

Rocky FALL

We head to Banff, Canada, during the Northern Hemisphere's autumn months, and brush the early snow off of our shoulders to discover the rock climbing, fat biking and trekking opportunities throughout the eponymous national park and beyond

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I slipped again on an unseen rock, steadying myself with my trekking pole. There was laughter at such harmless misfortunes in 30cm of fresh snow. At least I had good hiking boots. Some of my companions, the Summer Shoes Brigade they called themselves, endured frozen toes and soaked feet.

We were floundering in the Canadian Rockies, the Banff region more precisely; guests of the local tourism gurus keen to show off the delightful things to do in autumn. While I generally rant against the Americanisation of Australian English, the term Fall was certainly more relevant. It would turn out to be a trip where a lot more than just the leaves were falling.

WELCOME TO BANFF

Banff is one of those iconic mountain towns that probably needs little introduction. Located fully within the bounds of the eponymously named Banff National Park, people flock to its hot springs, hotels, mountains, lakes, ski areas, restaurants and heaven forbid — for me at least — its shops. They flock there in the summer months from June to September and for the skiing from December to April. But like so many popular places, both economic factors and a growing awareness of over-tourism have led to a desire to spread the load, to attract more visitors in the shoulder seasons of autumn and spring.

In the Rockies, with their high altitude and latitude, snow often lies deep in the mountains through spring. Autumn though can bring still warmish days and autumn colour ahead of the winter snows. But mountains of course decide their own weather and the vagaries of climate change add further to such variability. I had a couple of October weeks to explore, first with the group then a second week alone. The early snowfall might change plans but no way would it stop them.

Canada, like Australia, has a simple formula for naming things. Here we call mountains with snow on them the Snowy Mountains. Those in Canada with loads of rock get the Rocky Mountains. As with Australia, Canada also has abundant scary and dangerous animals — grizzly bears, brown bears, polar bears, wolves, cougars, moose and more. It's actually a good thing when we're in the outdoors, to be not right at the top of the food chain. A salient reminder we're not always in charge on this earth.



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But the Canadians can't have everything we claim. "You'll fit in well here with those shoes," said one burly local to me in the Grizzly Paws Brewery, looking at my Blundstone boots. I explained they were Australian but received a "No way" in reply until I showed him the label.

ROCK STAR REACHES OUT FROM RETIREMENT

With all that rock, what better place to pull on the shoes for the first time in at least a couple of decades? At Sunshine Slabs, one of any number of crags, top ropes were set up by our guides from Yamnuska Mountain Adventures and in the fine company of Lea, a Frenchwoman, I attacked routes that were beyond both my ability and agility. I'd like to say it was nice to touch warm rock again but, whilst it was good to be back, it was bloody freezing. Occasional snowflakes portended the change to come.

For those with a head for heights, the via ferrata at Mount Norquay is another rocky option close to Banff. Guides will take you safely on a wander up and across cliff faces following ladders, cables and other steel stuff, staying true to the translation of the Italian: The Iron Road. The first via ferrata were built through the Dolomites in the Italian Alps in the First World War as a means of offering mountain escape routes from the enemy.

After all this stretching and reaching, the Banff Hot Springs, on the way back to town, is a soothing follow up. The pool, very much with a view, is a pleasant 39 degrees or so and was the original reason for tourists coming to Banff. For additional authenticity you can even float and lounge around in 1920s style one-piece bathing costumes.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Looking down onto Banff from Sulphur Mountain gondola; Huw back on the rock again (Credit: ATTA/Matt Corliss); Banff Hot Springs (Credit: Noel Hendrickson, Banff & Lake Louise Tourism); Not yet frozen solid (Credit: ATTA/Jostah Holwick).





A WALK ON THE WHITE SIDE

The snow came down, whiting out the autumn colours. The original plan was a traverse of Castle Mountain but, with a group of mixed ability like ours, it was going to be too exposed in the fresh snow. Instead we took the gondola up Sulphur Mountain and struck out along the ridge from the comfort of the café at the top. There was plenty of slipping and sliding over the next few hours and even more laughter. Fresh snow brings out the child in all but the most hardened of adults.

