

THE POWDER & THE PASSION

If you visited Thredbo this winter and left with a taste for the wild life on the slopes, head to Canada where you'll find snow sports galore and the world's best powder snow in nature's own winter wonderland. By **Leigh Robshaw**



AS THE TRAIN PULLS OUT of the station we sip champagne and wave goodbye to Vancouver, its unique skyline of skyscrapers and mountains fading into dusk. We're on Via Rail's grand train, *The Canadian*, travelling to the Rocky Mountains in style. After the long haul flight from Sydney I'm itching to get to the ski slopes, but I'm assured the 17-hour train trip to Jasper is more rewarding than a quick flight and well worth the extra travel time.

We're soon called to the dining carriage for dinner. Soft lighting, crisp white tablecloths, china and silverware impart the feel of a fine restaurant, except here every diner is a traveller and strangers happily share tables and stories. The food is far superior to airline food and wine is served out of glasses rather than plastic. Very civilised.

After-dinner drinks and conversation flow in the lounge until late, where there's always tea, coffee, fruit and muffins. With its art deco interior, the train recalls elegant times past, and you can't help but relax in this unhurried atmosphere. There's actually nowhere to rush off to: my bed is only a couple of carriages away and my destination just one sleep away.

Around 6am I wake to an awesome sight just outside my window: a breathtaking mountain landscape, 578 million years old, perfectly serene wrapped in snow and soft sunlight and blanketed in dark green pine forests. The sun climbs slowly in this enormous white world and the mountains take on an incandescent glow as we cruise along at about 70 kilometres an hour.

We pass Moose Lake, its spotlessly

white icy surface stretching for 13 kilometres, Pyramid Falls with its tumbling waters frozen in mid-air, and the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies, Mt Robson at 3,954 metres. I watch for wildlife but see only tracks in the snow.

Having passed from British Columbia into Alberta during the night, we're now on mountain time, one hour ahead, which means we're just a few hours from Jasper. Suddenly I feel robbed of the last hour of this amazing trip and wish I were continuing for the three-day trip to Toronto across the wide belly of this beautiful country, any thoughts of rushing to the ski slopes now far from my mind.

We arrive in the quaint village of Jasper to a sunny four-degree day, typical weather for late March.

Jasper National Park, established in 1907, is the biggest national park in the Rockies and has over 1,000 kilometres of hiking trail winding through its 10,878 square kilometres.

The tiny town is refreshingly non-touristy, with a few unobtrusive souvenir stores, cafes and restaurants sharing two streets with local shops. We head to the Caledonia Grill for lunch, where my companions munch on elk burgers and I sample the mouthwatering local salmon.

Height restrictions of two storeys apply to buildings and even the few chain restaurants must maintain an alpine feel in their construction. Due to its location in a World Heritage National Park, there is a constant need for balance between conservation and commercialism. As a visitor to this quiet, unspoiled place, I say it's worth it.

The townsfolk respect the wildlife, and

Marmot's newly renovated rental and repair area, and we're all geared up and ready for our first lesson in about five minutes. The learner's area provides a small slope and a 'magic carpet' conveyer belt to transport us back to the top after each run.

There are no queues for lifts and once at the top there's plenty of room to fall flat on your face without getting in anyone's way. The clientele is mainly local, so there's an unpretentious, family atmosphere and little razzamatazz — the scenery is the main attraction here, not bars and restaurants.

Marmot Basin's World Heritage location means development is strictly controlled. No accommodation is allowed on site, but it's only a 20-minute trip from town and the reward is the preservation of this remarkably pristine environment for future generations of skiers and snowboarders.



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designated wildlife corridors allow elk, moose, caribou, black bears, grizzly bears and wolves to cross the valley safely. Sometimes bears wander into town in search of food, so bear-proof garbage bins on the streets are latched shut, and not a scrap of litter can be seen.

There are around 12 hotels plus seasonal cabins (May to October) in Jasper, as well as the outstanding Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, once host to the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Queen Elizabeth II, the Kennedys and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. With historic log cabins and cedar chalets spread across 366 hectares of forest encircling five lakes, it's more village than hotel.

Jasper townsfolk are rightly proud of their local ski hill, Marmot Basin. It's a great place to learn to ski or snowboard, as it's not as intimidating as nearby Lake Louise, which is five times the size. It's minus seven degrees when we arrive at Marmot, but the sun is shining and the air is very dry, so it feels warmer. Though it's the end of the Northern winter when we visited there's still plenty of snow around and it's all natural.

