



falling for THE ROCKIES

PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON

The natural beauty and striking seasonal changes of Canada's Rocky Mountains have long tempted Bundanoon-based adventurer HUW KINGSTON. He finally found a slot in his travel schedule for a crisp autumn hike – but the Rockies delivered an unexpected surprise.

I SLIP AGAIN ON AN UNSEEN ROCK, steadying myself with my trekking pole as my companions laugh at such harmless misfortune. Their falls will come soon, again and again. It is autumn and here we are floundering in 30 centimetres of fresh snow. This is turning out to be a trip where a lot more than the leaves are falling.

For decades I've avoided visiting Canada for no reason other than knowing I'd fall in love with the place. I knew it would scratch so many of my itches: mountains, snow, vast open space. Avoidance is bizarre given travel has always been so much a part of my life and work. And, despite becoming dangerously attached to various parts of the world, the Southern Highlands has, for a quarter of a century, always pulled me back.

So, when the good people at Banff and Lake Louise tourism insist I fill the blank on my map, what excuse do I have?

Banff is one of those iconic mountain towns that probably needs little introduction. Located completely within the bounds of the eponymously named Banff National Park, people flock to its hot springs, hotels, mountains, lakes, ski areas, restaurants and shops. I can cope with all but the last. The busy times are the summer months of June to September and the ski season of December to April.

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 the colours of fall. But mountains decide their own weather and the vagaries of



FROM LEFT HIKING AROUND AGNES LAKE NEAR LAKE LOUISE; FRESH AUTUMN SNOW ON SULPHUR MOUNTAIN RIDGE, BANFF; MOUNT BURGESS REFLECTION IN EMERALD LAKE, YOHO NATIONAL PARK.

climate change add further to such variability. This year the snow came early; the autumn colours whited out.

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 the Rocky Mountains. As with Australia, Canada also has abundant scary and dangerous animals – grizzly bears, brown bears, polar bears, wolves, cougars and more. Perhaps it's a good thing we are not at the top of the food chain; a salient reminder humans are not always in charge on this earth.

The easiest way to get high above Banff is on the gondola to the top of Sulphur Mountain. Time it for sunset if you can and be in awe of the mountains that define the town. There is nothing gentle about the Rockies: towering rockfaces line the Bow Valley all the way to Lake Louise and stare down as giant sentinels out to Canmore before running out on the flatlands to the east.

But there are no views this time as we take a walk on the white side from the top of the gondola, striking out along the

ridge. There is plenty of slipping and sliding over the coming hours, and more laughter. Fresh snow brings out the child in all but the most hardened of adults.

Views are limited along the ridge, but it is in such conditions that you focus on the near and not the far and, for that reason, often see more. An ice stalactite forming from the end of a pine branch; a top hat of snow perched on a head shaped rock; the single, fat snowflake that lands on the end of your nose, making you cross-eyed as you try to view it before it melts away.

For those with a head for heights, the Via Ferrata at Mount Norquay is a rocky option close to Banff. Guides will take you safely on a wander up and across cliff faces following ladders, cables and steel spikes, staying true to the Italian translation – the Iron Road. The first Via Ferrata were built through the Dolomites in the Italian Alps during World War I to offer mountain escape routes from the enemy.

After all this stretching, striding and, in our case, sliding, Banff Hot Springs are a soothing relief. The pool, very much



FROM TOP LOOKING DOWN ONTO BANFF FROM SULPHUR MOUNTAIN GONDOLA;
BANFF HOT SPRINGS, BANFF (PHOTOGRAPH NOEL HENDRICKSON,
BANFF & LAKE LOUISE TOURISM).

with a view, is a pleasant 39 degrees and was the original reason for kick-starting tourism in Banff.

There are some places, whether natural or built, that transcend their hype and popularity. Those even with hordes of visitors still dazzle and delight. The Taj Mahal, Uluru, Sydney Opera House and Mount Everest all do it. So does Lake Louise, possibly the most photographed place in Canada. Many mountain views equal it but there is something about the proportions, the colours of the lake and mountains that tip it onto so many bucket lists.

Well before dawn I'm not alone by a factor of a hundred; all of us doing our best to record the changing light and reflections. Behind our backs is the imposing Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. In such surrounds the building struggles to compete but how could an architect even try? It is worth a splurge to stay though, and in its sister hotel in Banff, the castle-like Fairmont Banff Springs. Or at the very least, drop in for a drink. Recalling a \$15 lukewarm cup of tea with teabag dangling in a Delhi hotel recently, it is notable in Canada that at least the drink prices in fancy hotels are usually comparable to those in a main street cafe or bar.

The walk up from Lake Louise to her smaller and higher sister Lake Agnes is a fine one, the continuation around the back of the lake to climb to the summit of the Big Beehive a pearler. The palette of rock, snow, water, forest, sun and sky all mix to present a work of art at every turn.

Canada shares the Rockies between the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, and beyond Lake Louise I sneak 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 ordered it changed to Louise, after one of her daughters. A royal prerogative I guess. Thomas Wilson, the first white man to discover and name Lake Louise as Emerald Lake in 1882, was rightly peeved so wandered off and found another body of water to use the Emerald moniker.

The national park offers superb hiking – it fits that *yoho* is a Cree Indian word for awe and amazement. I stroll around the five kilometre lake perimeter the afternoon I arrive; rocky Mount Burgess reflecting perfectly in the waters. From Emerald Lake Lodge a fine day-long hike then takes me up to Yoho Pass and across to Burgess Pass, before dropping back to the lake.

This first visit to the Canadian Rockies has been too short, very sweet and, for the time of year, perhaps a little too snowy. As I feared it might, the place has me captured. **HL**