

FAMILY TRIPS

Toddler tourist takes Edmonton by storm

Alberta's capital has plenty to offer kids – and their parents, too

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Travelling with my pint-sized ruler can be exhausting. To date, our holidays have focused on beach destinations. Why? Because when an overtired 18-month-old flings a bowl of scalding-hot oatmeal onto my lap, I at least want an ocean view.

However, I've found two to be a magical age. A real shift from baby toddler to mini-human has occurred. It also opens up a whole new realm of travel. City attractions like zoos, amusement parks and science centres now capture my daughter's interest and hold her attention. Even better, most offer free admission for tots under three.

With direct flights and heaps of family-friendly activities, Edmonton hit the mark for our foray into the world of city exploration. I'd also heard fantastic things about a burgeoning farm-to-fork culinary scene, and excessive dining always feels better if you're not stuffing yourself into a swimsuit the next day.

When you're up at the crack of dawn with kids, look for the silver lining and use it to your advantage. By arriving at Edmonton's Telus World of Science before the doors opened, we enjoyed a crowd-free viewing with no lineups and ample freedom for a certain someone to run around and burn off energy. We toured a few galleries before arriving at the pinnacle of play — Discoveryland. Designed for children under eight, with tot galaxy (a playroom for three and under), a water play area, tree house and mini jet plane, my daughter was captivated. So was my husband. We could have easily spent the entire morning here, perhaps even the day. Admission is free for kids under



WEST EDMONTON MALL

There's lots to entertain families in Edmonton, from West Edmonton Mall's Galaxyland Amusement Park, at left, to the Telus World of Science, at right.



EXPLORE EDMONTON

three, although I had to pay for my husband.

West Edmonton Mall was another huge success for us, and all of the attractions are free for three and under. We went straight to Galaxyland Amusement Park for the tot rides and space-themed play area. Arriving early is key as the mall gets busy in the afternoon and it's harder to navigate with little ones. The underground aquarium Marine Life and World Waterpark are also great for toddlers.

When visiting a new city, I try to seek out a farmers market. It's an activity that engages all of the senses and my daughter is quite happy to snack in the stroller, meet local producers and check out the brightly coloured stalls. For our first few nights we stayed in a modern

one-bedroom suite at the Matrix Hotel, which is only a few blocks from Edmonton's City Market Downtown. The buffet breakfast included with all room rates made for a much simpler start to the morning.

In my search for other unique foodie spots that welcome children, I found Blue Plate Diner and Duchess Bake Shop. Weekend brunch at Blue Plate is legendary, but as reservations aren't accepted until 2 p.m., we opted for a late lunch instead. Quirky kitsch decor and home-style comfort food are the best ways to describe the diner. The shepherd's pie came with a side of mac 'n' cheese. My husband was in heaven.

Duchess Bake Shop is at the other end of the design spectrum, a quaint yet lively little

café with gleaming glass cases elegantly displaying a rainbow of macaroons, delicate cakes and flaky pastries. Had I realized how popular Duchess was, we would have come earlier for a leisurely mid-morning tea and treat. Unfortunately, by late afternoon it was standing room only, and we had to take our treasures to go.

For us, vacation dates are a must, and that requires reliable and trustworthy child care. After an extensive search for a hotel that offers babysitting, we moved to the Fairmont Hotel MacDonald for our last two nights. The indoor pool was a bonus.

First up, we strolled along Whyte Avenue in Old Strathcona, popping into a string of eclectic boutiques along the way.

A couples massage at Wellness on Whyte followed. My therapist Suzy was so incredible that her hands alone would bring me back to Edmonton.

Dinner was at the critically acclaimed Corso 32. Reservations are not easy to obtain, as the tiny restaurant is often fully booked upwards of three weeks in advance. The handmade pasta was so delicate that I believe fairies were responsible for its creation. The following evening we scored an early reservation at RGE RD, a farm-to-fork restaurant in the most literal sense. Originally created as an on-farm dining experience, RGE RD's popularity begged for a more traditional restaurant format. Our meal was an event that lasted over two hours, allowing plenty of time for handcrafted

cocktails. While the dishes are hearty, the portion sizes lend well for sharing. For the adventurous there is Questionable Bits, a daily preparation using whole animal cooking. While intrigued by the name, I was drawn more to the local bison and Gouda perogies.

Edmonton also happens to be touted as Canada's festival city, and we fortuitously visited at the tail end of the jazz festival. Most events held throughout the summer are family-friendly and many include free outdoor concerts and performances. Next time we'll plan our trip around the Folk Music Festival in August. An afternoon of dancing in the park promises an early night for our little one.

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