

1

Strategies for Seeing **Banff** & the **Canadian Rockies**



Banff & the Canadian Rockies



Previous page: Photo opportunities can arise anywhere—even on the road between sites.

The beautiful Canadian Rockies are a vast area with so much to see and do. Your time is precious and you need to plan according to the seasons, the length of your visit, and your goals and tastes. Don't try to do it all—the magic in Banff is in the quietest moments. In this chapter I have several tips to help you make the most of your time.

Rule #1: Get out of town!

While the Town of Banff holds most of the lodgings and restaurants, not to mention shops and nightlife, it's what you'll find in the rest of the park that will most astound you. Those particularly interested in solitude should head to a nearby national park—Jasper in the north, or Kootenay and Yoho to the west—or to one of the many backcountry lodges dotted throughout the park. Even day trips in a car or a short hike count towards spreading your wings here.

Rule #2: Go to the experts and visit the Parks Canada Information Centres

These should be your first stop, whether it's in the Town of Banff, at Lake Louise, or in Jasper. Pick up maps and permits and take in interpretive exhibits that will greatly enhance your experience in the Canadian Rockies. The friendly staff members have the latest trail, road, avalanche, and wildlife reports, and can answer just about any question you have.

Rule #3: Don't over-schedule

Jam-packing your days from an early-morning bird-watching trip to a late-night stargazing excursion will only leave you exhausted. The loveliest moments in Banff are those that surprise you—spotting a wolf on a quiet road, or having a leisurely picnic by the river. Give yourself time for spontaneous adventure and explorations.

Rule #4: Allow plenty of travel time

Not only are the distances great, but you'll find lots of mountains along the

way that provide twists and turns—there are few straight lines in the Canadian Rockies. And along the way from A to B, there'll likely be dozens of photo opportunities and maybe even some wildlife sightings. Plan to get out of the car often, and take your time while driving.

Rule #5: Come in the shoulder season

Not only will it save you money, but you'll avoid the crowds. June is considered off-season, and September (my favorite month in Banff) is great for hiking. For winter travelers, try pre-Christmas December for good deals and April for spring skiing.

Rule #6: Be prepared for weather

In the Rockies, it's common to see all four seasons in a day, any time of the year. Even in the middle of summer, don't be surprised to see snow—bring appropriate clothing and never hit the trail without a good jacket, sunscreen, and a bottle of water.

The Lake Louise visitor centre provides maps, permits, and park information.





Mountains at every turn can make for winding roads and slow driving.

Rule #7: Try something new

Banff is a great place to do something you've never done before—or something you haven't done in years. Hiking isn't just for the super-fit and horseback riding ain't only for cowboys. The campground up at Lake O'Hara may be the most accessible backcountry camping in the mountains, so give it a try. In winter-time, take a snowboard lesson or try ice skating. Vacations are for breaking free!

Care-free skiing in the off-season.



Rule #8: Pick one central activity each day, then plan around it

Some low-key days will be for relaxing and strolling Banff Avenue. Others, like when you're heading out for a hike, require you to plan ahead—get your lunch the day before, check trail and weather conditions, bring lots of water, and get a good night's sleep. Be logical so that you don't have to back-track.

Rule #9: Think outside the park

Save cash by staying in a hotel just outside Banff. The Town of Canmore, just 20km (12 miles)—a 15-min. drive—east of Banff, is a lovely mountain town with an impressive list of affordable hotel options.

Rule #10: Use this book as a reference, not a concrete plan

Don't worry; I won't be hurt if you don't follow every single tour I lay out here. Read through the options I present, pick the ones that most appeal to you, and adapt them to your personal circumstances. ●