

## FAMILY TRAVEL

## JASPER A WONDERLAND OF OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Enjoy better deals in shoulder season and fewer crowds, writes Mhairri Woodhall.

Giggle, gasp, shriek, repeat. Two hours in and we're soggy and sillier than I anticipated was possible. Our seven-year old, who loathes getting her clothes wet, sports an ear-to-ear grin and is practically willing our guide to soak her one last time. It's rather impressive really, his seemingly innate ability to simultaneously crack jokes and spout geological facts, while strategically navigating our vessel into rapids that douse unsuspecting children. He picks them off, one by one, until every child has felt the Athabasca River's icy spray. Then, it's time for Round 2, 3 and 4. Somehow Jasper Raft Tours has transformed a scenic float into a fun-filled waterlogged adventure.

Jasper National Park is a world-class venue for outdoor pursuits; and its expansive rugged mountain terrain presents an abundance of wildlife viewing opportunities. If you ask locals for their favourite sighting spots, there's a good chance they'll tell you to head along Maligne Lake Road. The scenic 45-kilometre route that connects Jasper and Maligne Lake is a Canadian Rockies' wildlife mecca, where bear, deer, elk and bighorn sheep are known to make impromptu appearances. Hit the road early to improve your chances and avoid sharing the experience with 50 other cars. We did, and were gifted with a bucket-list moment, when an adult bull moose ambled out of the brush in front of our car. Parked just a few metres away, we spent a magical 15 minutes watching the impressive beast munch on roadside shrubs. On our return journey, we were treated to a gangly moose calf foraging in the trees.

While moose were a thrilling addition to the day, it was actually the Maligne Lake Boat Tour that inspired our early morning drive. The 90-minute round-trip cruise to Spirit Island has been on my photography-obsessed husband's radar for almost five years. Thanks to its famous introduction to the modern world in 1960, care of Peter Gales' Kodak Colorama image displayed in New York City's Grand Central Terminal, the iconic location has become one of the world's most photographed scenes. Even with lacklustre lighting during our visit, Spirit Island was a wondrous sight. For families travelling with younger children, I recommend exploring one of the lakeshore trails before boarding the cruise. We did this with our daughter, and also brought her sketchbook and a snack to help keep her engaged for the duration.

Open year-round, Maligne Canyon is another park attraction accessed from Maligne Road. The gentle paved trail, which is suitable for all ages, features six bridges and stunning perspectives of Jasper National Park's deepest canyon. Our daughter was in awe of the dramatic waterfalls and roaring river that churned and snaked through the canyon's narrow passageways. In winter, the falls freeze into a sparkling spectacle that is best experienced on a guided ice walk. After exploring the trails, we lunched at Maligne Canyon's onsite restaurant, the Wilderness Kitchen. The house-smoked, 16-hour slow-cooked Alberta beef brisket sandwich had my barbecue loving husband practically licking the plate. I'm told the canyon poutine is just as impressive, however, the French onion soup stole the show for me. Coffee, snacks and picnic-style lunches are available for grab and go, and the restaurant offers a full dinner menu as well. It's a popular spot, so reservations are recommended.

Jasper National Park is the world's largest accessible Dark Sky Preserve, and the stargazing here is outstanding. To elevate the exceptional, we booked Jasper Skytram's astronomy and dining experience. The program, offered in partnership with the



The crystal clear water of Maligne Lake and snow-peaked mountains await travellers in Jasper National Park.

CURT WOODHALL

Jasper Planetarium, takes place at the Skytram Upper Station on Whistlers Mountain. For families, the earlier Skytram Flight (at 5:45 p.m.) is optimal and provides enough light to take in the breathtaking display of turquoise and sapphire glacier fed lakes and rivers, six mountain ranges and the town of Jasper in the distance below. After a three-course meal, you'll have the

opportunity to talk with astronomy experts, learn about the solar system and look through one of the Jasper Planetarium's powerful telescopes. Star Sessions are available on Friday and Saturday nights, beginning in September and ending the last weekend in October; in conjunction with the annual Jasper Dark Sky Festival. For our family, the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge is another

iconic landmark that we endeavour to visit annually. With its enclaves of cabins that stretch along the perimeter of Lac Beauvert's emerald waters, it feels like a sophisticated sleep-away camp boasting full-service

resort luxuries.

Outdoor adventures on the 700-acre property are vast and varied. Canoe, kayak, stand-up paddle board and bike rentals, a lakeshore walking trail, children's playground, guided horseback rides and an award-winning 18-hole golf course are some of the highlights. However, it's the expansive lakeview pool, fronting a lawn sprinkled with outdoor bocce, beanbag toss and horseshoe games, where we spend the majority of our time. It's only after my daughter has transformed into a human-sized prune that we'll tempt her out of the water with a visit to the Kid's Club, or a Shirley Temple and charcuterie board at the Emerald Lounge.

We always travel to Jasper in October, November or May, for better deals and fewer crowds. However, a Jasper in January trip to ski Marmot Basin is now on my radar. Off-season, the Fairmont offers fantastic Alberta resident rates, which can reduce room costs by up to 30 per cent.

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