

Hot soaks among the cool peaks

SUZANNE MORPHET
heats up in the heart of
the Canadian Rockies

It was water — hot mineral water, specifically — that gave birth to Banff National Park.

In 1883, while helping to build Canada's first transcontinental railway, three men came upon a steamy limestone cave where sulphurous water bubbled out of the ground. It was "like some fantastic dream from a tale of the Arabian Nights", according to William McCardell, one of the men.

They promptly built a shack and hoped to develop the site.

The Federal Government had other ideas, and two years later, Canada got its first national park. Visitors from near and far were soon flocking to this cave and natural basin just outside present-day Banff to soak in the therapeutic water, and later, to swim in a man-made pool. Even if the water smelled disgustingly of rotten eggs, the facility was "an important place where Canadians could relax and find physical and spiritual renewal, according to Parks Canada.

Today, Cave and Basin is a national historic site and you can visit, but bathing has not been permitted since 1992.

However, for an experience that offers a similar sense of anticipation, colonial history and feeling of sublime wellbeing, drive to nearby Lake Louise.

Here, it wasn't hot water, but a turquoise lake carved by glaciers and surrounded by high and dramatic mountain peaks, that captured newcomers' attention.

The Canadian Pacific Railway decided to promote Lake Louise to wealthy American and European visitors. It even hired mountaineers from Switzerland to guide them. Lake Louise's credentials as a climbing destination were painfully solidified in 1896 when an American climber fell to his death — the first mountaineering fatality in North America.

The first hotel CPR built here was a simple, one-storey log cabin. After a fire destroyed it, a larger chalet was built. More wings were added. Then came a second fire and more reconstruction. By 1925, the property was renamed



Bathers enjoy the outdoor terrace at Basin Glacial Waters, Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Chateau Lake Louise and had 400 rooms.

Bathing became an important recreation for visitors here too, and in 1926 the chateau boasted Canada's second-largest outdoor swimming pool.

A black-and-white photo from the time shows a man performing an elegant swan dive from a springboard with the glistening lake and the Victoria glacier beyond.

That pool closed in 1980, but in the same spot, the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise has recently opened Basin Glacial Waters, a project two decades in the making and part of the owners' \$130 million renovations of the historic hotel.

"Basin sets a new worldwide standard for thermal spa luxury," according to Emlyn Brown, senior vice-president of wellbeing, strategy, design and development at Accor, which owns the Fairmont brand.

"We believe it's poised to become the world's next natural

wonder of bathing, joining the ranks of Iceland's Blue Lagoon and Switzerland's Therme Vals."

I got my first look at Basin Glacial Waters from the frozen lakeshore one winter evening. Steam billowed up from the outdoor hot pools, and flames flickered from fire bowls above banks of snow. It looked enticingly modern and primeval at once.

The next afternoon I arrived for my three-hour, self-guided "journey to wellness". There are so many options, both indoors and out, that guests are handed cards suggesting various wellness "trails" to follow.

If you're looking for detox and renewal, follow the cleansing trail. Want to relieve stress? Then try the stillness trail.

I just wander freely, starting with the Kneipp walk, where I wade through shallow pools of warm and cold water over an uneven surface to simulate walking barefoot outdoors, perhaps through a mountain stream. (Sebastian Kneipp was a 19th-century Catholic priest in Germany who founded this and other "water cures" to try to treat his tuberculosis.)

From the indoor pool, I glide through an arched opening in the wall to the outdoor infinity pool overlooking the lake. People are skating at one end, but the mountains dwarf everyone and everything. The peak on the opposite shore seems to puncture the steely grey sky, letting in slivers of silver light.

"Nature should shape the architecture, not the other way around," said Matteo Thun, the Italian architect who absorbed this same view before designing the facility with stone and wood to blend in with the landscape.

Time seems to slow as I move from an aromatic steam room to a dry sauna to a reflexology pool.

A bracing rinse under an icy "waterfall" sends me hurrying to a hot pool, where I chat with a couple of men from nearby Calgary, here for a ski conference. Later, I find a quiet spot to sip herbal tea and just be.

fact file

- For its opening phase, Basin Glacial Waters is available exclusively to guests of Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. Advanced reservations are essential. Access passes are \$275 per person, and valid for three hours for the selected date and time.
- chateau-lake-louise.com/wellness/basin-glacial-waters/
- For 2026, room rates in winter start from \$530 (\$CAD509) and in summer from \$1875 (\$CAD1799).
- For the hotel's Stay, Play & Ski offer: chateau-lake-louise.com/offers/stay-play-ski/

My favourite experience is the aufguss — the European sauna ritual in which an aufgussmeister (sauna master) controls the temperature and uses a towel to move hot air around the room.

About 30 of us gather at the appointed time and meet today's sauna master, who is a heavily tattooed young man from Mooloolaba, Queensland. "Aufguss just means 'pouring over' in German," Helaman tells us, explaining that he'll pour water over snowballs that have been infused with essential oils.

Closing the door, the ceremony begins. Snowballs sizzle over hot rocks and clouds of vapour thicken the air. Dope Lemon plays in the background, adding to the dreamy atmosphere. Sitting on wooden benches, we watch Helaman fan the air, directing it to each of us in turn. We're wearing thick felt hats to protect our heads from the extreme heat but it's becoming almost unbearable when suddenly, it's over. Flinging open the door, Helaman invites us outside to cool off.

In the last few decades, Nordic-style spas have been popping up everywhere in Canada, but nothing can compare to Basin Glacial Waters for a sensual extravaganza in one of the most revered landscapes in the world.

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



The view over the skating rink on Lake Louise, taken from the fifth floor of the hotel.