

The Best of Alberta

Alberta's fame—and international tourist reputation—is built on three pillars: mountains, cowboys, and more mountains. All right, that's two, but you get the point. 'This is an extravagantly gorgeous outdoor wonderland, and the Canadian Rockies are the main attraction. This is not to say all that is worthwhile is to be found at high altitude. Calgary's growing, urbane charms are drawing more visitors every year, and in Edmonton, the second-largest Fringe Theatre Festival in the world has long been a magnet for international travelers. In the badlands, the strong pull of paleontology, anchored by the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller, draws more than half a million visitors every year.

But the mountains still receive top billing, and with good reason. A practiced mix of otherworldly natural beauty and creature comforts—the Alberta Rockies have within their midst some of the finest resorts, inns, and restaurants to be found anywhere in the world—there are few places on earth where enjoying rugged wilderness can be so relaxing.

And if relaxing is not your idea of a good time, then take to the hills for world-class ski resorts, endless hiking trails, fly-fishing, rock and ice climbing, to name but a few pastimes. Because out here, the sky truly is the limit.

1 THE BEST TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Cruising the length of Waterton Lake:**

As the historic ferry boat chugs out of the harbor in Waterton Township, you can feel the chill rising off the glacial waters just a dozen feet below deck. In minutes, the township vanishes, and you're chugging through nature as it must have been thousands of years ago. This is truly a preternatural experience: Ancient peaks rise up all around you; to the south, millennia-old glaciers loom in their rocky bowls. Round trip takes about an hour and a half, but it seems a moment unstuck in time. See p. 129.

- **Hiking Sunshine Meadows:** When the ski season ends and Sunshine Village's lifts finally close down—as late as the end of May, often—the hill goes silent. But there's still the opportunity for guided hikes, up the ski hill's face and

down the other side. Even if you've skied here, you might be surprised at what awaits you: an alpine meadow well above the tree line, with endless vistas west and south of formations so massive and untouched that they seem more an artificial backdrop than real life. But real it is: Alpine lakes glisten in the sun, so cold your fingers ache on contact. To the west lies the trail to Mount Assiniboine, where a posh lodge awaits those willing to make the five-hour trek. Watch out for bears if you go; make lots of noise so they can hear you coming and get out of the way. See p. 164.

- **Sitting ringside at the Calgary Stampede:** These are the most coveted tickets at the annual rodeo, if you can get them, and they're not for the meek. Directly

behind the holding pen where two tons of bull is waiting to be released and buck off his rider are a small collection of seats for the aficionado. You can smell the bull's rage as surely as you can smell the cowboy's fear. This is as close as—or closer than—you'd ever want to get, and it's a bonafide thrill. See p. 100.

- **Helicopter tours above the Columbia Icefields:**

From the ground, they're jaw-droppingly awesome: A sheet of ice settled on top of the Rockies, and stretching for miles. The ice seeps over the mountain peaks and into bowls in the form of glaciers that hang precariously at high altitude. But from above, they're mind-bending: in mid-summer, ice and snow, as far as the eye can see, mountain peaks reduced to tiny hills poking up through the ice sheet. As your chopper hovers low in the bowls above the ice, the wind off the peaks swirling and licking at it in an uneasy jitter, you can almost feel the earth turning. See p. 194.

- **Kayaking the North Saskatchewan in Edmonton:**

The deep river valley of Alberta's capital provides it with a picturesque urban setting, but then there's the river itself. Deep, wide, and fast, it cleaves a path right through the city center. On a perfect summer evening as the sun is setting, the stillness on the water almost belies the fact you're in a city at all—except for the skyscrapers glowing sentinel-like just up the bank. See p. 235.

- **Afternoon tea at the Chateau Lake Louise:**

On a sunny day, the view from the Lakeview Lounge at Chateau Lake Louise (☎ 800/441-1414) is well-nigh incomparable: The emerald waters of the lake just in front of you, and the reflection of the Victoria Glacier at its southern end bouncing off it. Then there is the food: scones,

finger sandwiches, clotted cream—all of it great, and none of it cheap. If the price tag troubles you, try to think of it as rent: You'd pay that and more just to sit here and stare, guaranteed. See p. 186.

- **Trail riding at Mountain Meadows:**

Saddle up at the Nelson Ranch (☎ 866/653-2413), a 2,000-acre spread tucked into the province's southwest corner, and you'll be riding through history. Four generations of the same family have been ranching here since 1898, and the terrain could hardly be more spectacular: Bordering Waterton National Park to the west, the ranch nestles up against the Montana border to the south. The mountains feel almost close enough to touch, and as you ride up to the base camp, with its cozy cabins—and a great big hot tub, for those saddle-weary backsides—you'd swear you were in another era. Until dinner, that is, when you'll get a chance to eat some of the best beef broiled outdoors anywhere. See p. 128.

