

The ultimate Rocky road trip

Photos: Alamy, Parks Canada/Ryan Bray



You could drive the Icefields Parkway in three hours. But you won't. Whether you're a walker, photographer or expert picnicker, this is the longest three-hour trip in the world.

By Leslie Woit, Saturday 27 February, 2016

“There are two ways to see the [Icefields Parkway](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/northamerica/canada/736634/A-seriously-good-spin.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/northamerica/canada/736634/A-seriously-good-spin.html>). The hard way,” explained Banff mountain guide Chic Scott. “And the easy way.”

In 1967, Chic was among a small team who completed the first high-level ski traverse from Jasper to Lake Louise. It took 21 days to negotiate that particular uncharted strip of Alberta's [Rocky Mountains](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/north-america/galleries/Rocky-Mountains-highlights-17-incredible-photographs-of-the-Rockies/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/north-america/galleries/Rocky-Mountains-highlights-17-incredible-photographs-of-the-Rockies/>), 300km over what he described as “a logical line along the

Continental Divide”. They climbed peaks, hopscotched crevasse-riddled glaciers, crossed massive avalanche paths, all while passing through some of the most resplendent, rugged mountain scenery on Earth.

The Canadian Rockies, Banff National Park. Banff Lake Louise Tourism/Paul Zizka



And then there's the easy way

Parallel to Chic's backcountry route, the Icefields Parkway cuts a swath through western Alberta from Jasper to Lake Louise, a civilised 230km highway paved smooth as a baby's bottom. From behind my wheel – sun-roof open, Neil Young strumming, Twizzlers at the ready – I will experience those same Rocky Mountains, with as many glittering glaciers, lush forests, scenic hikes, wildlife cameos, and photo opportunities as I could wish for.

"A road trip is a magical thing, a prescribed journey into the unknown"

mountain drives.

Thanks to the men who built it – this was a Depression-era project that initially yielded a one-lane gravel path – the Icefields Parkway moved the mountains to the people. It is, without debate, one of the world's great



Mountain guide Chic Scott. Photo Patrick McCloskey

A road trip is a magical thing, a prescribed journey into the unknown. This one unites Banff and Jasper National Parks into one contiguous curtain call of alpine majesty.

In an area the size of Wales, more than 100 glaciers are visible from road. There are any number of ways – walking or fishing, sightseeing or mountain climbing – to get a feeling for the place. And the first way? My, what

big teeth it has...

Paw Patrol: grizzly bears crossing the Icefield Parkway. BluePeak Travel Photography



Elk pitstop. Kathmandu



Coyote. Parks Canada/Valerie Domaine



Traffic, but not as you know it

Bear jam. I'd been looking forward it. Just minutes south of the sleepy railway town of Jasper, beneath the crenelated peak of Mt Kerkeslin, half a dozen cars have pulled onto the hard shoulder, with more slowing down to join them. About 40ft away, flanked by a flattering array of wildflowers and shrubbery, a very large bear raises his very big head and looks me straight in the eye.

Weighing in at around 35 stone, with a handsome tan snout and glossy supermodel fur, this brawny creature would cast a shadow over a Mini Cooper. As per my natural instinct for survival and Parks Canada advice – if hiking, carry bear spray and make noise; if in a car, remain inside – I wind down the window and reach for my camera. Low, gruffling sounds hang in the air as he nuzzles the ground for his rooty lunch. Magic.

Wildlife sightings are one of the most exciting things about this drive. It's with good reason that Jasper the Bear – an urbane bear-next-door with a wife and two cubs – is the official mascot of Jasper National Park. He was the creation of cartoonist James Simpkins, whose regular feature for *Maclean's* magazine began in 1948 and ran for two decades, as well as being internationally syndicated.

In addition to Jasper the Bear's towering statue by the railway station, odds are on side for spotting various types of live ones. The short list of wildlife that's potentially on display? Elk, deer, bear, moose, caribou, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, coyotes, wolves, beavers, pine martens, lynx, porcupines, cougars, snowshoe hares and wolverines.