Traffic flows smoothly through

There's also plenty to do in Jasper for non-skiers and boarders at this time of year. Icewalking in the Maligne Canyon is a must, and the annual 'Jasper in January' festival has a host of fun events like a town parade, snow sculpture contest and celebrity pie throw.

Leaving Jasper, we join Sundog Tours for what the *Michelin Guide* has rated as the most scenic drive in North America — the Icefields Parkway, a 230-kilometre section of Highway 93 that passes within view of seven enormous icefields and 25 smaller glaciers.

The road skirts so close to snowy peaks towering over 3,500 metres that the chance of avalanches hitting it during late winter and early spring is high. Road signs en route warn drivers not to stop in certain places due to avalanche danger, and wardens are stationed every 50 kilometres so they can join up if there's an emergency. They patrol the road in the late afternoon to make sure no one has broken down — a good thing, since mobile phone coverage ends once you're 30 kilometres out of Jasper.

Our 29-year-old guide, Pascal Roy,

oozes with pride as he describes the passing panorama in impressive detail and we crane our necks as he points to Bow Summit, the famous Weeping Wall ice climb and the enormous Columbia Icefield, stopping at non-avalanche areas for photos and talks. An avid iceclimber and mountaineer, this is his playground, though a treacherous one — he lost his best friend while climbing here.

A campground attendant for Parks Canada in summer, he's also full of gory details about grizzly bears — and it's true what they say about playing dead. "They don't like fresh meat and after they roll you around a bit to make sure you're 'dead' they'll leave you to rot in peace for a few days," he says. "But then again, in spring they're really hungry and they'll eat anything — oh yeah, and today is the first day of spring, eh!"

During the drive we enter the World Heritage Banff National Park, the only park to have a crater on Mars named after it. Established in 1885, it was the first national park in Canada, the second in North America and third in the world, and attracts about five million visitors a year, 80 per cent during summer.

This protected frontier is the last place you would expect to find the largest combined ski resort in Canada, but there is little danger of overdevelopment ▷

as tough environmental regulations are strictly enforced. A partnership between Lake Louise, Ski Banff at Norquay and Sunshine Village was formed 25 years ago to give visitors easy access to all three resorts. You can buy a tri-area lift and bus ticket then check the snow report each morning and decide which resort to visit that day. The advantage is that summer is peak season in both Banff and Jasper National Parks, so the ski season is the cheapest time of year to visit.

While the superb downhill skiing and snowboarding are the main attractions of the area, there are dozens of other winter activities both on the slopes and elsewhere that Australia's alpine regions simply can't match. Icewalking, snowshoeing, iceskating, ice/rock climbing, snowmobiling, ice-fishing, horse-drawn sleigh rides, ecotours and trips to hot springs, cross-country skiing and for the very brave, heli-skiing, which was invented in the Banff/Lake Louise area 30 years ago.

About three hours after leaving Jasper we arrive at the grandiose Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. From its humble birth as a single-level log cabin on the shore of Lake Louise in 1890, it has metamorphosed into the stately castle-like structure it is today, attracting royal



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families, film stars and world leaders — a none too shabby place to stop for the night after a day of skiing or snowboarding. Its Walliser Stube restaurant has 14 different kinds of fondue, a legacy of the Swiss mountain guides who helped pioneer the Rockies.

A 20-minute bus ride takes us to the scary but awe-inspiring ski slopes of Lake Louise. It's the venue for the annual World Cup downhill races and a magnet for 20-something Aussies and Kiwis who seem to be the only people running the chairlifts, pushing up to 16,869 people through per hour.

Voted the best ski resort for scenery in North America by *Ski Magazine* (October 2002), you can ski on all four sides of the mountain across 1,701 hectares, making it the largest ski area in the Canadian Rockies. There are 113 named runs in all, plus thousands of hectares of open bowls.

After the user-friendly Marmot Basin, Lake Louise is a shock to the system. It's big, loud and busy, and intimidating for novices. Our instructor Carl explains that a beginner's run here

is like an intermediate run at Marmot. However, for confident skiers and snowboarders (like the five-year-old Canadian kids that whizzed past me), it's paradise.