- **Soaking up the sunshine at Prince's Island Park:**

Calgary's all hustle and bustle, but this island is an oasis of urban calm. A patch of lush green serenity in the middle of the Bow River, just south of downtown, Prince's Island is a favorite site for outdoor concerts and an array of other activities, but one of its best is simply nothing at all: Lean up against a shade tree, tune your ears to the burbling river, and let the world slip by. See p. 105.

- **Hiking to the Ink Pots in Banff National Park:**

This hike into Johnson Canyon is one of the busiest, and is sometimes overrun with kids, but the higher you get, past the upper falls, the crowd thins as quickly as the air as you climb up, up, up, past stunning mountain vistas to eventually reach the Ink

Pots, deep pools of icy-cold water fed from underground springs. It's all set amid a broad mountain meadow, surrounded by close-by peaks; there's even a mountain stream bubbling through the middle. It helps define the term "picturesque." See p. 161.

- **Urban cycling around Glenmore Reservoir:** Much of Calgary's drinking water comes from this reservoir, so it's mostly look-don't-touch, but the river valley it

fills is a haven for wildlife, especially birds, and the best way to see it is on two wheels. A well-maintained cycling path encircles the entire reservoir, providing lovely views, not to mention a hearty workout: The ups and downs in the valley are a challenge for all but the most seasoned pedal-pushers. Still, no rush—walk, ride, and rest at your leisure. It's like a mini-vacation in-city. See p. 108.

2 THE BEST HISTORIC SITES

- **Surveying the damage at the Frank Slide:** On April 29, 1903, the town of Frank, Alberta, disappeared. That morning, 82 million tons of mountainside came hurtling downward from its perch high above on Turtle Mountain, crushing everything in its path. The debris field, a historic site, remains a sight to behold: Boulders the size of suburban houses are strewn 150m (500 ft.) deep, 425m (1,400 ft.) high, and 1km (3,280 ft.) wide. These days, Highway 3 into British Columbia runs overtop the rubble field, and trees poke out from between the rocks. And the excellent **Frank Slide Interpretive Centre** (☎ 403/562-7388) offers you a chance to learn more about this massive cataclysm that happened in the blink of an eye. See p. 149.
- **The origins of the cowboy trade at Bar U Ranch:** Bar U Ranch (☎ 888/773-8888), a national historic site, rests in the gently rolling Porcupine Hills along the Cowboy Trail, just east of the Rockies. Some say this is where corporate ranching was born: The Bar U ran a big operation, employing thousands of cowboys and running hundreds of thousands of cattle while in operation from 1882 to 1950. Bar U

outlasted virtually everyone, but it couldn't outlast time: As ranches modernized and herds grew, Bar U owner Patrick Burns sold off parts of the vast ranch in 1950, bringing its dominance to a close. But the original Bar U site, with its horse barns, bunkhouses, mess hall, and office, remains intact. Thirty-five buildings all told—a slice of Alberta history, perfectly preserved. See p. 150.

- **Searching for David Thompson in Rocky Mountain House:** David Thompson, the celebrated cartographer, explorer, and fur trader, is credited with mapping as much as 20% of North America. Rocky Mountain House was his base for charting a pass through the Rocky Mountains. But that's not the only history here, in this small, high plains town. The rival Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company operated out of Rocky for 76 years, making it a center point of commerce and trade. See p. 152.
- **Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump:** A high bluff facing east over the endless plains made this site the perfect bison killing field. Long before European contact, Native Canadians would stampede vast herds of bison over these bluffs,

using the impact, and the crushing weight of the herd, to kill enough meat to last the winter. These days, a brilliant interpretive center (☎ 403/553-2731) steps up the bluff in harmony with its surroundings; inside, an array of excellent exhibits explains the significance of this site to Native culture and history. See p. 120.

- **Surveying the past at Lougheed House:** When Calgary was young, much of the city was built of sandstone from nearby quarries. But the material was high maintenance, and only a few buildings survive. One of the best is Lougheed House (☎ 403/244-6333), a family mansion built for the prominent Lougheed family (Peter Lougheed was premier of the province from 1971 to 1985). Built in 1907, Lougheed House represents a perfectly preserved piece of the city's architectural history.
- **Glaciers in motion:** Locally known as the "Big Rock," the **Okotoks Erratic** is the world's largest-known glacial erratic—rock dragged far from its place of origin by the shifting of the glaciers 10,000 years ago. It weighs in at a massive 16,500 tons, 9m (30 ft.) high, 41m (135 ft.) long, and 18m (60 ft.) wide. Looming out of the prairie not far from the town of Okotoks, the Big Rock

provides a glimpse of the massive forces that shaped the planet long ago. It's a favorite of novice rock climbers too, with nothing but bald prairie below the rock faces.

