway, scenic Bow Valley Parkway, Banff-Radium Highway and Trans-Canada Highway all lead motorists through different areas of the park. A favorite car cruise with locals and visitors is the Minnewanka Loop Drive, a nine-mile route starting from Highway 1 at the Town of Banff's north end. Highlights include the Cascade Ponds recreation area, the retired coal mining center of Bankhead and Lake Minnewanka, where you'll want to disembark and take the short stroll to Stewart Canyon, keeping an eye out for bighorn sheep.

Ready for some shelter after a day of exploring? More than 100 local accommodations include the park service's 13 campgrounds, backcountry hike-in lodges, quaint B&B's and spare-no-expense luxury resorts such as the opulent Fairmont Banff Springs.

On the Town of Banff's busy main street, pedestrians will hear phrases in languages from Spanish to Japanese as they browse in designer shops and dine in tempting bistros. Yet a couple blocks from the action, a solitary stroll along the Bow River is a clear reminder that Banff sits within a national park. One of a visitor's first stops in






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town should be the Banff Information Centre, full of information from Parks Canada (the national park service) and the Banff/Lake Louise Tourism Bureau.

Understanding an area's culture and history adds meaning to any trip, and Banff has dozens of stories to share. The Cave and Basin National Historic Site displays the bubbling thermal waters of the Cave and Basin springs, interpretive trails, an exhibit gallery and a new theatre production explaining the landscape, history and culture of the park through humor and drama. Banff Park Museum National Historic Site of Canada is a natural history museum housed in a large rustic lodge. The Cosmic Ray Station Historic Weather Observatory on top of Sulphur Mountain bestows panoramic vistas of the Bow Valley as well as an introduction to mountain meteorology. To learn more about Banff's human inhabitants, check out the Canada Place interactive museum or the Luxton Museum, which highlights the culture of the area's native peoples.

Those who stay in the town of Banff only need to hike down the street to reach a trailhead. Favorite in-town hikes include the Hoodoos interpretive trail explaining the geology of these natural pillars, the short asphalt Sundance Trail with a more strenuous canyon loop option, and Tunnel Mountain Summit, which rewards hikers' efforts with an aerial view of Banff Townsite and the Bow Valley. After hiking, soothe aching muscles with a therapeutic soak in the Upper Hot





TAKE A DIP IN THE POOL BEFORE ENJOYING A FINE MEAL AT THE FAIRMONT BANFF SPRINGS RESORT OR VISIT CHATEAU LAKE LOUISE FOR A GLIMPSE OF VICTORIA GLACIER, ONE OF THE MOST ROMANTIC SPOTS IN CANADA.

Springs, one of the area's earliest mineral pools in an area now brimming with full-service spas.

A long day on the trails calls for replenishment; luckily restaurants in Banff can tame any craving. Perhaps inspired by their surroundings, Banff's chefs reach for new culinary heights. Their edible results often change according to the seasons and make use of the freshest—local ingredients. In summer, for example, a salad course might be sprinkled with edible wildflowers from a nearby meadow. Sample carefully crafted traditional Canadian regional foods paired with fine wines at Evergreen Restaurant, or get a little wilder at the Grizzly House, a fondue joint where diners can dunk Alberta beef, game meats and rattlesnake or stick to standbys like chicken and bread chunks. Whatever a traveler's tastes, Banff's full menu of fine and casual dining venues serve both tradi-

tional dishes and ethnic flavors, including Mexican, Thai, vegetarian and more.

Indoor pursuits extend beyond eating in Banff. The Banff Centre hosts an international arts festival throughout the summer. Filumena, the new Canadian opera, makes Banff its home base alongside chamber music ensembles, dance performances, art walks and regular literary readings. Shopaholics can divide their day and dollars between a world-class collection of galleries, shops and cafés. Retailers range from internationally-recognized clothiers, independent boutiques and Canada's oldest department store.

The loveliest lady in western Canada is named Louise. She's brilliantly beautiful, one-of-a-kind, and best of all, generous. Lake Louise offers the pleasure of her company to all who seek it.

Callers need only drive 32 miles west of the town of Banff for a date.

Louise's sparkling waters have earned the lake comparisons to precious gems. Originally named Emerald Lake for its clear blue-green water, Louise also goes by the nickname "Diamond in the Wilderness" for the way it reflects its shining backdrop of Victoria Glacier. Just one facet in an area of Banff decorated with waterfalls and glaciers, this is one of the most romantic spots in Canada.

The Lake Louise area of Banff includes the lake itself, the village of Lake Louise and the Lake Louise gondola area. Along shore, the Chateau Lake Louise is a popular spot for lakeside views of Victoria Glacier. Possessive types who don't want to share the vista will want to visit before 10 a.m. or after 4 p.m. In the summer Lake Louise's famous ski resort cross-trains as a gondola lift, providing a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. Clear days allow glimpses of Mount Assiniboine, the highest peak in Banff National Park.

Through August, the park guides provide free strolls along the shore of Lake Louise and lead daily hikes to the Plain of Six Glaciers Teahouse. Considered the best hike in the area, the Plain of Six rewards trekkers for their efforts with closer encounters with mountains, glaciers and often wildlife, and adds the bonus of a log teahouse where servers deliver trail fuel that by far transcends gorp. Not the tea type? The village of Lake Louise holds an array of dining, as well as shopping and accommodations.

With natural and man-made charms at a peak, it's easy to see why summer vacations to Lake Louise and Banff National Park spark so many romances with the area that last well beyond the season.



BANFF ON THE WEB

Trails to and from the hikers' paradise of Banff never end, and now the Internet features a seemingly endless list. Curious would-be travelers can link up online and start dreaming of a Canadian Rockies excursion via www.banfflakelouise.com and www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/banff.

Photos courtesy of Banff/Lake Louise Tourism Bureau.

