

Slow & steady is the peak of relaxation

Have a taste for adventure? Take the VIA train from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific with SUZANNE MORPHET

Time you enjoy wasting is not wasted time." I read those words, attributed to British author Marthe Troly-Curtin, on the wall of the women's bathroom at Lostlands Cafe in Jasper, Alberta.

A couple of hours later, as I settled into my seat on a VIA train bound for a Pacific port 1000km away, I wondered if I was about to waste a big chunk of time.

Google Maps showed that I could drive to Prince Rupert in just under 12 hours. Taking the VIA train would be almost twice that long.

For the past few days my husband and I have been enjoying Jasper National Park, the largest park in Canada's Rockies, with magnificent mountains, turquoise lakes and abundant wildlife.

Now, my husband has flown home — he didn't relish the thought of sitting on a train for hours on end — so I'm on my own.

The Jasper train, also known as Train No.5, is one of VIA's "adventure routes". There are no dining cars nor cabins for sleeping. In Prince George, where the train stops for the night, everyone finds their own hotel room before re-boarding the next morning. I worry that "adventure" might be a pseudonym for "uncomfortable", or "slow and tedious".

Last year, on a day trip I made with VIA from Toronto to Sudbury, in northern Ontario, I met a young man who told me gleefully that, more than once, he had hopped onto freight trains as they were leaving a station and rode — outside — for free. "The sunrises were amazing," he recalled with a grin. Who would I meet on board this time?

After finding a seat and storing my bag, I head for the dome car, a two-storey car with a snack bar and lounge on the bottom and an



Passengers enjoy the dome car on the VIA train to Prince Rupert. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



The train station in Terrace, BC.

upper floor offering panoramic views. Considering its advanced age — this train was built in 1954 — it's comfortable and well maintained. The interiors feel dated, but so does train travel itself, at least in Canada.

Compared to the freight trains we'll pass — some more than 3.5km long (yes, kilometres!) — our train is stubby with just the locomotive, a baggage car, a passenger car for 25 people, and the dome car.

Everyone I meet seems in high spirits, including an older farming couple from Ontario, a young Mennonite woman from Haida Gwaii, and a couple from Edmonton with two little kids.

Among the international visitors, there's a Dutch businessman with two grown sons, a young German couple and three American retirees.

Leaving Jasper, the weather turns sombre, but the scenery is anything but. Within the first hour, we chug through the Yellowhead Pass and cross the Continental Divide — the crest of land that runs the length of North America and determines whether rivers will flow east or west.

"This is also the provincial boundary between Alberta and British Columbia," says Jean-Francois, our VIA host, "so welcome to British Columbia."

Soon we see Mt Robson rising above the clouds — the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies at 3954m — with its pyramid-shaped peak still streaked with snow. A river comes alongside — our first glimpse of the mighty Fraser, the longest river in British Columbia and the largest sockeye salmon producer in the world.

More mountains fill the horizon, including glaciated Mount Rider, named for Sir H. Rider Haggard, author of King Solomon's Mines, who rode this route in 1916, just two years after it was completed.

The scenery we enjoy is rivalled only by the history of this route, part of Canada's northern transcontinental rail line. As

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"To witness, firsthand, the resilience and adaptability of our animals, and the ecological rebirth of some of the most iconic landscapes in the Canadian Rockies is a rare and exceptional opportunity."

On our evening tour with SunDog in June, we learned that elk can often be seen right in the town of Jasper, and recent photos show that's still the case.

"They have managed to figure out that wherever we are, there happens to be no predators. So, it's not uncommon to open your door and find an elk sitting in your front yard," our guide Gareth said.

We also learned that elk can be very dangerous — the females when they have calves, and the males during the fall rut, which is happening now through the end of October. And beware of any male moose sporting giant antlers during the rut. Gareth added, "He has this massive rush of testosterone going through his body, so if you're anything but a beautiful,



sultry, female moose, you are in danger!"

That evening we spotted three black bears and a couple of bull elk, all grazing peacefully along the road within half a kilometre of each other. Those bears will be higher up the mountains now, feasting on berries to fatten

up before winter. And those elk — well, we know what they're up to.

"Amidst the ashes, life finds a way," tweeted park staff soon after the fire. "Just like the community of Jasper, Jasper National Park's wildlife will rebound from this crisis."

The Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge rents canoes and other water craft to guests. Picture: Suzanne Morphet

fact file

- Most hotels in Jasper have now reopened, including the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge. It offers a wide range of accommodation for couples and families from log cabins to lakeside suites. fairmont.com
- For information on other businesses and services that have reopened: jasper-alberta.ca/p/what-s-open
- Jasper National Park: parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ab/jasper
- Tourism Jasper: jasper.travel
- When photographing wildlife, follow these Parks Canada rules: parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ab/jasper/activ/experience/photo-film