- **The first oil well in Western Canada:** Everyone knows that Alberta equals oil, but few would know that the first commercially productive oil well here was found in what is now Waterton Lakes National Park. A pristine wilderness area, Waterton bears none of the scars of oil exploration—owing, perhaps, to its discovery in 1902, before demand began to skyrocket in the automotive age. The well seemed to run dry a few years later, and was shut down in 1907, but it's believed there's a good amount of oil deeper than old drills could reach; with more modern technology, Waterton could be a very different place today than it is. See p. 129.
- **The Leduc Gusher:** This was the big one: oil spraying high in the sky, signaling the beginning of Alberta's oil era. It was discovered February 13, 1947, and the rush was on, as local and foreign companies raced to capitalize. The field produced 200 million barrels of oil, but more importantly it signaled the beginning of an era for the province that still dominates today. Leduc is about a half-hour south of Edmonton. See p. 215.

3 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **The Royal Tyrrell Museum:** No offense to any of the province's other excellent institutions, but this one holds the trump card. A world leader in paleontology, the Royal Tyrrell (☎ 888/440-2240), in the rich dinosaur fossil beds of Alberta's badlands, near Drumheller, is truly a world-class facility, capitalizing on location to draw some of the world's most accomplished scientists and exhibit designers in the field. No trip to Alberta would be complete without it. See p. 121.
- **The Royal Alberta Museum:** Long on Aboriginal history in the province, Edmonton's Royal Alberta (☎ 780/453-9100) includes the Syncrude Gallery of Aboriginal Culture, which showcases

11,000 years of Aboriginal history. There also are extensive displays on the geological forces that shaped the province's spectacular, varied terrain, and, of course, a nod to the dinosaurs that are such a star attraction here. See p. 234.

- **The Glenbow Museum:** Calgary's Glenbow Museum (☎ 403/268-4100) is a multipurpose institution, and it handles its multitasking role as the largest museum in the city with aplomb. It's a must for anyone with an interest in the history and culture of Western Canada. Especially notable is the third floor, with its vivid evocation of Native cultures—particularly of the local Blackfoot—and compelling descriptions of Western Canada's exploration and settlement. Other floors contain displays of West African carvings, gems and minerals, and a cross-cultural look at arms and warfare. See p. 98.
- **The Art Gallery of Alberta:** Temporarily set on the main floor of a downtown tower, this public gallery is rightly placed among the most innovative and daring contemporary art institutions in the country. It is a champion of First Nations contemporary art (think artists like Jane Ash Poitras and Carl Beam),

and soon its environment will match its ambition: In late 2009, a brand-new, C\$88-million facility will double the gallery's space to nearly 30,000 square feet. (☎ 780/422-6223) See p. 231.

- **The Whyte Museum:** A little gem of a regional museum, the Whyte (☎ 403/762-2291), in Banff, chronicles the adventuresome town's founders (none of them among my relations, alas) and the indefatigable pioneer spirit that built it. The Whyte isn't limited to history; interesting touring exhibitions, like a recent show of contemporary landscape painting interpreting the varied Alberta landscape, keep a foot planted firmly in the present. See p. 171.
- **Remington Carriage Museum:** Special interest, to be sure, but this private museum in tiny Cardston has been voted the "best indoor attraction in Canada" by Attractions Canada, and it's a thorough survey of transportation before the combustion engine ruled the roads. Every manner of carriage is present in the collection, along with a healthy dose of history. The museum also has one of the only carriage restoration shops in North America. (☎ 403/653-5139) See p. 128.

4 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS

- **Cochrane:** Get there before it's gone! Cochrane, just a half-hour from downtown Calgary in good traffic, is rapidly expanding beyond small-town status, and it's easy to see why: The spectacular location in the foothills along the Cowboy Trail is drawing city slickers with a taste for country living in droves. Calgary's boom has the city limits pushing ever-closer to Cochrane's boundaries as well, but the town retains its commitment to western heritage, with sites like

the **Cochrane RanchHouse** (☎ 403/851-2561), which was built in 2004 to recognize ranching and rodeo as twin pillars of rural Albertan culture. See p. 151.

- **Rosebud:** A tiny prairie gem cradled in a river valley on a provincial byway, Rosebud is a thriving arts center just off the map. An art school, theater, and opera house are among the tiny hamlet's hidden pleasures, as are the meals to be had at the historic **Mercantile Dining**

Room (☎ 403/267-7553). Art galleries and crafts by local artisans are for sale here as well, most of them so good you'd swear you were in a town 100 times its size (Rosebud has a little over 100 permanent residents). See p. 123.

