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# Beautiful

# Banff

*There's plenty to love in this charming town within Canada's first national park*

Story and photos by Julie L. Kessler  
Special to the Star-Advertiser



Lake Louise, top, named after Princess Louise Caroline Alberta who never visited her glorious namesake. Another vantage of the lake from one of the dining rooms at Chateau Lake Louise, above.

There are only a few places in the world that actually look like the glossy postcards sold in tourist shops. Banff, Lake Louise and Lake Moraine in Canada's western province of Alberta, are kissing cousins in that lofty category. The idyllic sites are included in Banff National Park, part of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984.

While the locals like to joke that Banff stands for "Be-Aware-Nothing's-For-Free," the truth is that the free things are in fact the most impressive: towering, emerald-colored pine forests, gleaming turquoise-blue lakes, hiking and walking trails amid rushing rivers, all surrounded by snow-capped mountains. This splendor is home to elk, deer, moose, bison, mountain goats, cows, horses, bears, over 260 bird species and just 8,500 year-round residents of the human variety.

## The sights

Most of Banff's central sights can be visited on foot, or by the complementary town shuttle that de-

parts from Evelyn's Coffee World, 215 Banff Ave., every half-hour from June to early September.

My daughter Remi and I walked around Cascade Botanical Gardens on Cave Avenue, with its unusual bridges, then took the 10-minute gondola ride (banffgondola.com) up Sulphur Mountain for glorious, panoramic views. We walked the 3-1/2 miles down, and once at the bottom, we stopped next door at the Upper Hot Springs (1 Mountain Ave. 1-800-767-1611, hotspings.ca) for a relaxing soak among the pines.

The Bow River, 365 miles long and fed by the Bow Glacier, is a wonderful backdrop

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for both short walks or long hikes. A visit to the Whyte Museum is worthwhile to see regional artwork and a modest Japanese art collection. It also contains a Heritage Collection (111 Bear St., 403-762-2291, whyte.org) with artifacts of the Aboriginal people, immigrants, climbers and explorers.

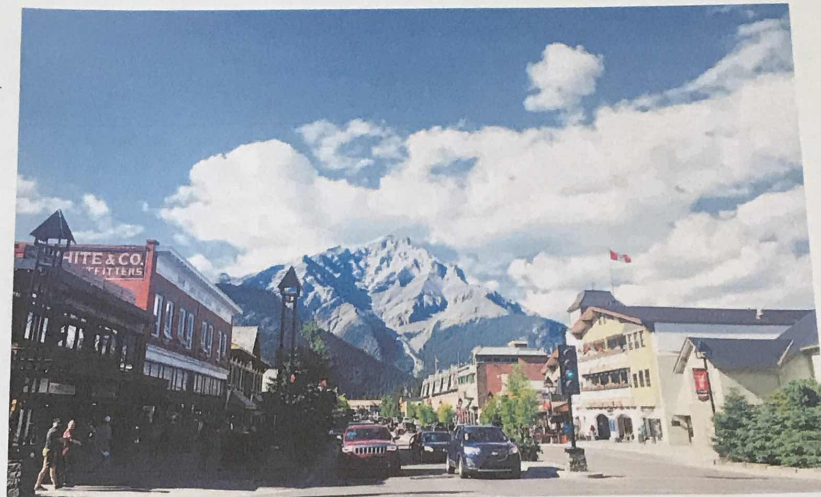
If you're in Banff on a Wednesday between June and early October, be sure to stop by the small local craft and farmers market (thebanfffarmersmarket.com) at the Bear Street parking lot. We found wonderfully fresh produce, including juicy cherries the size of apricots.

Although there are many good places for happy hour along Banff Avenue and Bear Street, not to be missed is Rundle Lounge at the historic Banff Springs Hotel (405 Spray Ave., 866-540-4406, Fairmont.com/BanffSprings). Here the perfect view is enhanced by perfectly made raspberry mojitos served with delicious rice crackers.

Along the Bow Valley Parkway, built in the 1920s by World War I prisoners mainly of Hungarian, Austrian and Ukrainian descent, we stopped at Castle Mountain Bridge, where an enormous osprey had constructed for her offspring an even more enormous nest — approximately 8 feet in diameter. About 30 minutes later we arrived at Lake Louise.

With just over 1,000 full-time residents, Lake Louise is one of the most photographed lakes in the world. While gazing at this miracle of nature, I overheard one Spanish-speaking tourist describe it to his friend as "taco de ojo," literally eye taco, or in English slang, eye candy. The lake was named after Princess Louise Caroline Alberta (1848-1939), the fourth daughter of Britain's Queen Victoria, and wife of the 9th Duke of Argyll also known as the Marquess of Lorne. Incredibly, Louise never set foot at the lake.

