



Breathtaking views reach as far as the eye can see atop the Banff Gondola

## CHRISTMAS ON HIGH IS BEST GIFT OF ALL

From Yule-themed treasure hunts to gondola rides, the Rockies are never more beautiful than now

**MHAIRRI WOODHALL**

Sitting fireside on the 360-degree observation deck at the summit of Sulphur Mountain feels like floating on a cloud. I'm a little light-headed, and completely gobsmacked. Banff's panoramic views of the Canadian Rockies are only intensified at the top of the gondola.

While my husband and I devour the scene of six snow-capped mountain ranges shimmering amid a blue sky, our kiddo searches in earnest, trying to see where the guest of honour has parked his fleet of reindeer. "It's like we're flying in Santa's sleigh," she exclaims, with the exuberance only a five-year-old can muster. In an instant, our first visit to the Above Banff interpretive centre has become a new Christmas tradition.

The gondola elves have been busy, adding new activities and events to this year's holiday lineup. Our little Sugarmouse Greensparkles — the official elf name bestowed upon our daughter — has hit up every holiday station. We've spent almost four hours partaking in the free fun, which includes cookie decorating, letters to Santa, screenings of Disney's Prep & Landing movie, pictures with the big man in red, and a Christmas-themed treasure hunt that spans all four floors of the interpretive centre. After said festivities,

Mama was ready for a well-earned glass of bubbly in the Sky Bistro. The mountaintop eatery, which welcomes families, boasts the best view of any restaurant I've dined in. We were just as impressed with the food, and although a kid's menu is available, our tiny foodie was happy to share in the local charcuterie platter and chef's winter salad.

Our holiday merriment continued at the Fairmont Banff Springs, where Christmas at the Castle is in full swing. Brunch with Santa, in the Bow Valley Grill, continues to be a family favourite. However, this year's shining star is awarded to the resort's new theatre production, A Christmas Carol. Having already watched the Disney version featuring Scrooge McDuck, I knew our daughter would be comfortable with the slightly scary storyline.

What I hadn't anticipated is that the play's talented cast of five would hold her interest for almost two full hours. She was utterly captivated, and refused to leave the theatre at intermission for fear of missing out on any part of the second act. Tickets to the show, which runs through Christmas Day, can be purchased individually or as part of a weekend brunch package. Hotel guests receive 50 per cent off admission and can partake in the resort's many free holiday activities, including roasting marshmallows in the garden

terrace and family fun in the Kids @ The Castle centre.

As Banff, like Calgary, is still wishing for a white Christmas, we had to head to the hills to play in powder. Mount Norquay's Tube Town opened last Sunday, and if you're new to tubing — like we were — you're in for a treat. I'm told that it's possible to reach speeds of up to 80 km per hour, which is a little intimidating as you relinquish all control while in the tube. The good news is that absolutely zero skill is required. Simply hop in, and hold on tight. My shrieks could be heard over the park's blasting music. For the cautious, like myself, expect to feel equal parts of joy and terror. My little thrill-seeking maniac, however, squealed with laughter every time she flew down the hill. Given the speed at which you travel, kids must be at least four years old and 42 inches tall to use the park.

Visiting Cave and Basin National Historic Site, the birthplace of Canada's national park system, was another first for our family. Admission is free in 2017, and at the age of five, our daughter can now appreciate the story behind the landmark. Highlights — for kids in particular — include exploring the underground cave to see the bubbling and hilariously smelly thermal waters, giggling at the overly modest bathing suits from the 1800s, 'driving'



Delicious gingerbread replica of The Castle at the Fairmont Banff Springs

the cool VW Beetle and playing with the stuffed animals in the family zone. If the weather's fair, I also recommend walking the boardwalk to see the cave from above, as it's fun to imagine how explorers first discovered hot pools through such a tiny opening in the ground.

The healing waters of Cave and Basin inspired me to book a little pampering of my own at the Meadow Spa, in The Moose Hotel where we stayed.

While my husband and child splashed in the hotel's rooftop pools, I experienced 75-minutes of nirvana. In fact, my signature pedicure, complete with mud wrap, paraffin and pressure point massage, was so incredible that I'm booking my husband the men's version for Christmas. If you're a skier, hiker, or simply an exhausted parent, this is the treatment for you.

Our weekend theme, of seeking out new experiences, also extended to dining. As such, we discovered two top restaurants that are suitable for kids, yet highly enjoyable for adults. The Banff Ave. Brewing Co., just a short walk from The Moose, is an excellent choice for a hearty meal in a lively atmosphere. Top dishes for us were the grilled Caesar salad with bacon jam and roasted garlic dressing (to die for), spaghetti and meatballs and grilled Alberta beef sirloin.

For a slightly more upscale option, take the short drive to the Juniper Hotel. The Atlantic sea scallops and wild boar rack are menu standouts.

### IF YOU GO

Families will love the Banff Gondola Interpretive Centre's interactive activities that are available throughout the year. Book your tickets in advance to save 10 per cent off adult fares. The bonus? Kids (ages 6-15) ride for free until 12 p.m. during winter, and toddlers (five and under) are always free. Visit BanffGondola.com for the schedule of Mountaintop Christmas events, running through Jan 7.