- **Rowley:** North and west of Drumheller sits Rowley, one of Alberta's almost-ghost towns. A semi-famous Canadian movie, *Bye Bye Blues*, was shot here in 1989, increasing the town's population—albeit briefly—by a factor of 50. This is because Rowley has four permanent residents, who share maintenance duties and fund the town's up-keep with a monthly pizza night—one of the biggest draws in the region. See p. 122.
- **Vulcan:** The folks in Vulcan, Alberta, have a motto you've probably heard before: "Live long and prosper." Granted, the town was named well before Leonard Nimoy's pointed-eared alter-ego, Mr. Spock, became a cult legend. But never let it be said that an Albertan would let an opportunity to make a few bucks go to waste. The **tourist bureau** (☎ 403/485-2994) features a miniature *Starship Enterprise* as a welcoming sign, and the building itself looks lifted from the set of the late-60s *Star Trek*. Vulcan, a small farming community, celebrates Spock

Days/GalaxyFest each June, and brings in whatever tangentially Trek-related celebrity it can get (in 2008, it was Rod Roddenberry Jr., son of Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry and Majel Barrett Roddenberry). See p. 127.

- **Bragg Creek:** Not much more than a shopping plaza and a gas station, Bragg Creek, a short 45-minute hop west of Calgary, remains a draw as much for its excellent ice cream shop as for its perch on the edge of Kananaskis Country. Increasingly becoming known as a weekend getaway for moneyed Calgarians, Bragg is starting to show its urbane side: contemporary fusion restaurants, for one, and a day spa. But really, the attraction is the location: Bragg sits in the curl where the Rockies begin—picturesque, to say the least. See p. 151.
- **Lake Louise:** Just a half-hour west of Banff seems to make all the difference. Where Banff is crowded, noisy, and over-touristed at times, Lake Louise is peaceful and serene. An excellent, hippie-ish bakery and laid-back atmosphere make it all the more appealing. In Banff, you feel urged to do everything; in Louise, as the locals call it, you can be content to do nothing at all. See p. 186.

5 THE BEST LUXURY ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Jasper Park Lodge** (☎ 780/540-4454): Amid the grand old railway hotels of the bygone era, it is the most modest of them that remains the most alluring. The Jasper Park Lodge, set on 700 acres of mountain meadow just outside the town of Jasper, with its bend-over-backward service, is the ultimate in civilized wilderness refuges. Guests stay in an array of out-buildings around the Lodge's private lake, in units

ranging from a hotel room to a full suite. Canoeing and tennis, horseback riding and swimming, fine dining and cocktails, give the lodge a feeling of bygone-era privilege. The room service delivered on bicycle along the gentle path that runs alongside the lake doesn't hurt, either. See p. 204.

- **The Kensington Riverside Inn** (☎ 403/313-3733): It's a little slice of Malibu along the riverbank in Calgary. The

Riverside, with its less than two dozen rooms, is private, intimate, modern, and sleek. Cocktails are served in the inn's comfortable, expansive lobby lounge—when weather permits, fireside. Warm grays and marble, dark leather and wood define the aesthetic. There is nowhere else in the province where you're likely to feel as much like a Hollywood star on hideaway. See p. 84.

- **Mount Engadine Lodge** (☎ 403/678-4080): This is roughing it in the best possible way. Tiny Mount Engadine Lodge is about a half-hour north of Canmore on a rough gravel road. Off the proverbial beaten track, there are few travelers here; as you pass a network of pristine mountain lakes, you'll surely wonder why. At the lodge, perched on a bluff above moose meadows (well-named, as they meander along the mossy ooze through the valley below, oblivious to your presence), you can enjoy some of the finest home cooking in the Rockies while sipping wine on the patio. On any given day you can hear a pin drop—or a moose bleat. See p. 140.
- **The Post Hotel** (☎ 800/661-1586): Tucked away in a grove of trees in secluded Lake Louise, the Post is a wonderful antidote to Banff fatigue. Voted the best hotel in Canada by *Travel & Leisure* magazine in 2007, it's not hard to see why: Private, peaceful, and elegant while remaining homey, the Post has garnered an international reputation for impeccable service (it's part of the prestigious Relais & Chateau network) and easygoing comfort. Its award-winning restaurant doesn't hurt, either: *Gourmet* magazine recognized it as one of its top-three rustic retreats in the world. See p. 189.
- **Chateau Lake Louise** (☎ 800/540-4413): Dramatic grandeur in the shadow of the Victoria glacier, the Chateau, like

its sister property, the Banff Springs, teems with tourists almost every day of the year. Different from the Springs, though, is that here it doesn't seem to matter. Understated where the Springs is overstated, the Chateau has an old-world charm that's at ease in its rugged surroundings. Of course, the view doesn't hurt. On the shores of Lake Louise, the glacier that feeds it suspended high above, is one of the greatest vistas to be seen anywhere. See p. 188.