Obviously, some creatures are more elusive than others. Elk, you will soon see, are not shy. Indeed within minutes, a dozen-pointed *Cervus canadensis* lope into frame and Alberta's most famous ungulates – around 1,600 elk live in the two parks – begin to populate my memory card.

The Ice Explorer navigating the Athabasca Glacier. Brewster Travel Canada



Mine's with a little ice

The road winds and rises over passes, skirts wetlands speckled with ducks, glides beneath peaks that fill the car windows and mirrors to bursting. After a full afternoon of roadside photo calls, I stop for the night at Columbia Icefields, the largest icefield in the Canadian Rockies – and as the glittering jewel in Canada's glacial crown the namesake for the Parkway itself. Nearly three-quarters of the park's highest peaks are clustered near the Icefields, making this alpine panorama ground zero.

A fresh chill floats through the open window of my bedroom at the Glacier View Inn, the only hotel for many a mile. Its remote location the edge of a glacier, the side of a highway – lends an air of exotic desolation – part *Dr Zhivago*, part Bates Motel.



The Glacier View Inn.
Brewster Travel Canada

I stay the night in order to enjoy a leisurely and very modern-day morning expedition: snow-time in the summer. Joining a group of Americans, British and Chinese visitors, I clamber up the steps of a *Moonraker*-worthy Ice Explorer, four metres high and weighing in at a spritely 25 tons. Specially designed for glacier travel, it's one of only 23 in existence. All but one

is hard at work from April through October traversing the permanent snow and ice of the Columbia Icefields. The 23rd is stationed in Antarctica, so you get the picture of what they're built for.

It soon goes seriously downhill, slowly. The machine's toothy tracks bite hard into the gradient. Negotiating the moraine's edge towards the glacier, we're descending the second steepest grade in North America, beaten only by Lombardy Street in San Francisco. Through the panorama window, a study in white unfurls – from baby powder to old lace to tarnished silver and back again; variations of ancient ice and layered snow; hulking seracs and icy turquoise fangs as far as the eye can see.

The Athabasca Glacier. Paul Zizka



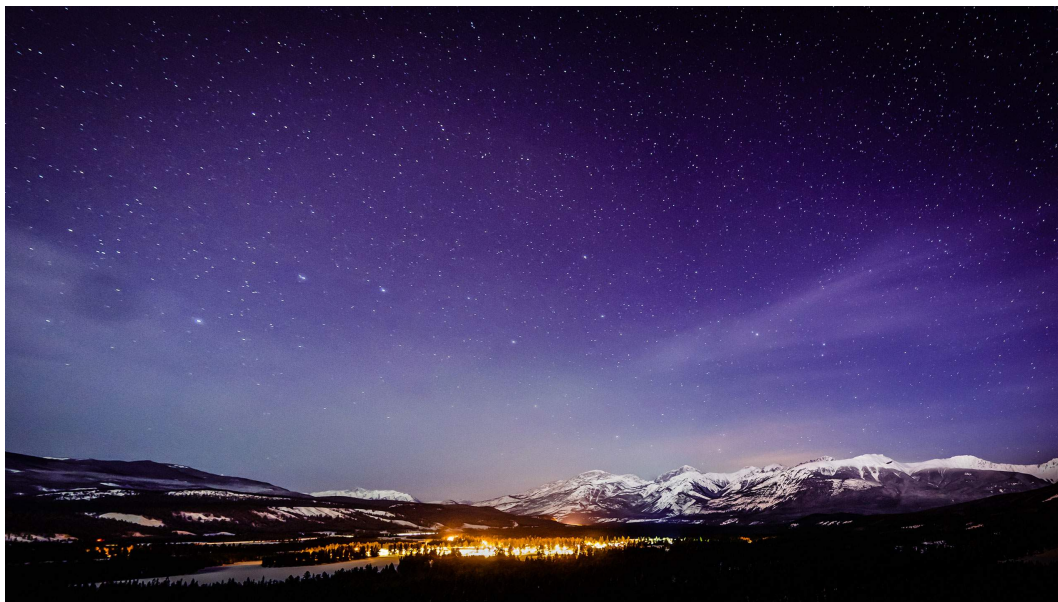
Known as “the mother of rivers”, the Icefield comprises about 30 distinct glaciers. We're on the largest, the Athabasca, travelling from subalpine to alpine terrain in minutes. When the humungous ATV slows to halt, we walk over moving ice taller than the Eiffel Tower and gambol in the summer snow – building a snowman, throwing snowballs at a Canadian flag wedged into a crack in the ice, shooting selfies with Mount Snowdome bursting from the