Views were limited along the ridge, but it is in such conditions that you focus on the near and not the far, and often see much more because of that. An ice stalactite forming from the end of a pine branch, a top hat of snow perched on a head-shaped rock, and always the careful placement of each foot on a soft blanket hiding the solid stuff beneath.

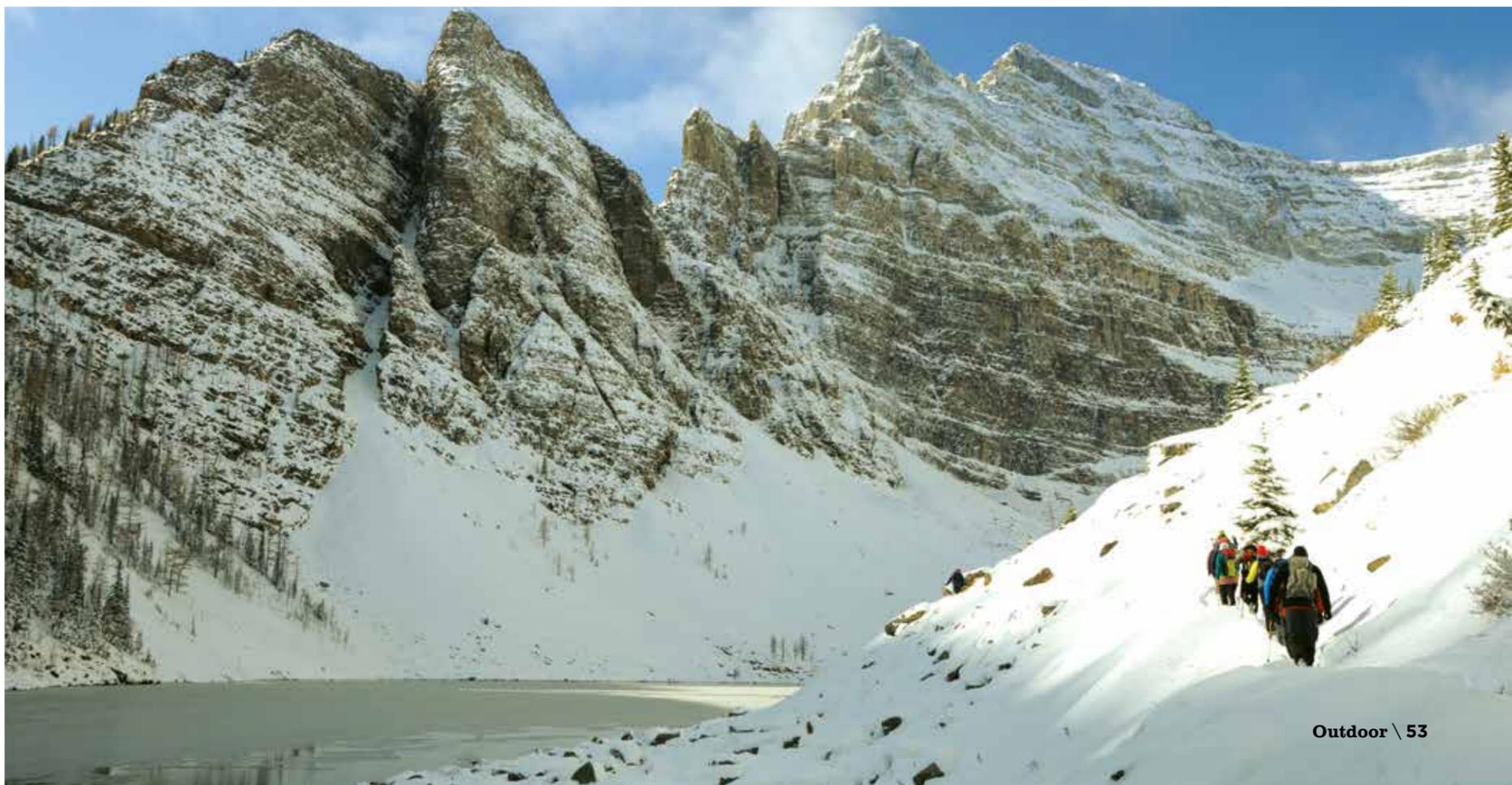
CHEERS LOUISE

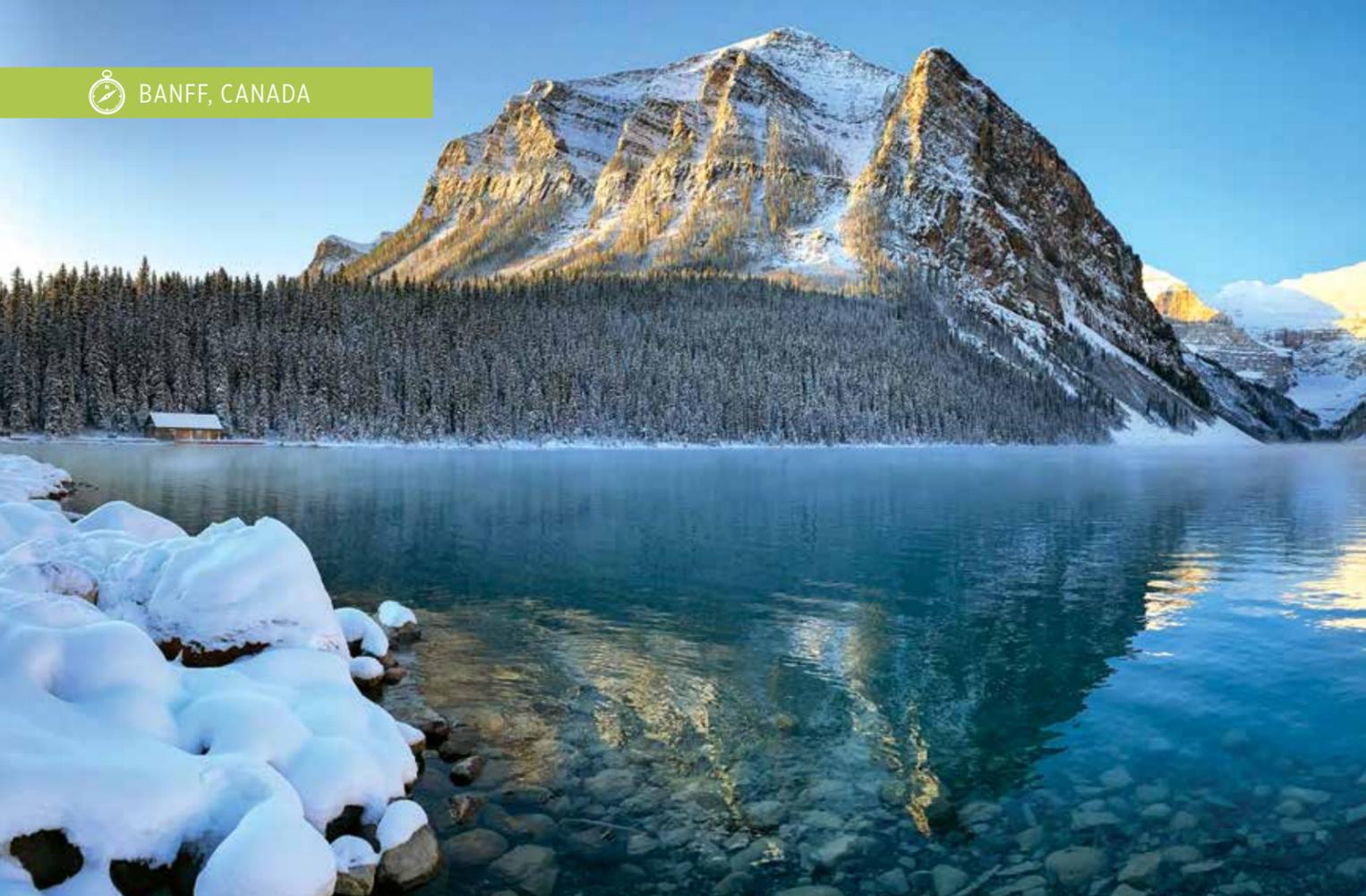
There are some places, whether natural or built, that transcend their hype and popularity. That, even with the hordes of visitors, push through the masses to still dazzle and delight. The Taj Mahal, Uluru, Sydney Opera House and the Matterhorn all do it. So it is with Lake Louise, quite possibly the most photographed place in Canada (although Niagara would give it a nudge). So many mountain views equal it, but there is something about the proportions and colours of the lake and the mountains that tip it into so many bucket lists.

