

DESTINATION CANADA



**ALL THE
CREATURE
COMFORTS**

How to bed down
in style in national
parks {P6}



**THE
WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN**
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Some like it fresh

Adventures aplenty, from forest
walks to icy encounters

There's a (white) bear out there: The Great Bear Rainforest covers 8.5 million hectares of mist-shrouded wilderness fringing the remote northwest coast and islands of British Columbia; it's home to wolves, wolverines and the enigmatic and endangered spirit (or kermode) bear.

And we are going in. Barb is our guide from King Pacific Lodge (KPL), a five-star floating resort towed into position off Princess Royal Island every summer and tethered in the shadow of the forest, with bull kelp swirling about its moorings and bald eagles soaring overhead. Every excursion begins in the wet room, suiting up like firemen, for even if it's not raining when you set out, the world's largest temperate rainforest will be busy making its own weather.

We motor by boat around the point and into Cameron Cove, a primeval place of mists, ferns and lichens, dimly lit and as strangely menacing as a noir film.

After disembarking we follow the river into the darkening forest as mists roll down to blanket ancient cedars and hemlocks, and the only sound to be heard is water — raining, trickling, dripping, squelching. This is no walk but an obstacle course of fallen logs and shattered stumps; the mossy ground is as spongy as a trampoline. We are heading towards a thundering waterfall only discovered by KPL guides a year ago.

They have dubbed it Tombstone for the eerie, moss-corroded tree stumps, like rotten teeth, that surround it. And along the way we pick our own snacks. The forest is a rich larder for the First Nations Gitga'at people (and peckish bears), affording salmonberries and huckleberries, cow parsnip and rice root.

All the while there is a sense we are being watched, by wolf or bear or wood sprite. This is a forest so drenched in mystery, so Tolkien-esque, it's like a fairytale, beautiful and dreadful in equal measure. (September is the best month to spy the rare white spirit bear.) More: kingpacificlodge.com.

CHRISTINE McCABE

Northern exposures: When 100,000 men stampeded north for the 1890s Klondike Gold Rush, the Yukon's uncompromising wilderness was their biggest challenge. Anyone surviving the killer rapids and jagged-toothed mountains to get there could call themselves a local — that's if they also made it through the minus 30C winters.

Fast-forward and I am about to explore this raw-toothed nature head-on, albeit from a cosy heli-

copter. A bird's-eye view is the way to go and one operator usually shutting workers for the Yukon's busy resources sector runs an eye-popping scenic service.

Clambering aboard at tiny Dawson City airport in the Klondike River Valley with three other camera-wielding visitors, we quickly shimmy into the air. The airport soon looks like a toy-town model as we zip over forest-stripped foothills.

Looming ahead is the region's most dramatic mountain landscape. At almost 2200sq km, Tombstone Territorial Park is renowned for its claw-like granite terrain. Swathed with multi-hued tundra flora in summer, on my visit it's still in winter's glassy grip.

Moose and caribou call the area home, razor-sharp pinnacles poke upwards like fangs, streaked with laser-white snow. Prying open one of the chopper's small windows, I take photos of vast volcanic craters brimming like cauldrons with icy mist.

Back below the snowline, we follow the glittering Klondike River over historic Dawson City, where the nugget-eyed prospectors stayed. When the easy gold was gone, they quickly left and machines moved in. Ship-sized dredges chewed up local riverbeds here for decades; and just before the airport, we spot the evidence.

Deposited in vast, undulating trails that, from above, resemble the shed skins of huge snakes, the dredge piles, or tailings, are discarded rocks that were sifted for gold. Their man-made patterns have an oddly attractive, organic look. It's time to land and recharge. More: trinityhelicopters.com.

JOHN LEE

I'm going to Grasslands: Along the horizon we spot a small herd of bison grazing on lush spring grass.

On the immense prairie of Grasslands National Park in southern Saskatchewan, with no trees to block our view, they look like big brown dots. But as we drive closer, their distinctive shape comes into focus. The closest bull stands majestically alone, his shaggy, horned head pointing into the breeze.