- **Banff Springs Hotel** (☎ 800/540-4406): The grande dame of the Rocky Mountain hotels, the Springs has been plenty touristed and tarted up over the years, most notably when its grand entrance was built over to provide a more efficient guest-processing experience. But the views of the Bow Valley from the Rundle Room are still near unmatched, and the service, among the best you'll find anywhere, keeps the Springs an experience worth having. See p. 173.
- **The Matrix Hotel** (☎ 800/465-8150): A brand-new, of-the-moment boutique hotel, the Matrix is the urbanite's choice in downtown Edmonton. Sleek design and a soothing palette of browns and grays provide a perfect minimalist backdrop for whatever urban adventure you care to infuse it with. See p. 222.
- **Moraine Lake Lodge** (☎ 800/522-2777): Not far from Lake Louise, Moraine Lake Lodge defines "romantic getaway." Rustic, charming rooms and cabins cluster along Moraine Lake, which is walled in by mountains along its shore. Take a canoe ride, stroll along the shore, have dinner in the arched, glass-roofed dining room and take in the surrounding splendor, or sit by your private fireplace in your room. This is about as romantic as romantic gets. See p. 189.

- **Hotel MacDonald** (☎ 866/540-4468): Perched high on the banks of the Saskatchewan River in Edmonton, the MacDonald surveys the valley with commanding grace. You can, too, from

the expansive patio overlooking the river—or choose to view it from the stately rooms that recall an old-world elegance. See p. 222.

6 THE BEST FESTIVALS

- **The Calgary Stampede:** Whether you want to call it a festival or not is your choice, but there's no denying that this is the biggest party Alberta has every year, bar none. Forget the thousands of tourists for a moment—it's Calgarians pulling on their boots, donning their Stetsons, and leaving work at noon every day (if they show up at all) that sets things alight. Oh, and there's that biggest-rodeo-on-earth aspect as well, but it's only part of the fun. This is the one event where an entire city goes to the same party. See p. 100.
- **The Edmonton Fringe Festival:** After Edinburgh, the world's first and largest, Edmonton's Fringe Theatre Festival has no equal. This is a theater town, and it's never more apparent than during the 10 days in June when theater companies from all over the world descend on the Alberta capital with their finest, freshest work. This is truly a cross-section of the best contemporary theater the world has to offer—a can't-miss event for those in love with live performance. See p. 241.
- **Wordfest:** Calgary's answer to Toronto's International Festival of Authors (one of the world's biggest), Wordfest (aka the Banff-Calgary International Writer's Festival) has become an increasingly popular draw for an A-list of writers. Readings are open to the public, and have included such luminaries as Richard Ford and David Adams Richards. It takes place each October. See p. 36.
- **Banff Television Festival:** It's more an industry shindig than a public event, but a lot of big names descend on Banff each year for this annual meet-and-greet marketplace. Public events are scant, but if you're ever going to see Michelle Pfeiffer (on the arm of TV impresario hubby David E. Kelly) trotting her Manolos in the midst of the Rockies, then this is where you should be. **The Banff Centre** (☎ 800/565-9989), a cultural hub, hosts talks by TV big wheels (past guests have been *Sex and the City* creator Darren Star and *West Wing* creator Aaron Sorkin) that a well-planned visitor might see. And if not that, the throngs of aspiring TV creators, pitching madly to whomever will listen, provide amusement enough. See p. 168.
- **Beethoven in the Badlands:** Set in a natural amphitheater that seats 2,500 just outside Drumheller, Beethoven in the Badlands is an annual event that takes the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra into the open air. The setting is truly spectacular: A stone bowl curves around and back from a flat plane of rock, and the acoustic effect is astonishing and crystal clear. The site of Drumheller's annual *Passion Play*, about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you'd almost think this natural formation was planned by Somebody. See p. 120.
- **The Calgary Folk Music Festival:** There are bigger music festivals, and there may even be better ones (because

music depends on your point of view, doesn't it?), but on a sunny afternoon, the setting, on Prince's Island Park, can hardly be matched. And with a list of past headliners that includes Blue

Rodeo, Ani DiFranco, Kris Kristofferson, Calexico, Bedouin Soundclash, and Charlie Musselwhite, the music ain't bad, either. See p. 35.