frame. From its magical apex, at the Continental Divide, a glass of water would flow in three directions – west to the Pacific, north to the Arctic and westwards into the Atlantic via Hudson Bay.

Stargazer and telescope at the Jasper Dark Sky Festival. Jeff Bartlett



Stars over Jasper National Park. Jeff Bartlett



In 2011, Jasper was designated a Dark Sky Preserve by the Royal Astronomy Society of Canada. Limited light pollution creates ideal conditions for 11,000 square kilometres of dark-park star gazing. The Milky Way glimmers above like 100 million celestial candles.

"Framed by silver ice-capped peaks, I focus on a kaleidoscope of constellations"

As part of the Jasper Dark Sky Festival (<http://jasperdarksky.travel/>), a month-long celebration of other-worldly pursuits including outdoor concerts and Aurora Borealis watching, professor of astronomy at the University of Alberta Sharon Morsink leads a group of us on a one-night outdoor space tour. Our 360 degree classroom is the Glacier Skywalk Platform.

The Glacier Skywalk Platform. **Brewster Travel Canada**



Powder down, look up

The recently opened Skywalk's glass-floored observation platform hangs 280 metres above the Sunwapta Valley. But it's up, not down, we're looking.

“We’re talking about 40-million-year-old mountains versus a four-billion-year-old Earth and a 13-billion-year-old universe,” Professor Morsink explains, reminding us that the Rockies were, in universal terms, born yesterday.

At the mention of “10 to the 7th” she loses me, and instead guides my eye to the lens of a jumbo Dobsonian telescope. Framed by silver ice-capped peaks, I focus on a kaleidoscope of constellations, and she steers my view towards her pet stars, twinkly and dancing under powerful magnification. (I was so thrilled by the experience that a few nights later in Banff I slept on the balcony to watch meteor showers to and froing like a slow-motion Wimbledon final.)

Back on the road in the morning, sunshine dapples the snow-capped peaks as I drive south, crossing the “border” from Jasper into Banff National Park. Established in 1885, Banff is Canada’s first national park. Its protected mountains, glaciers, forests, meadows and rivers are intersected by over 1,000 miles of maintained trails, making it one of the world’s premier places to take a hike. Spoiled for choice, I pull over at Num-ti-Jah Lodge, attracted by both the look and the sound of it.



The dining room at Num-ti-Jah Lodge

Num-ti-jah (the Stoney Plain Native word for pine marten) is a fabulously higgledy-piggledy log lodge built by Englishman and legendary outfitter-guide Jimmy Simpson. He started hewing the logs just after the highway reached Bow Lake in 1937 and not a lot’s changed since. There are simple rooms, moose and elk trophies to oversee candle-lit dinners – and then, of

course, there’s the saw-toothed mountains reflected by the clear, glacial water of Bow Lake like a spit-polished mirror. A walk down the lakeside trail leaves cars, people and sound behind. There’s only silence at the long linear viewing platform, which looks out over the snows of Bow Glacier, floating high like a super-size Starbucks flat white.



Bow Lake. Banff Lake Louise Tourism/Paul Zizka

You could make the full drive from Jasper to Lake Louise in three hours. You really could. But to do so without stopping to walk round a lake, or snap images of glittering glaciers hanging from lofty peaks, or as happened to me next, to glimpse a prehistoric-looking, humpbacked Grizzly bear loping across a meadow, is nigh on impossible.

Equally enchanting are the spots to stop for the night: easy-access camp sites; historic lodges such as rustic Num-ti-jah or the sumptuous Post Hotel at Lake Louise; or indeed my next stop...

