

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of the Canadian Rockies

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding adventure in the Canadian Rockies
 - ▶ Retreating to a cabin in the wilderness
 - ▶ Enjoying a view with dinner
 - ▶ Taking a beautiful day trip
 - ▶ Discovering legendary lakes
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The Canadian Rockies contain some of the most impressive scenery in the world. (Yes, it does look like the postcards.) 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 Humber, 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.



So where do you head for in this vast region, and what should you see? This chapter provides a quick reference to what I consider to be the best of the best. I highlight the top travel experiences, the best restaurants, the best places to stay, and the most scenic drives and viewpoints. You can find more information about all of these places and experiences in the destination chapters of this book (Parts III, IV, and V). Just look for the Best of the Best icon.

The Best Canadian Rockies Travel Experiences

To really experience the Canadian Rockies (and life in general, I suppose) you have to get out of your car. Scramble up a mountain. Dip your toes in a stream. Meander through a field of wildflowers. Here are a few suggestions for memorable Rocky Mountain adventures.

- ✔ **Hitting the hiking trails:** Once you've experienced a day in the backcountry on foot, you'll likely be planning your next hike, if not your next trip to the Canadian Rockies. In the destination chapters, I point you in the direction of many top treks, ranging from the well-trodden Plain of Six Glaciers trail in Lake Louise (see Chapter 12) to the Crypt Lake hike, in Waterton Lakes, where you arrive at the trail head by boat. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Savoring the fall colors:** Brilliant yellow and blazing gold aren't shades that spring to mind when you envision hiking in the Rockies — unless you're talking about trekking through a valley of alpine larches in the autumn. Larch trees turn a beautiful golden-orange color before they drop their needles. Trails in the Moraine Lake area in Banff National Park are top places to admire this seasonal spectacle. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Lodging in a log cabin:** While you can find many fine hotels in the Rockies, few offer the romance and atmosphere of a stay in a log cabin. For one thing, when you step out your door, rather than heading down the hallway to the front lobby you walk into a forest or along a riverbank. A cabin or chalet usually contains the same conveniences you enjoy in a hotel, along with a wood-burning fireplace, and in some cases, a spiffy kitchen, but in a beautiful secluded setting. Some terrific cabins are hidden along the Bow Valley Parkway in Banff National Park and along the Icefields Parkway, just south the town of Jasper. See Part III.
- ✔ **Cycling through the mountain parks:** If you like to tour on two wheels and can budget three to five days for an excursion, consider the popular "golden triangle" route, which loops through three Canadian Rockies national parks (Banff, Kootenay, and Yoho). It's a long haul (320km/198 miles), but the scenery is so stunning that you'll ignore your aching quads. See Part V.
- ✔ **Cruising the international waters:** Upper Waterton Lake, the deepest lake in the Canadian Rockies (nearly 150m/500 ft. deep), crosses the Canada/U.S. border in the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. A two-hour boat tour showcases rugged mountain scenery and includes a brief visit to Goat Haunt in Montana. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Unwinding in a hot pool:** Soak up a view of the surrounding mountains while you soak up the hot mineral waters in the pools at Banff, Jasper, or Kootenay national parks. In Banff and Kootenay, you can also book a massage at an onsite spa. (After all, you *are* on vacation.) See Parts III and V.
- ✔ **Watching for 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 spot wildlife — from your car or from the hiking trail — is one of the most thrilling aspects of travel in the mountain parks. (Keep in mind that it is unwise — and illegal — to, entice, feed, or disturb animals in the parks.) See Parts III, IV, and V.

- ✓ **Rafting on the Kicking Horse:** The fittingly named Kicking Horse River, which courses through Yoho National Park and hurtles west to Golden where it meets with the Columbia River, is known for white-water action. To really get acquainted with the Kicking Horse, book a trip on the lower canyon section. For a gentler introduction to the river, sign up for a sight-seeing float trip on smooth water. See Chapter 18.

Best Places to Get Away from It All

From elegant hotels and lodges, to charming chalets and country inns, to rustic retreats in the backcountry, the Canadian Rockies offers accommodations for every taste and budget.

Best one-of-a-kind places to stay

Worthy attractions themselves — you'll at least want to take a stroll around the grounds — these upscale resorts are spectacularly situated and inextricably linked with the history of the Canadian Rockies. Rooms don't come cheap, but you often see packages and low-season specials.

- ✓ If you splurge on a room at the luxurious **Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise**, you enjoy every amenity imaginable, including front row views of the famous lake. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ The castle-like **Fairmont Banff Springs**, overlooking the Bow Valley in the town of Banff, opened its doors in the late 1800s to provide luxury accommodations for visitors traveling through the Rockies by rail. It's a Banff landmark. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ The posh place to stay in Jasper, for those willing to pay the price, is the **Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge**, which enjoys a quieter and more secluded setting than its sister properties in Banff. See Chapter 14.

