

Part I

Getting Started

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Yes sir, our backcountry orientation programs are held at the Footblister Visitor Center, the Lostwallet Ranger Station or the Cantreadacompass Information Pavilion."

In this part...

If this is your first trip to the Canadian Rockies, where do you start? This part helps you devise a plan. I give you a rundown of the destinations covered in this book and offer tips on when to visit — the best months to ski, to hike, to see wildlife, or to catch festivals and events. I even include itineraries, so you can get a handle on how much of the Rockies you may be able to experience during your travels. Budget information is here, too, so you can figure out how much you can afford to see — along with ideas for stretching your dollars further. This part also provides tips for traveling with kids, suggestions on finding deals for seniors, hints for travelers with disabilities, and resources for gay and lesbian travelers.

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of the Canadian Rockies

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Enjoying the scenery
 - ▶ Discovering the wildlife
 - ▶ Exploring the great outdoors
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Saying you've decided to visit the Canadian Rockies is a bit like saying you're planning to see Canada.

You can experience the Rockies by fleeing to the wilderness with a backpack and a cook stove or, if you prefer, checking into a posh resort and heading straight for the spa. Myriad combinations are doable, as well: the Canadian Rockies region includes more than 23,000 sq. km (nearly 9,000 sq. miles) of national and provincial parkland along with bordering towns and cities. The whole area does share one common theme, though: spectacular mountain scenery. (Yes, it does look like the postcards.)

In this chapter, I reveal some of the natural attractions that drew travelers here in the first place, point you in the direction of majestic mountain scenes, and offer tips on where to spot wildlife.

Stepping Back in Time

Canada's first national park — indeed the country's entire system of national parks — originated with the country's first health spa, in the town of Banff, more than a century ago. To get the lowdown on the history of **Banff National Park**, start with a visit to the **Cave and Basin National Historic Site** in Banff Townsite (Chapter 13).

The story, which you can find out more about at the historic site, begins in the late 1800s, with the Canadian government busy building the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to link the country from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. When the railroad reached the Rocky Mountains,

three CPR workers discovered hot springs flowing from the side of a mountain. Likely looking ahead to retirement, these men attempted to stake a claim to the hot springs. Arguments broke out, and in 1885 the prime minister of the day, Sir John A. Macdonald, stepped in and declared the mineral waters and the surrounding 26 sq. km (10 sq. miles) a national treasure, to be owned by all Canadians.

This area, initially called Rocky Mountain National Park, was later renamed Banff National Park, and has since been expanded to encompass 6,641 sq. km (2,564 sq. miles).

Railway workers were by no means the earliest arrivals in the Canadian Rockies. Archaeologists believe that Aboriginal people lived in the area 11,000 years ago. More recently, in the 1700s, the Cree, Kootenay, and Plains Blackfoot tribes hunted and fished in the mountain passes. European fur traders and explorers arrived in the next century. Many mountains and other natural features were named by John Palliser and other members of the British North American Exploring Expedition, who ventured through the Rockies in the mid-1800s. Alberta's **Kananaskis Country** (Chapter 16) and the Kananaskis River were named by Palliser in honor of an Aboriginal.

It was the CPR, though, that planted Banff on the tourist train circuit long before the development of highways through the mountains. Indeed, a CPR director chose the name "Banff" in honor of his homeland of Banffshire in Scotland. This was well before the development of highways through the Rockies, so in order to get there you had to ride the train.

Railway officials recognized right away the potential of the spectacular Rocky Mountains as a travel destination. CPR manager William Van Horne famously remarked, "If we can't export the scenery, we'll import the tourists." Having spent a fortune developing the national railway, the CPR had considerable incentive to lure wealthy visitors to the Canadian Rockies.

Van Horne and his colleagues set about building a chain of luxury hotels, beginning with the magnificent Banff Springs Hotel, overlooking the Bow Valley, which opened in 1888. The **Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel** (Chapter 13) is a national historic site and the landmark most associated with Banff today. Development of a resort on the shores of Lake Louise, the **Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise** (Chapter 13), got under way soon after.

The Canadian Pacific Railway pushed west, crossing the Rockies between Alberta and British Columbia over the Kicking Horse Pass, laying the steepest stretch of track in North America. For safety's sake, this leg of the railway, called "Big Hill," was ultimately rerouted through creatively engineered **spiral-shaped tunnels**, which are used to this day. In British Columbia's **Yoho National Park** (Chapter 19), created in 1886, you can stop at a viewpoint on the Trans-Canada Highway to watch trains wind through the tunnels.