7 THE BEST DINING

- **The Blue Pear** (☎ 780/482-7178): Set in an unassuming strip mall in Edmonton's 124th Street district, the Blue Pear might just be one of the best restaurants in the country. Run by a husband-and-wife team with a stout devotion to local, organic ingredients, the culinary results are no less than symphonic: lamb ravioli in a yoghurt brown butter sauce; roast pork belly, crab cake, soyapea puree with pancetta-wrapped enoki mushrooms—the list goes on. Each plate—there are four courses for C\$85, no exceptions—arrives like a carefully constructed piece of art. But the real art is the flavor. See p. 229.
- **The Bison Mountain Bistro** (☎ 403/762-5550): New in 2008, the Bison, on the second floor of a new “green” building in Banff, offers an array of local ingredients simply prepared with flavor in mind. The name tells the tale: bison—burgers, steaks, or smoked—or venison pepperoni, all worked in to meals as thoughtful and flavorful as they are simple. A general store, with house-made breads and ingredients or whole sandwiches to go, is the busiest place in town—and deserves to be. See p. 182.
- **The Edith Cavell Dining Room** (☎ 780/852-6052): The main level of the Jasper Park Lodge offers the refined mountaineer the white-glove treatment: The Edith Cavell, named for the majestic peak that rises above the lake just outside the dining room window, is old-world fine dining. And fine it is: Multiple courses served by a battalion of servers, all with focused roles (appetizer, salad, cocktail, wine, de-crumber). Meanwhile, in all of Alberta, its beef tenderloin is perhaps the most perfectly grilled piece of beef to be found anywhere. And that's saying something. See p. 211.
- **Towa** (☎ 403/245-8585): It doesn't cost an arm and a leg and its environment is decidedly casual—cartoony, even—but Calgary's Towa sushi earns huge marks for sheer inventiveness. Maki rolls the size of your wrist and sashimi that seem to require an entire side of fish are the hallmarks of this creative Japanese restaurant. Size isn't all that matters: its combinations, like an unagi roll made with sweet omelete, avocado, and freshwater eel, are ingenious flavor combinations. Add in the lively young crowd, and this is a winner. See p. 95.
- **Mercato** (☎ 403/263-5535): One of Calgary's true see-and-be-seens, Mercato deserves the hype: fresh, traditional Italian with a contemporary twist that is as consistent as it is delicious. Sublime pastas, fresher-than-fresh salads and cheeses, a deep respect for the simplest ingredients like olive oil and balsamic vinegar—all earn Mercato high marks. The food's not the only thing that's fresh here, though. If you can cast a glance away from the brilliance on your plate, you'll understand quickly enough. See p. 94.

- **Baker Creek Bistro** (☎ 403/522-2182): An unassuming spot on a secondary road that hooks through the mountains just a few minutes east of Lake Louise, you'd be forgiven for driving by the Baker Creek Chalets if looking for fine dining. The chalets are lovely, set alongside a burbling creek, but the dining room, in an unassuming log cabin, should be the main attraction. Fresh local food served with grace and contemporary panache by chef Shelley Robinson is a delight and surprise, and well worth a step off the beaten track. See p. 191.
- **Jack's Grill** (☎ 403/434-1113): An Edmonton institution for those in the know, Jack's, tucked in a quiet residential area, has a lovely courtyard and an even lovelier simple, creative menu. The emphasis is on the carnivorous here—try the simply grilled beef tenderloin, infused with interest by the addition of Stilton, or the New Zealand venison rack—but it's always simple, and always creative. See p. 231.
- **The 1886 Buffalo Café** (☎ 403/269-9255): The name means what it says: Founded in 1886 (the "Buffalo" was added in recent years) and made moderately famous by a Visa ad made for the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, Calgary's 1886 is probably the longest-

running breakfast in town, if not the whole country. The hash browns are piled high, the bacon and sausages are fresh and perfectly cooked, the flapjacks come in towers, and the array of egg dishes is dizzying. Choose the fresh fruit over the potatoes—it's worth it. See p. 92.

- **Fleur du Sel** (☎ 403/228-9764): Locals don't get more local than this. With its rich, red walls and black-and-white tile, everything about Calgary's Fleur de Sel screams "French!"—including its boisterous owner and chef, Patrice. Like most of his staff, he knows most of the customers by name, and greets them with the enthusiasm of a favorite uncle. Traditional French bistro fare, served in a homey environment, make this a great stop to take the pulse of the town. See p. 95.
- **Evil Dave's** (☎ 780/852-3323): The loyal following of locals should be your first clue that this Jasper resto, with its devotion to theme—"Malevolent" home-style Alberta beef meatloaf, or "Ex-Wife" spicy tomato penne, with chicken and shrimp—is a keeper. Chef David Hussereau, who also runs the considerably more *haute* local Tekarra Restaurant, is looking to unwind, but his cooking here is just as razor-sharp. See p. 212.

8 THE BEST SCENIC DRIVES

- **The Columbia Icefields Parkway:** Predictable, sure, but with good reason. You couldn't do this drive often enough to be anything but awed by it. As you drift past the silent majesty of millennia-old glaciers, millions of tons of age-old ice draped over the looming, ancient peaks, you may as well leave your jaw on the dashboard, because around the

next bend it'll just land there again. Easily and without a doubt the most dramatic stretch of highway in the province, if not the entire country. See p. 193.