We, on the other hand, walked around the lake until the trail ended at a small, sandy beach. Walking back, we had a late lunch at the famed Chateau Lake Louise where every table faced floor-to-ceiling windows (111 Lake Louise Drive, 866-540-4413, Fairmont.com/



Lake Louise). With such a spectacular view, it would not have mattered one bit had we eaten the white linen tablecloth instead of the salads we enjoyed.

Although it was hard to imagine that another site could match Lake Louise, we were told the lesser-known Lake Moraine was not to be missed. It was good advice. Climbing to the top of the Rockpile Trail for prime views, Moraine's cobalt water had me distrusting my sunglasses in disbelief. The water's incredible color comes from fine-grained particles of rock called silt rock flour that is carried into the lake from melting glaciers. Lake Moraine is surrounded by the majestic Valley of the Ten Peaks — 10 mountains ranging from 10,010 to 11,234 feet in elevation — named by explorer Samuel Allen, with numerals 1 to 10 in the Stony First Nations language. Seven of the 10 peaks were later renamed after prominent individuals, including peak 6, named after Allen.

## The activities

Remi wanted to bike ride and I wanted to kayak, so we lucked out that Banff Adventures had a paddle-and-ride package that included



Banff's charming Main Street, aptly called Banff Avenue, top. Above, mountain goat traffic jam near Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. At left, the historic Banff Springs Hotel amid miles of pines.

excellent, front-suspension bikes and a canoe rental that I swapped for a kayak (211 Bear St., 800-644-8888, banffadventures.com).

Stopping at IGA Market on Elk Avenue for deli sandwiches, we rode on a dedicated bike path for most of the way up to Lake Minnewanka. Even after we turned off the path heading toward the lake, the few cars that passed us were respectful and gave us wide berth.

After a lovely lakeside picnic, we returned the bikes, had ice cream and walked the few minutes down Wolf Street to the Banff Canoe Club where both canoes and kayaks are stored. Shortly after leaving the dock, we found ourselves paddling quietly through winding waters, with a backdrop of stately fallen trees and snow-topped mountains. We soon came within 10 feet of two massive elk enjoying happy hour, munching peacefully on lakeside bushes and granting us the ultimate photo opp as we propelled silently by.

## The bed

We stayed at the comfortable three-star Mount Royal Hotel in the heart of downtown. The hotel is within walking distance of everything in central Banff. With 135 rooms and helpful staff, its high-season, doubles rates start at \$259, including breakfast, 138 Banff Ave., 877-442-2623, mountroyalhotel.com.

## The meals

We enjoyed traditional pub fare plus vegetarian and gluten-free menus at Elk & Oarsman Pub, 119 Banff Ave., 403-762-4616, elkan-doarsman.com; and delicious lamb shank at Balkan Restaurant, 120 Banff Ave., 403-762-3434, banff-balkan.ca. Bear Street Tavern had great gourmet pizza, 211 Bear St., 403-762-2021, bearstreettavern.ca; and Nourish Bistro has vegan and vegetarian options with organic wines, 211 Bear St., 403-760-3933,

nourishbistro.com.

Park Distillery Restaurant & Bar serves homemade spirits and campfire cuisine, 219 Banff Ave., 403-762-5144, parkdistillery.com, and last, but definitely not least, Cow's Ice Cream, a super premium, high-butter-fat wonder that originated on Prince Edward Island and has attained a cult-like following. I wouldn't be surprised if Cow's signature handmade waffle cones one day replace Canada's maple leaf as its national symbol, 134 Banff Ave., 403-760-3493, cows.ca.

## The lessons learned

There are few places as pleasant as Banff and fewer still as gorgeous as Lakes Louise and Moraine. In 1888, Yale professor and Canadian explorer Walter Dwight Wilcox wrote, "No scene has ever given me an equal impression of inspiring solitude and rugged grandeur." Here, the time he spent admiring the view from the Rockpile was the best half-hour of his life. Thank goodness that some things have not changed.

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## IF YOU GO...

### Banff

>> **The best way:** \$443 round trip from Honolulu on United, Alaska Air, Westjet, Delta and Air Canada. During the summer months, Uncommon Journeys has several one-week escorted, all-inclusive tours departing Seattle, stopping in Montana's Glacier National Park, before heading to Banff for four days, 800-323-5893; UncommonJourneys.com. For more information, see TravelAlberta.com and Banfflakelouise.com



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