Those proportions ensure that dozens upon dozens of photographers are on its shore well before a freezing dawn. Some are there weighed down with copious amounts of camera gear and tripods, others travelling light with just a smartphone.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Mount Burgess reflects in Emerald Lake; Canoeing on Lake Louise (Credit: ATTA/Josiah Holwick); Sulphur Mountain Ridge; Skirting Lake Agnes; Moraine Lake (Credit: ATTA/Josiah Holwick).





HOW TO EXPERIENCE BANFF

Getting there

The nearest airport to Banff and Canmore is Calgary, which has international flights to Europe and US as well as regular connecting flights around Canada, including to Vancouver, which is the easiest place to get to from Australia. The Banff Airporter (www.banffairporter.com) runs regular shuttles to/from the airport.

Staying and Eating

There is of course a huge variety of accommodation in the area. At the top end are the iconic Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise (www.fairmont.com/lake-louise) and Fairmont Banff Springs (www.fairmont.com/banff-springs). In Banff the Moose Hotel (www.mooshotelandsuites.com) is a comfortable option and away from it all between Banff and Lake Louise, check out the cabins at Baker Creek Mountain Resort (www.bakercreek.com). At Emerald Lake the lodge of the same name is the place to stay (www.crmr.com).

Down in Canmore, Falcon Crest Lodge (www.falconcrestlodge.ca) offers very comfortable apartments and for a night or two out of town Mount Engadine Lodge (www.mountengadine.com) is an excellent mountain getaway.

The worldwide craze for craft beer and gin has brewed and distilled its way into the Rockies with plenty of options on tap and bottle. For a weird mix of Swiss fondue, local wildlife options (think buffalo and rattlesnake), 'dark' Mexican décor and a feel of go go dancing heritage, then dine at The Banff Grizzly House (www.banffgrizzlyhouse.com). In Canada beer is well priced, wine is expensive.

Useful Resources

Good general resources are www.banfflakelouise.com, www.explorecanmore.ca and www.travelalberta.com.

If you're looking for guided activities in the mountains then there are plenty of options including:

Yamnuska Mountain Adventures

www.yamnuska.com

Alpine Air Adventures

www.alpineairadventure.com

White Mountain Adventures

www.whitemountainadventures.com

The Mount Norquay Via Ferrata can be booked through www.banffnorquay.com.

If you need to hire a bike and for all bike spares then Rebound Cycle (reboundcycle.com) in Canmore is your place. Details on the trails at Canmore Nordic Centre can be found on www.canmorenordiccentre.ca and on The High Rockies Trail on www.kananaskistrails.com/high-rockies-trail.

For advice on staying safe among the local wildlife check out WildSmart (www.biosphereinstitute.org/wildsmart) and don't forget to take your best singing voice.

The famous Banff Mountain Film & Book Festival (www.banffcentre.ca) takes place in late October each year.

All there to catch the changing light and reflections. All there in front of the imposing Chateau Lake Louise. In such surrounds the building struggles to compete but how could an architect even try?

