



Waterton Lakes National Park receives about half a million visitors a year.

Beauties beyond Banff

SUZANNE MORPHET visits Canada's lesser-known Waterton Lakes National Park

“The baby just took off,” says a man in a hushed voice as he lowers his camera. Half a dozen of us are standing on a roadside in Canada’s Waterton Lakes National Park, where we’ve been watching a mother black bear and her cub no more than 50m away.

It’s one of the most distant sightings we’ve had of bears since arriving a few days earlier. At other times, mother bears with cubs have walked right beside the windows of our rental car when we’ve pulled over.

Still, this encounter turns into our most endearing when the cub starts to climb a nearby pine tree. He’s mostly hidden from our view or camouflaged by the pine cones that perfectly match his cinnamon-coloured coat. We track his progress by the shaking of branches and occasionally see spot small, rounded ears and a pointy nose poking out.

“Imagine climbing a tree that quickly!” says a woman in awe. As the cub nears the top we lose sight of him until someone notices three small furry legs dangling from a branch. Nap time!

According to Parks Canada, most visitors to Waterton Lakes National Park never see a bear. Maybe we’re just in the right place at the right time, but over the course of three days in May we see

multiple mums with cubs, as well as mountain goats, a bighorn sheep strutting down the middle of the road as if he owned it, and two fox kits playing on a sunny slope within walking distance of the town of Waterton.

“Biodiversity is what sets Waterton apart,” says Kris Robinson, the captain of our cruise boat, when we drag ourselves away from viewing wildlife to viewing the landscape from Upper Waterton Lake, the deepest natural lake in the Canadian Rockies. “This is where the prairies meet the mountains, so you’re finding not only unique geology, but plant and wildlife, biodiversity, human history, a lot of human history, and a lot of it’s been recently unearthed after the Kenow Mountain wildfire.”

The Kenow fire was an extraordinarily severe wildfire that started with a lightning strike in the summer of 2017. Fuelled by extremely dry conditions and 80km per hour winds, it blazed through almost 40 per cent of the park. The village of Waterton and the historic Prince of Wales Hotel were saved by firefighters and water bombers that scooped water from the lake and doused the buildings.

Dead and whitened tree trunks still stand, but thousands of new Lodgepole pine trees are now as tall as the big mama bear we saw standing on her hind legs one evening (likely the same one whose cub enchanted us with its tree-climbing skills the next day).

“Take a look off to the right,” says Kris, pointing at the jagged pinnacles and spires of Citadel Peaks, as we continue cruising south. “The Blackfoot people, who’ve lived here since time immemorial, called the mountain Ataniawaxis, meaning ‘needles in the sky.’”

At just over 500sqkm, Waterton is the smallest national park in the Canadian Rockies but it adjoins the much larger Glacier National Park in the American state of Montana. In fact, the 49th parallel, which divides Canada and the United States, crosses Upper Waterton Lake. As we approach



A father and son throw stones into the clear cold water of Upper Waterton Lake.



Climbing bear. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

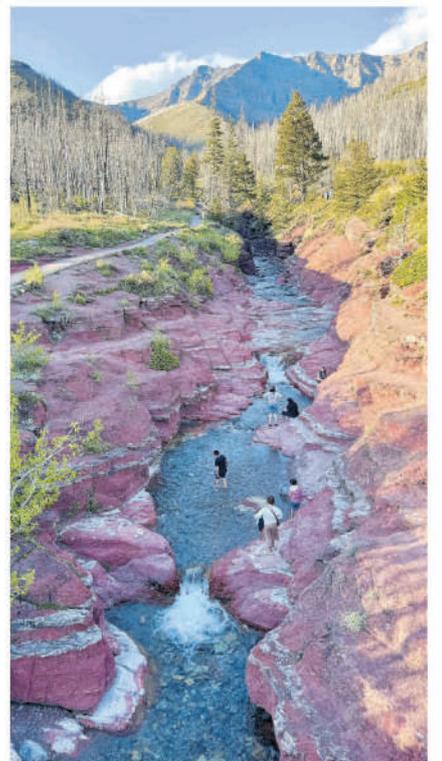


the boundary, we see a linear clearing that’s been cut through the forested mountain slopes on either side of the lake.

In the 1930s, Rotarians on both sides of the border successfully petitioned their respective governments to establish the world’s first International Peace Park. “They came up with the slogan ‘Nature needs no boundaries’”, explains Kris. “And that’s a pretty good phrase to go by. We’re the only species out here who recognise borders and cut lines.”

Another first was in 2017 when Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park became the world’s first international trans-boundary Dark Sky Park. “On a clear night, check out the stars,” Kris tells us when it’s time to turn the boat around and motor back into Canada. “You will be amazed . . . the Milky Way is just a river of stars dazzling overhead.”

More recently, Waterton is being recognised as a quiet alternative to bigger and better known national parks in the Canadian Rockies, especially Banff, Canada’s oldest. Part of the reason Waterton has flown under the radar is because it’s on a secondary highway, not the major



Red Rock Canyon in the national park in mid-May.



A bear cub crosses a road.