The Canadian government established **Jasper National Park** (Chapter 14) on the northern border of Banff in 1907, the same year a northern railway line was proposed for the Yellowhead Pass. **Kootenay National Park** (Chapter 20), between Banff and Radium Hot Springs in British Columbia, was created in 1920.

Today, national parks focus on protecting nature and wildlife. Before 1930, however, industries such as mining and logging were allowed. That explains why you can explore the remains of a former coal-mining center, at **Bankhead**, when you visit the town of Banff (Chapter 13).

Waterton Lakes National Park (Chapter 17) in southern Alberta along the Canada–United States border, was established in 1895, largely due to the efforts of a southern Alberta rancher who wanted to see the historically and environmentally unique area preserved. Early tourists arrived from the United States, traveling to Montana by train and north to Waterton Lakes by bus. The **Prince of Wales Hotel**, now a national historic site, opened in 1927. A few years later, Waterton was united with Montana’s Glacier National Park to form the Waterton–Glacier International Peace Park, a symbol of goodwill and cooperation between Canada and the United States.

When you tour around Waterton and southern Alberta, you’re bound to come across the name **Kootenai Brown**. John George Brown, who was born in Ireland, was the earliest settler in the Waterton area and the park’s first superintendent. (He was called “Kootenai” because of his association with the Kootenay tribe of southeastern B.C.) You can visit Brown’s cabin at the **Kootenai Brown Pioneer Village** in Pincher Creek, just outside Waterton Lakes National Park.

Among other celebrated figures in the Canadian Rockies are numerous mountain guides, outfitters, and climbers. Some, such as **Bill Peyto** and **Tom Wilson**, worked for the CPR during construction of the railway and chose to stay in the Banff area. A cabin that Peyto built in the 1890s is now part of the **Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies** (Chapter 13) in the town of Banff. A mountain in the Bow Valley bears the name of another legendary outfitter, **Jimmy Simpson**, who arrived in Canada from England in 1896. **Walter Wilcox**, an American student from Yale University, who explored and climbed in the region in the 1890s, named a number of mountains and lakes in the Lake Louise area. Wilcox and his group were the first to reach the summit of **Mount Temple**.

Although the Canadian Rockies were promoted as a tourist attraction from day one, travel to the region in the early years was really only feasible for the affluent. Major tourist traffic started only after highways enabled visitors to reach the Rockies by car. You can still take a luxury rail trip through the Rockies, however. **Rocky Mountaineer Railtours** (☎ 800-665-7245; Internet: rockymountaineer.com) runs various tours between Calgary and Vancouver along the historical train route.

Checking Out the Scenery

The Canadian Rockies contain some of the most impressive scenery in the world. Because of their exceptional geological features and unspoiled beauty, the four national parks of Banff, Jasper, Kootenay, and Yoho, together with the British Columbia provincial parks of Hamber, Mount Robson, and Mount Assiniboine, are recognized as a United Nations **World Heritage Site**. The Waterton–Glacier International Peace Park, with its rich and diverse wildlife and outstanding scenery, has earned the same designation. That puts the Canadian Rockies in the same category as the Pyramids, the Acropolis, the Galapagos Islands, and other natural and manmade wonders.

Setting the scene

The mountains you see when you travel through the Rockies are quite young, relatively speaking. They were formed millions of years ago, when sediments that had piled up on the beds of ancient seas caused the earth's surface to shift, lifting and folding enormous blocks of sediment. On mountainsides in Yoho National Park, paleontologists have found fossils of animals that inhabited the seas 500 million years ago. Over time, erosion, wind, water, and ice shaped and sculpted the mountains, producing their angular peaks.

The Rocky Mountains stretch more than 4,800km (3,000 miles) from Alaska, through Canada and the western United States. They're part of the Cordillera system, the largest mountain chain in North America. Because they form the Continental Divide, which separates rivers that flow west from those that run east, the Rockies are sometimes referred to as the "backbone of North America."

In Canada, the Rockies span 1,200km (740 miles), separating Alberta from British Columbia and extending from the U.S. border north into Yukon Territory. The tallest peak is Mount Robson (3,954 meters/12,972 feet). Many others exceed 3,000 meters (9,842 feet).

The Canadian Rockies are grouped into four ranges, based on the age and geological makeup of the mountains. The Western Ranges are found in parts of Kootenay and Yoho national parks and in the B.C. provincial parks. The Main Ranges, which include the peaks of the Continental Divide, such as Mount Victoria (visible from Lake Louise), are among the oldest rocks. The Front Ranges, which you find in both Banff and Jasper, include Mount Rundle in Banff and Roche Miette in Jasper. The most easterly ranges are the Foothills.