An après-ski highlight at Lake Louise is the Torchlight Dinner and Ski night. As we view the sunset from the mid-mountain chalet, live music and a limbo competition get long tables of skiers and boarders from around the world into a festive mood. After a huge buffet meal, wine and a to-die-for hot chocolate with peppermint schnapps, I've worked up the courage to 'ski' down in the dark. After sliding down half the mountain on the icy night snow, Carl delicately suggests I might like a snowmobile ride to the bottom.

A short drive but a world away is Lake Louise's charming little sister, Ski Banff at Norquay. Perhaps a little tame for hardcore skiers and boarders, its beginners and intermediate runs are groomed nightly, ensuring nice fresh corduroy snow each morning.

Norquay is a locals' mountain during the week, so it has the intimacy of



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Marmot Basin with the convenience of being part of the Big Three of Banff. Sunshine Village is our final ski destination, and an excellent one at that. We board the world's fastest eight-passenger gondola on a stunning 'bluebird' day for a 15-minute ride to the village, where we find the softest, 100 per cent natural snow we've seen yet. The average snowfall per season here is 607 centimetres so there's no need to make fake snow.

With all 107 runs fanning off to three different mountains open for business, we're grateful for the guidance of our instructor, who takes us straight to the one with the most panoramic views. Here the lift capacity is 22,000 people an hour, though the expansive 1,360-hectare terrain offers plenty of room for all to go crazy without colliding.

A 20-minute drive from Sunshine Village is the township of Banff, home to a bevy of international ski resort staff, tourists and a permanent population of around 6,000. Orange-hued Douglas fir timber gives many of the town's buildings a log-cabin feel, so on the surface it looks like a charming mountain village, but on closer inspection I realise most of the stores are full of tacky souvenirs that leave me pining for the unassuming little town of Jasper.

The upside is that Banff offers plenty of après-ski activities, like shopping, visiting museums and galleries, dining out or clubbing. You can take your pick from dozens of restaurants and cafes. One of the best is Café Soleil, which offers an extensive wine list and well-priced tapas in a cosy atmosphere. The

Getting there and around

The Canadian ski season runs from November through to May. To find a resort that suits you, visit www.skicanada.info

► **By air:** Air Canada is the only airline to offer a daily, direct, same-plane service from Sydney to Vancouver, via Honolulu. For more information on Air Canada, call 1300 655 767 or visit www.aircanada.com

► **By rail:** VIA Rail's 'The Canadian' train departs from Toronto or Vancouver three times per week. Visit www.viarail.ca for more information.

► **By car:** From Edmonton, follow the Yellowhead Highway (16) west. From Calgary, follow the Trans Canada Highway (1) west to Lake Louise and north on Highway 93, along the Icefields Parkway. If you're staying more than one month you'll need an International Driver's Permit (IDP). IDPs can be purchased at NRMA branches or visit www.mynrma.com.au

► **Daily scheduled shuttle service:** SunDog Tour Co operates a shuttle between Jasper and Banff. Visit www.sundogtours.com for more information.

► **Ski packages:** Value Tours offers a wide range of Canadian Ski Packages to suit all budgets. For a free brochure or to secure a package deal, call Value Tours toll-free on 1300 361 322 or visit www.valuetours.com.au

For more information on Canada, buy a copy of NRMA's Great Drives of Canada. Send a cheque for \$10.95 (plus \$2.95 postage) to: Special Publications, Level 23, 388 George St, Sydney NSW 2000. Please allow 28 days for delivery.

Hoodoo Lounge is a funky nightclub with great dance music, inexpensive jugs of local beer, extreme snow sports videos and a cool, beanie-clad crowd.

Our final resting place is the elegant Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, an historic Canadian landmark. Originally opened in 1888 as a luxury stopover for Canadian Pacific Railway passengers, more than C\$175 million has been spent on renovations over the last 10 years. A great addition is the Willow Stream spa with its rejuvenating mineral pools, outdoor spas, saunas and body treatments.

Viewing the hotel from a distance, it looks like a tiny toy castle compared to the enormity of the surrounding landscape. However from the inside, its size is overwhelming. Guests wander its vast halls like wide-eyed zombies, lost in the grandeur. You'd expect to hear the click of elegant heels on the stately floors but instead there's a 'clomp clomp' of ski boots each morning and afternoon. At this time of year it's the ski slopes that are the real drawcard, the hotel simply a wonderful place to rest tired muscles and refuel on fine cuisine, ready for another day of sumptuous snow play. ●

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