Flowers in Waterton Lakes National Park. Picture: Suzanne Morphet

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Trans-Canada. And unlike Banff, it has no nearby ski resorts, so most businesses close in winter.

That includes the Prince of Wales Hotel that sits on a bluff between Upper and Middle Waterton Lakes. Its big picture windows frame grand views of Upper lake from spring through fall, but in winter they get pummelled by wind and must be boarded up.

The contrast between the rugged wilderness beyond those windows and the bare legs of staff under tartan kilts inside the hotel is stark. We arrive in time for afternoon tea in the Royal Steward Dining Room, where we meet our server, Jack. "For today, you have a selection of nine teas," he says, adding that he's come from Ireland to work another season and experience the Rockies in his free time.

Despite its name, no Prince of Wales has ever visited this hotel, but it's still regally beautiful, with dark wood panelling, a soaring ceiling and Persian-style carpets. Its green copper roof matches that of other grand railway hotels built in Canada in the early 20th century.

We sip black tea and eat dainty squares and pastries from a silver tray. "They make it look so beautiful," coos my friend Jeanette. "It makes me want to go home and make cucumber sandwiches!"

It makes me want to go home and make plans to return. Everything about this park is appealing, not least the fact that it's relatively quiet. This year, more than four million people will visit Banff, while only half a million will make it to Waterton. I count myself lucky to be one of the latter.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Waterton Lakes Chamber of Commerce, with additional support from Travel Alberta and Pursuit Collection. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.

fact file

- The Prince of Wales Hotel is open from mid-May to mid-September. Rates from CAD \$300 (\$335). Afternoon tea from CAD \$64pp (\$71.50).
- The Bayshore Inn & Spa is open May to October. Rates from CAD \$284 (\$317).
- The Waterton Shoreline Cruise Co offers a variety of cruises and shuttles on Upper Waterton Lake. Its Canada-US Border cruise (1 hour 15 minutes) runs multiple times daily from early May through mid-October and is CAD \$65pp (\$73).

The ʔapsciik tasii coast.



New cycle routes in Canada's west

STEVE LYONS on the extraordinary ʔapsciik tasii trail, and other unmissable rides



A new cycling trail on Vancouver Island's wild west coast links the laidback surf towns of Tofino and Ucluelet — and it's as meaningful as it is scenic. For Tla-o-qui-aht elder Levi Martin, the ʔapsciik tasii (pronounced "ups-cheek ta-shee") is more than a pathway — it's a route grounded in reconciliation, ceremony, and cultural respect.

When asked what kind of input his people had in the trail's creation, a grin crosses Levi's face and his response is succinct: "Everything and anything."

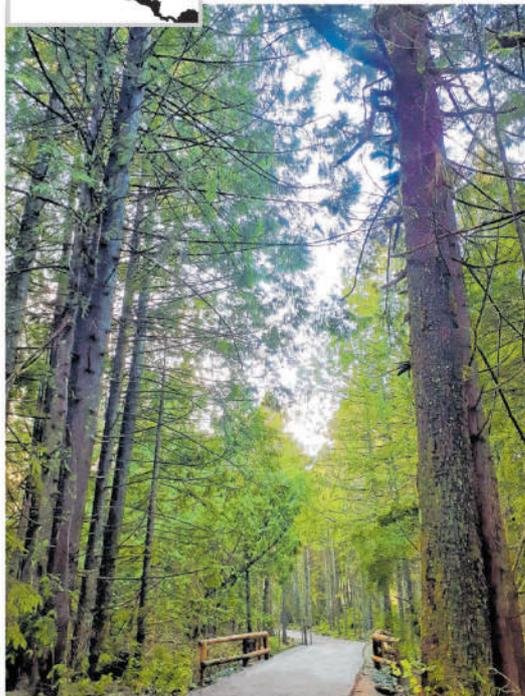
It hasn't always been that way. For centuries, colonial governments in Canada ignored Indigenous rights and traditions. But this trail — opened in 2022 after years of design and collaboration — is different. It lies entirely within the hahuuli, the traditional homelands of the Tla-o-qui-aht and Yuuluʔilʔath First Nations. From the earliest planning meetings in 2018, Parks Canada worked closely with Indigenous leaders to ensure the route would respect sacred sites, ecological sensitivity, and cultural significance.

An Elders Working Group gave the trail its name, ʔapsciik tasii, which loosely translates to "going the right direction on the path". It's both literal and metaphorical — a reminder to walk (or ride) with awareness, humility, and respect for all living things.

Levi hopes the path lives up to its name. "We don't just go in there and do whatever we feel we need to do or want to do," he says. "Before we go into another person's territory, we stop and say a prayer — for ourselves, for the land, for the community. That we will not do anything to offend the land or the community."

The ride itself is extraordinary. The 25km trail links seamlessly with multi-use paths in both Tofino and Ucluelet, creating an 80km return route. It weaves through towering cedar forests, skirts second-growth bogs on boardwalks, and passes some of the most beautiful beaches in Canada.

Environmental stewardship is built into every curve of the path: salmon habitat has been protected, amphibian tunnels help frogs cross under the highway, and construction was paused during migratory bird nesting season.



Tall trees along the trail. Pictures: Steve Lyons