If you start your trip in Calgary, as many people do, the Rocky Mountain Foothills loom in the distance as you motor west through the **Bow River Valley** along the Trans-Canada Highway, also known as Highway 1. A detour south at Highway 40 will take you through the Kananaskis River Valley and over the Highwood Pass, the highest drivable pass in the country.

Back on Highway 1, en route to Banff, you pass the town of Canmore and spot three frequently photographed and easy-to-recognize mountains (on your left): the **Three Sisters**. These peaks, individually called Big Sister, Middle Sister, and Little Sister, were originally named the Three Nuns, since they were thought, when capped with snow, to resemble praying nuns.

In Banff National Park, a drive along the **Bow Valley Parkway** gets you off the fast lane (the Trans-Canada Highway) so that you can slow down and reflect on your surroundings.



Driving slower on the Bow Valley Parkway, also called Highway 1A, isn't optional, by the way. The speed limit here is 60 kph (37 mph).

Along the parkway, which begins just west of Banff Townsite and runs to the village of Lake Louise, you're treated to awesome views of some popular peaks, including **Castle Mountain**, which you'll have no trouble identifying thanks to its fortress or castle-like appearance. James Hector of the Palliser Expedition named this castle-like stunner in 1858. Nearly a century later the peak was renamed Mount Eisenhower in honor of the United States president, but eventually the original name was restored. The tall pinnacle that juts up on the southeast end is called Eisenhower Tower.

From the Bow Valley Parkway, if you head south into British Columbia, you follow the Kootenay Parkway down through the steep walls of **Sinclair Canyon** to **Radium Hot Springs**, where you can break for a dip in the hot pools.

For scenery of a cooler nature, drive north of Banff on the highway to **Jasper National Park**. The route name alone — **Icefields Parkway** — prompts you to pack a coat. This 230-km (143-mile) highway, which parallels the Continental Divide and offers views of glaciers, is a signature Canadian Rockies excursion. If you have the time (and energy), it's also a spectacular cycling route in the warmer months.

Quick trips to summits

If you lack the time or the urge to scramble up a mountain, you can still take in the scenery from several mountaintops (without renting a helicopter) by riding a gondola. Tickets for sight-seeing gondolas in the Canadian Rockies usually cost C\$17 to C\$25 (US\$12 to US\$18). Some gondola operators offer sight-seeing trips only in summer. The Banff Gondola, which delivers you to the top of Sulphur Mountain for a panoramic view of Banff Townsite, runs year-round. In Lake Louise, you can take a gondola to the top of Mount Whitehorn while admiring the world-famous lake with Mount Victoria rising beyond it. The Jasper Tramway, which is the highest in Canada, whisks you to the top of Whistlers Mountain. You can spot Mount Robson, the highest peak in the Rockies, as well as various neighboring peaks, rivers, and lakes. In Golden, British Columbia, a gondola at the Kicking Horse Mountain ski resort offers splendid views of the Columbia River Valley.

Watching for the Wildlife

The Canadian Rockies are famous for wildlife-viewing opportunities. Banff National Park alone is home to more than 50 species of animals, ranging in size from ground squirrels to grizzly bears. The chance to see wildlife — from your car or on the hiking trail — is one of the most thrilling aspects of travel in the mountain parks.



Bear in mind — no pun intended — that it's unwise (and illegal) to entice, feed, or disturb animals in the parks.

Among the larger critters, you may see the following:

- ✓ **Bears:** Although both black and grizzly bears live in the Rockies, black bears (which, despite their name, may be black, brown, or blond) are easier to spot from the highway, since they prefer the lower valleys, whereas grizzlies generally keep to the high country. Grizzlies are larger — some weigh as much as 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) — whereas the largest black bears are less than half that big. Bears are easiest to spot in the spring and fall. Keep your eyes peeled when you travel the Icefields Parkway between Banff and Jasper national parks (Chapter 14). Cameron Lake in Waterton Lakes National Park (Chapter 17) is a good spot to look for grizzly bears in particular (bring your binoculars). You may also see grizzlies on the slopes under the Lake Louise Gondola (Chapter 12).



