

Skiers climb a ridge at Lake Louise Ski Resort to make their own line through fresh snow.



Fly downhill as the bears sleep

SUZANNE MORPHET goes skiing in Banff National Park

The grizzly bears of Banff National Park are halfway through their winter slumber when I arrive in mid-February.

As much as I love seeing bears in the wild — from a safe distance — being able to explore this park without the fear of running into one is a good reason to visit in winter.

As well as no bears, there are far fewer people. And, of course, there's the skiing!

Of Canada's 293 ski resorts, only four are in national parks, and three of them are right here (the fourth being in Jasper National Park).

Instead of viewing condos and cabins, roads and hydro power lines, you're surrounded by raw nature, mountain sides blanketed in snow, and with so much room to roam that you need to keep an eye on your ski buddies so you don't lose each other.

Here's what I learnt and enjoyed about each resort.

MT NORQUAY

The oldest of the ski resorts in Banff National Park, Mt Norquay celebrates its 100th birthday this year. One of its chairlifts dates from 1948 — the oldest operating in Canada.

Norquay is also the closest ski resort to the town of Banff, just a 10-minute drive, and was

originally the local ski club.

Today, it's still popular with locals because of its convenience and its excellent ski school.

"So many Olympians skiing here, living here. It's wonderful," says Jasper Johnson, the resort's marketing manager, when he spots cross-country skiing gold medallist Chandra Crawford with some kids from a local school, including his own nine-year-old son on the day I join him.

"Have fun," Jasper calls out to the boy. "I'll see you at 3 o'clock at the lodge, please!"

Despite being family-friendly, Mt Norquay is known for its steep runs, but these kids make it look easy, some launching down a black diamond slope with no visible qualms. Jasper finds intermediate runs for me to enjoy and points out the beginner-level hill and sizeable Terrain Park, both illuminated after dark on Fridays and Saturdays for skiers and "shredders".

For a different kind of adrenaline rush, he recommends the resort's tube park — the largest and fastest in Canada's Rockies. "A lot of visitors come up here and see that and say, 'Holy, this is the craziest thing I've ever seen in my life,'" he laughs, explaining that you ride up the slope on the "magic carpet" ski flit with your inflatable tube, then quickly slide down one of eight slick lanes.

BANFF SUNSHINE

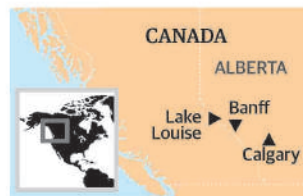
This resort boasts lots of superlatives. It's the highest in Canada. It has the longest season (mid-November to late May). And it claims to have Canada's best snow.

All this makes sense when I learn Banff Sunshine sits on Canada's Continental Divide — the north-south ridge that directs snow melt either east to Hudson Bay or West to the Pacific Ocean.

It's a meandering and scenic 20-minute gondola ride just to reach the Upper Village, where you then choose from one of four "quad" chairlifts that will transport you to an alpine paradise on one of three different mountains. Other lifts take you even higher, including the Great Divide, which whisks us to the top of Lookout Mountain at 2730m above sea level. This place is almost overwhelming, but in a good way.



Skiers against the forest and mountains at Banff Sunshine Resort. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



"People who come from Europe say, 'Oh my God, there's no line-ups,'" says my ski guide David MacLellan. "Even on a busy day, it's a 15-minute wait, tops."

His comment reminds me of last winter when I skied in France at Grand Massif. The mountains were glorious, but so packed with people it was scary at times. Not here.

Then there's the snow. Most resorts make artificial snow, but Banff Sunshine gets so much natural snowfall, it doesn't need to make more. Crews simply spread around what collects. At noon, David and I are still making fresh tracks as we descend one blanketed slope after another, tails of snow flying behind us in the crisp alpine air. Sublime!

LAKE LOUISE

Lake Louise is famous for its turquoise lake in summer, but its ski resort is also noteworthy. With 1780 skiable hectares, it's one of the largest in North America. On average, it snows here 82 days every winter, accumulating more than 5m. This winter, it had already snowed that much by the start of the new year.

In the last five years, the resort has added five new lifts, including a chairlift with heated seats and a cover. This year it expanded its

fact file

■ SkiBig3 works on behalf of all three ski resorts in Banff National Park to help visitors have a seamless experience. It reserves accommodation, books rental equipment, lift tickets and transportation between resorts and the towns of Banff and Lake Louise, as well as from Calgary, where the closest international airport is located. Free shuttle buses mean you can easily get around the park without renting a car. SkiBig3 is a partner of Ikon and Mountain Collective passes. skibig3.com

■ The Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise has its own Stay, Play & Ski offer: chateau-lake-louise.com/offers/stay-play-ski.

terrain by 80ha and a new high-speed quad to serve it.

On our fourth day — the first that it's not snowing or overcast — the views from the top of Lake Louise are staggering. Pointy peaks, wide open bowls, granite ridges and, far below, the Chateau Lake Louise aglow at the edge of the snow-covered lake.

I'm also pleasantly surprised by the food, not just at Lake Louise, but everywhere we go. I'm accustomed to items like chilli con carne at ski resorts, not duck confit. It feels like we could be in Europe — but without the line-ups — when we linger over a long lunch in the post-and-beam Temple Lodge at Lake Louise on our final day.

My husband, who is not prone to hyperbole, declares our sunny day here the best ski day of our lives. I can't disagree.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of SkiBig3 and the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.



The only bears you'll see in winter in Banff National Park are ones like this at Banff Sunshine.