For the Fairmont Banff Springs' holiday activities, visit ChristmasAtTheCastle.com. If you can't make it to the mountains before the new year, try to plan your trip around Banff SnowDays festival in January. As part of the month-long celebration, the resort is offering discounted packages of up to 45 per cent off per stay.

The Moose Hotel & Suites is a beautiful new property on Banff Ave. Ideal for families, the one-bedroom suites include two queen beds and a double pullout, and are equipped with a microwave, sink and fridge for quick meals and snacks. MooseHotelAndSuites.com For more destination information, visit [www.arrivalstravel.com](http://www.arrivalstravel.com)

## MSC brings a little European flavour to North America

New York is launch point as line readies its newest megaships for Caribbean



**AARON SAUNDERS**  
Ports + Bows

This week, I have to give a tip of the hat to MSC Cruises (cruise.center/msc), which has just announced three new itineraries from New York for the spectacular new MSC Meraviglia (mer-a-veel-eah) when she arrives on the shores of North America in late 2019.

If you haven't already heard about MSC Cruises, that's going to change over the next few years. The world's largest privately owned cruise line already dominates in both Europe and South America, and has been slowly making inroads in North America (specifically the Caribbean) for the last decade. Now, it is unleashing its newest and most high-tech cruise ships on North American guests at an unprecedented pace.

The line already has a fleet of 14 superbly designed megaships, with another two on the way. These range from the smaller, more intimate 1,984-guest sisters, MSC Lirica and MSC Opera; to the high-tech 4,488-guest

MSC Meraviglia and her newest fleetmate, MSC Seaside. The latter, MSC's most innovative ship to date, is making her way across the Atlantic as I write this, bound for her new home in Miami.

That MSC is now adding MSC Meraviglia to North American departures — to join MSC Seaside and MSC Divina — for the winter of 2019-20 is no secret, but her new departures from New York are definitely worth noting.

"New York has been a market that MSC Cruises has been exploring for a number of years," said Rick Sasso, chairman of MSC Cruises USA. "We are thrilled that for the first time in MSC Cruises' history, we are now able to offer sailings from this important region and meet the expectations of both our travel agent partners and guests."

These three new itineraries — all of which go on sale Jan. 2 — explore Canada & New England and the East Coast of the Americas, and are great options for those looking for a big-ship experience with an international flair. MSC has a strong following in Europe, so expect the on-board crowd to hail from many different countries.

First up are two 10-night Canada & New England voyages that depart round-trip from New



By 2019, MSC Cruises will have three of its newest and most impressive ships sailing to the Caribbean from Florida, with a few sailings departing from New York and visiting Canadian ports first. MSC CRUISES

York aboard MSC Meraviglia.

The first voyage, departing Oct. 8, 2019, will visit Canadian ports exclusively, calling on Sydney, N.S.; Corner Brook, N.L.; and Charlottetown, along with an overnight call on Quebec City.

MSC Meraviglia's second North American voyage, on Oct. 18, 2019, offers a mix of Canadian and American ports, stopping at Bar Harbor, Maine; Saint John, N.B.; Halifax and Sydney, N.S.; Portland, Maine; and Boston.

Finally, cruisers can depart on Oct. 28, 2019 for a 13-night exploration of the eastern seaboard, sailing from New York to Miami via the Caribbean. On this cruise, MSC Meraviglia will stop at Philipsburg, St. Maarten; Fort-de-France, Martinique; Bridgetown, Barbados; Saint George, Grenada; Willemstad, Curaçao; and Oranjestad, Aruba, before arriving in Miami.

From there, she will begin her

inaugural season of voyages to the Caribbean, joining fleetmates MSC Divina and MSC Seaside in offering a multitude of voyages to the Eastern and Western Caribbean.

Departing Sundays, MSC Meraviglia will primarily sail weekend cruises to the Western Caribbean on two separate itineraries. The first of these will include calls on Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, Mexico and the Bahamas; while the second itinerary will feature ports in Mexico, Honduras, Belize and the Bahamas.

If you look online, MSC gets a rough ride in the Caribbean from cruisers who expect the line to be exactly like Carnival or Princess and are surprised to find daily programs offered in a multitude of languages and cuisine that caters to a more international audience. The line makes no secret of its European heritage, nor should it.

My own experience aboard MSC in the Caribbean a few seasons ago was one filled with good food and great European niceties, like made-on-board gelato and some of the best coffee at sea. Entertainment tends to be more visual than other lines (a nod to the different languages spoken by guests) and was very high quality.

With MSC bringing bigger-and-better ships to the shores of North America, it's like having a little slice of Europe in the Caribbean.

Happy cruising. Visit [portsandbows.com](http://portsandbows.com), sponsored by [Expedia CruiseShipCenters](http://Expedia CruiseShipCenters), 1-800-707-7327, [www.cruiseshipcenters.com](http://www.cruiseshipcenters.com), for daily updates on the latest cruise news, best deals and behind-the-scenes stories from the industry. You can also sign up for an email newsletter on the site for even more cruise information. Aaron Saunders may be contacted directly at [portsandbowsaaron@gmail.com](mailto:portsandbowsaaron@gmail.com)