- **The Bow Valley Parkway:** On the short stretch of Trans-Canada that links Banff to Lake Louise, there's a little-traveled side route called the Bow Valley Parkway

(or Highway 1A). It's little-traveled with good reason, perhaps: Its two lanes wind through rock and forest and probably double the travel time between the two points. But getting there, in this case, is half the fun. Little 1A wends off along the base of Castle Mountain, one of the true massives of the local peaks, and getting underneath it offers the truest sense of its majesty. It's also along 1A where you're most likely to see wildlife—a giant elk grazing by the roadside, or maybe even a black bear (don't even mention the bighorn sheep, which are as plentiful as squirrels). Sometimes the road less traveled does, in fact, make all the difference. See p. 161.

- **The Dinosaur Trail:** It's a short loop from the town of Drumheller around the Dinosaur Trail, but inside it is some of the most spectacularly barren scenery to be found anywhere. As you circle the route around Horse Thief and Horseshoe canyons, carved by the Red Deer River, picture yourself sailing through a massive, shallow inland sea, swarming with marine dinosaurs twice the size of your car. Then look down into the dark, desiccated canyons, and think how long it took the river to carve deep and wide enough to reveal this ancient history. It can make you feel tiny, indeed. See p. 119.
- **Highway 40 through Kananaskis:** It's only open less than half the year, from June 15 to December 1, and with good reason: This is among the more rugged drives along the fringe of a major mountain range you'll ever take. The turn-off at Longview from Highway 22 warns you that the road is fraught with hazards, but on a beautiful summer day with the sunroof open, none of this seems to even be possible.

As it transports you from bald prairie expanses to the towering peaks of the Rocky Mountains on the way to Highway Pass, you'll have reached an elevation of 2,228m (7,310 ft.)—the highest elevation of any highway in the country. As you cruise close to the tree line you'll find mounds of snow, even in high summer. But save your gawking for the wildlife, as elk, moose, mountain goats, and the occasional bear pause to watch you rumble by. See p. 135.

- **The David Thompson Parkway:** Connecting Rocky Mountain House to the east with the Icefields Parkway, the David Thompson Highway is a direct route into the heart of the Rockies' high scenic drama. The foothills west of Rocky give way quickly to the hard-rock mountains, which rise quickly in the west. The road is swallowed along the way, until you realize there are mountains ahead, behind, and all around you. The sense is of a massive, natural fortress that you've slipped inside. See p. 153.
- **The Cowboy Trail between Cardston and Rocky Mountain House:** Alberta's famed Cowboy Trail skirts the eastern edge of the Rockies, through rolling foothills and nothing much more at all, and that's its charm: hills upon hills, rolling gently toward mountains that seem close enough to touch. Passing through the occasional small towns along the way offers a clue to the road's name: These are true west places, with pickup trucks and honky-tonk spirit to spare. North of Rocky Mountain House, the trail spills out into high plains, which are less picturesque than the mountain vistas to be found south. See p. 148.

9 THE BEST EXPERIENCES FOR KIDS

- **Heritage Park:** With a petting zoo, steam engine train, paddle-wheel boat, and more cowboy and frontier fun than you can twirl a rope at, Calgary's Heritage Park offers a plethora of off-the-main experiences for the little ones. Easily a full day of distractions for the kiddos. And the grownups might learn a thing or two as well. See p. 101.
- **The Royal Tyrrell Museum:** We know it's already been listed, but a special mention of the Tyrrell is deserved here, for its amazing array of dinosaur diversions, such as interactive displays, films, animations, and hands-on experiences, like a bucket full of T-Rex tooth fossils ripe for the handling. Slightly bigger kids (9 years+) can camp out overnight in the badlands and pick up real fossils from the dinos' final resting place. See p. 121.
- **Telus World of Science, Calgary and Edmonton:** Facilities with a distinct kid-friendly focus, both venues offer a romp through the world of science from outer space to the microscopic. The Lego Mindstorms, in which kids can build a functioning robot out of Lego, as well as multiple programs, should easily provide an afternoon's diversion for the little ones. See p. 101 and 234.
- **Shaw Millennium Park:** With 75,000 square feet of skateable surface, basketball courts, and four sand volleyball courts, Calgary's Shaw Millennium park is one of the largest skateboard parks in North America and draws skaters of all ages from all over the continent. A good bet for bigger kids; helmets and pads can be rented or purchased from the pro shop. See p. 101.
- **World Waterpark, West Edmonton Mall:** Five acres of waterslides and wave pool in the massive West Edmonton Mall promise hours of wet and wild fun for kids. With the water kept at a bathtub-like 86°F (30°C), it's a little trip to the tropic in Northern Alberta. See p. 240.
- **Calaway Park:** Western Canada's largest amusement park boasts roller coasters, a log ride, and gentle diversions, too, like bumper cars and mini-golf. See p. 102.
- **Calgary Zoo:** One of the best zoos to be found in Western Canada is in Calgary—it recently placed in the top 10 in North America—with generous enclosures for big-thrill animals like Siberian tigers, and a baby elephant born in 2007. The Zoo's prehistoric park, with no fewer than a dozen life-size dinosaur replicas, provides an exciting meander through Alberta's prehistoric past. See p. 101.