On highways in Banff and other parks in the Rockies, you see cars clustered along the side of the road where somebody has spotted a bear. When you pass these “**bear jams**,” be sure to slow down in case an animal — or a tourist — darts across the highway unexpectedly. If you decide to pull over, make sure it’s safe to do so and stay in your car. Park officials encourage drivers not to stop when they see bears. Besides being aware of the potential for accidents, they’re concerned about bears that get so accustomed to human contact that they’re no longer afraid of people and begin to pose a danger. Often, these animals end up having to be destroyed.

- ✓ **Deer:** Both mule deer and white-tailed deer are found in the parks. The mule deer, which sports huge ears and has a black tip on its white tail, is more common. The best place to see mule deer is Waterton Lakes National Park (Chapter 17), particularly in the townsite. In Banff, watch for deer along the Bow Valley Parkway, especially around Johnston Canyon (Chapter 12).
- ✓ **Elk:** Chances are good that you’ll see elk in your travels, even if you don’t venture far from the towns of Banff or Jasper (Chapters 12 and 14). These huge animals (bull elk can weigh up to 450 kilograms/1,000 pounds) look pretty tame, especially when you see them nibbling on flowers and shrubs in people’s front yards. But they’re actually the most dangerous animals in Banff, so keep your distance (at least 30 meters/100 feet, or three bus lengths). Be especially cautious in calving season (mid-May through June) and in the fall mating season. And never come between a cow elk and her calf or between any group of elk.
- ✓ **Bighorn sheep:** The Rockies support large populations of bighorn sheep. Good places to look for them include the road to the Sunshine Village ski area, Mount Norquay Road, or on the Minnewanka Loop in Banff National Park (Chapter 12); near the Visitor Information Centre or at Red Rock Canyon in Waterton Lakes National Park (Chapter 17); and around Sinclair Canyon in Kootenay National Park (Chapter 20). The adult males are easily recognized by their big, curved brown horns. Ewes have short, spiky horns.
- ✓ **Mountain goats:** Differentiated from sheep by their longer, shaggier coats and pointed black horns, mountain goats are numerous in the Rockies although harder to catch sight of given their preference for high, rugged terrain. You may see them on the Icefields Parkway in Jasper — there’s a good viewing spot about 38km (24 miles) south of Jasper Townsite (Chapter 14); on the Plain of Six Glaciers hike in Lake Louise (Chapter 12); or on the road to Takakkaw Falls in Yoho National Park (Chapter 19).

Visitor information centers in each park offer information on recent wildlife sightings. It’s a good idea to check in with them, especially if you plan to go hiking.

Getting Active

Most people consider hiking the activity of choice in the Canadian Rockies (for help planning a hiking itinerary, see Chapter 3; for recommended hikes, refer to the chapters on specific parks), but the mountain parks and gateway communities offer nearly unlimited opportunities for other outdoor adventures.

Golf courses in the Rockies are hard to top for majestic surroundings. Tee off in the shadow of Mount Kidd in gorgeous Kananaskis Country (Chapter 16) or gaze at Mount Rundle and Sulphur Mountain when you hit the links in Banff (Chapter 12). In the Radium Hot Springs region on the western slopes of the Rockies, you can take in views of both the Rockies and Purcells — and enjoy a golfing season that often runs from March to October.

Mountain biking is permitted on specific hiking trails (check with park visitor centers). The Nordic Centre in Canmore (Chapter 15), built for the 1988 Winter Olympics, features 72km (45 miles) of trails. For more daring downhill adventure, check out Mount 7 in Golden, British Columbia (Chapter 18).

The Rockies are also ideal for **road biking**, whether you want to tool around near the townsites or tackle a longer cycling excursion such as the Bow Valley Parkway (Chapter 12), the Icefields Parkway (Chapter 14), or the Kootenay Parkway (Chapter 20).

Can't decide which ski hill to check out? If you base yourself in Banff or Lake Louise, you can conveniently sample the **downhill skiing or snowboarding** at three area resorts: **Lake Louise**, **Mount Norquay**, and **Sunshine Village** (Chapter 12). If you're staying in Calgary, it's easy to spend a day on the slopes at **Nikiska** or **Fortress Mountain** in Kananaskis Country (Chapter 16) and slip back to the city for dinner. West of the Continental Divide is the latest addition to the ski scene in the Canadian West — **Kicking Horse**, in Golden, British Columbia. Look for challenging terrain and memorable dining.

For cross-country skiing, visit the **Canmore Nordic Centre**. From there you can whip along trails developed for Olympic athletes. Venture into a snow-covered wilderness in nearby Kananaskis Country. Or, try one of the national parks. Banff alone offers 80km (50 miles) of groomed trails.