Grasslands is Canada's only national park that preserves the mixed-grass prairie ecosystem. Bison once reigned on the prairies, from Canada to Mexico.

Before Europeans arrived in the 1800s and hunted them almost to extinction, they numbered about 30 million. The 71 bison reintroduced in 2006 have multiplied to more than 300, a far cry from the thundering herds of the past, but a thrilling start.

If you want to taste bison, you



CATHERINE MARSHALL

A sturdy and reliable four-wheel-drive vehicle is essential for tackling Alberta's Icefields Parkway in winter



NIGEL FINNEY

Bison roam the range again at Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan

Exploring here is a hiker's dream. A few trails have been built, but you are encouraged to wander.

"If you want to hike 10km in that direction, you can," says Parks Canada heritage guide Caitlin Mroz, pointing towards nowhere in particular.

Look for tipi rings — circles of stones that once secured the tipis (tents) of First Nations people. More than 12,000 have been discovered, along with stone cairns and bison drive lanes, where native people once herded bison to be killed for food and clothing.

The entire park is an archeological treasure trove and there's even traditional tipi accommodation available at the Crossing Resort.

The past is powerful, but so is the present.

Listen for the high-pitched bark of prairie dogs — there's a huge colony with underground burrows — and watch for owls, black-footed ferrets, antelopes, foxes, coyotes and, of course, those bison.

If you want to taste bison, you

can. Just outside Grasslands, in the tiny village of Val Marie, Harvest Moon Cafe, which is run by Mroz in her spare time, serves up bison burgers, made from domestic animals raised for their meat. More: pc.gc.ca; crossingresort.com.

SUZANNE MORPHET

Ice and easy does it: Alberta's Icefields Parkway expresses itself best in the depths of winter, when wind-chill pushes the temperature to minus 40C and the road is paved with an unyielding sheet of ice.

The behemoth of a four-wheel-drive my daughter and I have hired makes perfect sense now that we are out on this 232km-long veritable ice floe.

Although the car is impossibly unwieldy in parking lots, it glides along the open road with confidence and precision, maintaining the very firmest of grips. Our cold-shocked bodies thaw out, thanks to its heated seats and tight insulation and on-demand outpouring of warm, soothing air.

These are not small comforts,

field into the town of Jasper, where people skate on the frozen lakes.

Our eyes have recorded this journey as though it were some glorious, cinematic montage; if only we could show you the results. More: icefieldsparkway.ca.

CATHERINE MARSHALL

Bay watch: From July to mid-August, Rick Stanley from Oceanquest Adventures will hurtle you across Newfoundland's Conception Bay.

This is the Avalon Peninsula, the farthest place east you can go on the North American continent, and your mission will be to swim with humpback whales (which apparently like to show off) plus the occasional opportunity to view narwhals, beluga whales, white-beaked dolphins and minke whales.

Stanley knows this rugged part of Canada like the back of his hand, including the seabed where he often dives for wartime shipwrecks; he takes up to 12 passengers on his boat for half-day excursions at \$C199 (\$192) to snorkel and \$C149 to watch.

Your best chance to have a close encounter with a 10,000-year-old lump of ice is between early May and mid-July.

From the boat you can hear it crackling and if the skipper says it is safe enough, you can take back a souvenir piece of iceberg, perhaps to pop in a drink.

There are also trips for experienced divers that may give you the chance to climb on to an iceberg, if the skipper gives the nod.

For those who like their adventures less daring, there is sea kayaking with a guide who will offer you sea urchins picked from the shoreline.

The bay has a wild beauty, has often been used for film shoots and the people are about as friendly as Canadians can get. More: oceanquestadventures.com.

ANNE KOSTALAS



ANNE KOSTALAS

Icebergs and marine wildlife abound in Conception Bay



CHRISTINE McCABE

British Columbia's Tolkienesque Great Bear Rainforest



JOHN LEE

Volcanic craters in the Yukon brim with icy mist



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