10 THE BEST HIKING AND WALKING TOURS

- **Grassi Lakes:** The Canmore/Kananaskis area is overrun with great day hikes, but this one's a real winner. Short (5km/3 miles) but spectacular, the trail starts as a wide, rough road at the Canmore Nordic Centre but quickly narrows and climbs, past a towering waterfall and up, up, up to the lakes themselves, which are an intense hue of aquamarine, towering peaks all around them. People have been climbing to take in the view from Grassi Lakes for millennia; keep an eye out for Native Canadian pictographs just above the lakes themselves. See p. 146.
- **Crypt Lake:** A water taxi across icy-blue Waterton Lake in Waterton National Park takes you to the Crypt Lake trail

head, a full-day hike that takes you up 700m (2,297 ft.) to the shores of the even-icier aquamarine Crypt Lake. There's much to take in along the way, too, including a 182m (600-ft.) waterfall and a natural tunnel. Agoraphobes beware: There's also a dramatic cliff traverse. See p. 131.

- **Urban Safari:** For those who like their hiking not too far from a well-stocked bar, Calgary's **Urban Safari** tour (☎ 403/283-3158) won't disappoint. Hike one of Calgary's central neighborhoods, foraging for culinary delights at some of the city's best restaurants, all included in the package. See p. 111.
- **Lake Agnes and the Big Beehive:** Set out from the Chateau Lake Louise

along the lake's south shore about 500m and you'll be at the trail head for Lake Agnes, a short, popular, and utterly spectacular 11km (7-mile) loop that gradually climbs about 500m (1,640 ft.) over its span. First you'll pass Mirror Lake, and above it, the Big Beehive, an aptly named rock formation that looms over the lake and offers gorgeous views of the Chateau and the lake below. This is civilized wilderness; a little higher up offers respite at the Lake Agnes Teahouse, a log cabin coveted for tourism. Keep going; the farther you go, the thinner the crowd gets (many turn back at the teahouse) along with the air, and the better to absorb the spectacular scenery surrounding you. See p. 187.

11 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Visiting grizzlies in Banff:** Fortunately, few in bear country (that's the Rockies in general, folks) ever come nose-to-nose with a grizzly, which is a good thing; one ton of hungry bear can be hard to reason with. But some tours offer the occasion to view the magnificent beasts in their natural habitat in relative safety. **Discover Banff Tours** (☎ 877/565-9372) takes you bear watching through Lake Louise and on to the Grizzly Bear Refuge near Kicking Horse. See p. 160.
- **Heli-hiking in Banff:** It's one thing to take a helicopter over the Rockies; the wind whipping off the peaks makes it an unsettling, exhilarating experience. But touching down way up high, where no truck, train, or hiker could ever get to, is an otherworldly experience. This is an untouched as the earth gets. See p. 194.
- **Paddling the Athabasca River and climbing Morro Peak:** The **Jasper Adventure Centre** (☎ 800/565-7547) calls it their "ultimate adventure," and it's hard to argue, really. A 12km (8-mile) paddle along the Athabasca River ends up at the foot of Morro Peak, where you'll climb 700m (2,100 ft.) to the rocky—and somewhat frighteningly narrow—ridge that is the mountaintop. Only one thing beats looking at the mountains here: Standing on top of one. Here's your chance. See p. 197.
- **Dog-sledding in Kananaskis:** For those for whom skiing is too mundane, **Mad Dogs and Englishmen** (☎ 403/609-3670) is happy to take you on a true-life Arctic-esque adventure across the frozen mountainscapes, pulled behind a game team of huskies. See p. 145.
- **Riding range on a cattle drive:** Sure, you can get all your cowboy experience at Cowboys, the rowdy, always-game bar in Calgary, but if you want to go all the way, driving cattle is about as authentic as it gets. If you've seen *City Slickers*, where Billy Crystal and friends play, well, city slickers driving in the herd alongside real-life ranch hands,

you've got the idea. **Home on the Range Adventure Tours** (☎ 866/760-8334) provides a link with real, live ranches in the Rocky Mountain foothills along the Cowboy Trail to ride range on the herd for a night or three. This is the real deal—right down to the smell. See p. 148.

- **White-water rafting Horseshoe Canyon in Kananaskis Country:** The truth

of it is, you could white-water raft on any number of mountain rivers all over Alberta and get a taste of the experience. But Horseshoe Canyon, in Kananaskis Country, offers the iconic mountain landscapes, a crisp, icy river, a plethora of water ledges to tumble over—and, most importantly, plenty of white water. See p. 148.