The walk up from Lake Louise to her much smaller and higher sister Agnes is a fine one, the continuation around the back of the lake to climb the Big Beehive a pearler. Snow was thick on the ground still, a warning to be prepared for all weathers on any autumn visit. The palette of rock, snow, water, forest, sun and sky all mixed to create an incredible artwork at every turn.

BEAR BIKE RIDING

20km from Banff, and just outside of the national park, is the town of Canmore. Not as famous but offering just as much to outdoor types, it was the venue for the Nordic skiing disciplines of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. The Canmore Nordic Centre is still a magnet for XC skiers in winter but is alive with mountain bikes from May to October, attracted by the extensive



LEFT TO RIGHT: Sun-soaked reflections paint Lake Louise (Credit: ATTA/Josh Holwick); 'Bear Left' sign at Canmore Nordic Centre Taking a rest on the High Rockies Trail, Spray Valley, Kananaskis.

network of flowy, well-built trails.

I hired a bike from Rebound Cycle; a fat-bike. These overweight beasts would seem to have two perfect uses — riding snow and riding sand — although the snow that had impacted activities the previous week had pretty much melted by the time I got to Canmore. But, looping around on the singletrack, the squishy 4.5 inch tyres bounced off everything and it was all rather fun. 'Bear Left' said one sign...

"Sing and shout. Make loads of noise on the trail," I'd been told. This to forewarn any bears in the area that might be surprised by a fast approaching biker. I've belted out many tunes in the mountains over the decades, but it felt odd when it had a purpose beyond self-entertainment. A bunch of the trails on the other side of Canmore had been closed just days earlier, after a woman walking her dogs had a close encounter with a mummy grizzly walking her cubs. The woman deployed her bear spray, an item well worth carrying when hiking or riding in these parts, even if the vast majority of people would never use it in their lifetime.

I packed an overnight pack and took off on the fat-bike from Canmore, climbing up into the Spray Valley. Fat-bikes are like tractors on the road and a bloody good workout, but this approach would lead me to the High Rockies Trail. This newish 80km MTB and hiking trail runs deep into Kananaskis country where spectacular rock peaks and lakes abound. Once off the dirt road and onto the trail, the riding turned to real mountain biking and both fat-bike and I were much happier.

It was almost dark when I arrived at the lonely but very comfortable Mount Engadine Lodge, about halfway along the track. Soon I was toasty warm by the log fire, putting more calories in than I could have burned through that day, despite all the effort.

My good friend Mr White returned the following day, stymieing further progress up the High Rockies Trail. I did attempt to trek the Tent Ridge horseshoe, a renowned classic of a hike, but after a couple of hours was beaten back by soft snow and returned to the comforts of the lodge. A walk for another visit. When I did ride back to Canmore, the fat-bike was in its element in the snow.

NAME CALLING

Canada shares the Rockies between the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia and I snuck across the border into BC to visit Emerald Lake in Yoho National Park.

Lake Louise was originally called Emerald Lake but apparently Queen Victoria was not amused and stepped in to change it to Louise, after one of her daughters. A royal prerogative I guess. Thomas Wilson, who discovered and named Lake Louise as Emerald Lake in 1882, was rightly a bit peeved, so wandered off and found this other body of water to call Emerald Lake.

The national park offers some superb hiking and it was fitting that 'yoho' is a Cree Indian word for awe and amazement. I walked around the 5km lake perimeter the afternoon I got there with rocky Mt Burgess reflected perfectly in the waters.

The following day from Emerald Lake Lodge, I enjoyed a fine solo 20km hike up to Yoho Pass, along the Wapta Traverse to Burgess Pass, then back down to the lake. I didn't see a soul.

Come to Banff for the fall they'd said. Snow had fallen and I'd fallen — on climbing ropes, on treks knee deep in snow and off the mountain bike attacking glorious singletrack. I flew home from Canada exactly one year to the day since the country had legalised the use of cannabis. But no one needs such stimulants to get high in the Rockies and I'd certainly fallen for the place. ☑