I throw another log on the crackling fire before sinking into my bubble-rich, claw-foot tub, a cozy envelope of warmth against the quickly dropping temperature of a mountain summer's evening. My charming one-bedroom cabin at Johnston's Canyon Lodge is postcard – or is it Instagram? – perfect, with comfy Arts and Crafts furniture and a bijou kitchenette. After climbing the catwalk path and staircases to see the gushing plume of Johnston's Canyon waterfalls just above, my private porch begs me to drain a glass of wine while basking in the forest song of one of the world's greatest national parks.

Mount Rundle and Banff. Banff Lake Louise Tourism/Paul Zizka



Banff from above

Strictly speaking, the Icefields Parkway ends at Lake Louise. But 40 minutes' drive onwards is Banff, a living mountain community, Canada's highest town, and a natural finale of the Icefields Parkway tour. Mount Rundle's iconic sloping face cuts a dramatic diagonal above the homes of its 9,000 residents. From high on Mt Norquay, I can make out the Bow River's emerald waters arcing round the baronial splendour of the iconic Banff Springs Hotel.

"Choose a point in the distance and keep your eyes on it." The sound advice is from my guide John Thornton, the man responsible for the one-inch thick cable that's keeping me hanging between heaven and earth, hundreds of feet above a rocky chasm.

I'm testing Norquay's new via ferrata, a guided climbing experience consisting of ladders, fixed ropes and a dramatic 30m suspension wire that I'm next up to tip-toe across. The exposure is real, but so is the safety. An experienced mountain guide, John spent years charting routes and finally supervising installation of the cables, bolts and ladders that make climbing a mountain accessible to almost anyone. "Yes, you can fall," the briefing information declares, but any fall is arrested by leashes attached to steel cables and harnesses.

I have a decent head for heights. Still, tight-roping the Rockies shakes up an adrenaline-laced cocktail of high mountains, low valleys and a lot of very clean, very thin air that suddenly, rather alarmingly, seem to be the only things that matter. Far in the distance, I see the road and step toward it.

Sometimes you've just got to take the hard way.

Climber on Mt Norquay's Via Ferrata. Mt Norquay



ESSENTIALS

Staying there

Fairmont Banff Springs (<http://www.fairmont.com/banff-springs>) has doubles from £303 (all prices for June stays).

The Post Hotel (<http://www.posthotel.com>), Lake Louise has doubles from £160.

Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise (<http://www.fairmont.com/lake-louise>) has doubles from £258.

Glacier View Inn (<http://www.brewster.ca/hotels/glacier-view-inn>) at Columbia Icefields has doubles from £87.

Num-ti-Jah (<http://www.num-ti-jah.com>) at Bow Lake has doubles from £113.

Johnston Canyon Resort, Banff ([johnstoncanyon.com](http://www.johnstoncanyon.com)) (<http://www.johnstoncanyon.com>) has cottages from £102.

Out and about there

[Click here for more information on the Columbia Icefields Glacier tour](http://www.brewster.ca)

[\(http://www.brewster.ca\)](http://www.brewster.ca)

[Click here for more information on over 1000 marked hiking trails](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/index.aspx)

[\(http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/index.aspx\)](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/index.aspx)

[Click here for more information on Mount Norquay Via Ferrata](http://summer.banffnorquay.com/)

[\(http://summer.banffnorquay.com/\)](http://summer.banffnorquay.com/)

[Click here for more information on Jasper Dark Sky Preserve](http://jasperdarksky.travel/)

[\(http://jasperdarksky.travel/\)](http://jasperdarksky.travel/)

Getting around

Check road conditions and the weather forecast before you leave town: the weather changes quickly in the mountains.

Have a safety kit in your vehicle that includes a mobile phone, water, energy bars, candles, extra clothing and blankets.

[Click here for more information on Alberta \(http://www.travelalberta.co.uk\)](http://www.travelalberta.co.uk)



The Jasper Dark Sky Festival. Jeff Bartlett

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