Best easy-to-get-to escapes

The following lodges and cabin resorts all offer relatively private accommodations, but you don't have to detour far off the main park highways to reach them.

- ✓ A stay at **Baker Creek Chalets**, along the Bow Valley Parkway in Banff National Park, puts you close — but not *too* close — to both the town of Banff and Lake Louise. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ Among the cabins and chalets in Jasper National Park, **Alpine Village** is a standout, with spiffy log cabins on beautiful grounds. Despite its wilderness setting, the resort is only minutes from the town of Jasper. In the same park, the lovely hillside chalets at **Pyramid Lake Resort** are just far enough removed from town to feel like a getaway. See Chapter 14.

- ✓ When you escape to Waterton Lakes, you'll find yourself in very comfortable surroundings at **Waterton Lakes Lodge**, where rooms are spread among nine individual buildings, so they seem rather private. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ When in Yoho National Park, the places to spoil yourself are **Cathedral Mountain Lodge**, along the Kicking Horse River, and **Emerald Lake Lodge**, on the shores of Emerald Lake. Both are a bit out-of-the-way, yet accessible by car. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ In Kootenay National Park, the log cabin accommodations at **Kootenay Park Lodge** are rustically romantic and a bit remote. See Chapter 20.

Best country inns

Infinitely more intimate than a hotel, each of these small inns is a treat.

- ✓ In Calgary, the exquisite little **Kensington Riverside Inn** is in a class of its own. Stroll along the Bow River to reach the city center. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ For a room with character in Canmore, it's hard to choose between the **Lady Macdonald Country Inn** or its slightly larger neighbor, the **Georgetown Inn**. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ For many regular visitors to Waterton Lakes National Park, a stay at **Kilmorey Lodge** is part of the tradition. The excellent dining room is part of the appeal. See Chapter 17.

Best in the backcountry

There's getting away, and there's really *escaping*, such as when you fly (or trek) to a remote mountain lodge for a few days of hiking, fishing, snowshoeing, or skiing. As you might expect, rates at these very out-of-the-way places tend to be steep, but they generally include memorable meals.

- ✓ **Purcell Lodge** is gorgeously situated in a remote area along the eastern boundary of Glacier National Park, near Golden, B.C. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ The road to **Lake O'Hara Lodge** in Yoho National Park is closed to regular traffic, so visitors to this spectacular spot hike in or arrange a ride on the bus. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ You can ski through deep layers of fantastic powder well into the spring when you base yourself at **Mount Assiniboine Lodge**, situated in a chunk of wilderness between Banff and Kootenay national parks. See Chapter 21.

The Best Dining Experiences in the Canadian Rockies

In these restaurants, you savor the setting as much as the food.

Best regional cuisine

Some of the most interesting menus in the Canadian Rockies feature regional ingredients, from Alberta cheese and berries to B.C. fish and wine. At the following handsomely rustic restaurants, you enjoy your ranch-raised elk and organic greens in authentic Rocky Mountain surroundings.

- ✔ The **River Café** is in downtown Calgary, but you'd never know it, thanks to its location in a park on an island in the Bow River. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Unless you happen to be staying at **Baker Creek Chalets**, the **Baker Creek Bistro**, on the Bow Valley Parkway between Banff and Lake Louise in Banff National Park, involves a bit of a drive. But it's a lovely excursion, and you'll definitely be pleased that you made the trip. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ The words rustic and spectacular don't often appear in the same phrase, unless we're talking about **Buffalo Mountain Lodge** on the slopes of Tunnel Mountain in the town of Banff. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ Dining alfresco in the mountains doesn't get much finer than a table on the deck of the **Tekarra Restaurant** in Jasper National Park. But don't let nasty weather hold you back — you'll be cozy and comfortable inside. See Chapter 14.

Best international flavors

Singapore noodles? Indonesian gado gado? While some restaurants deliver precisely what you *expect* to be served in the Canadian Rockies, others, such as the following, catch you by surprise.

- ✔ **Fuze Finer Dining**, in the town of Banff, takes a worldly approach to menu planning, and it's one of the hottest new arrivals on the Rockies' culinary scene. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ When in Canmore, the place for a fine French meal (any time of day) is **Chez Francois**. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ It isn't every day that you get a chance to enjoy Thai chicken saté with Japanese spinach salad in a log cabin restaurant near the banks of the Kicking Horse River. So if you happen to be in Golden, be sure to check out the **Kicking Horse Grill**. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ You find spatzle and Wiener schnitzel on the menu at the cozy little **Helna's Stube** in the village of Radium Hot Springs. See Chapter 20.