

# Piste DE RÉSISTANCE

Nestled in the majestic Canadian Rocky Mountains, Banff is the wondrous winter destination. With blankets of snow, breathtaking vistas and excellent hospitality, it's a perfect blend of comfort and style. Rowena Carr Allinson reports

Escaping to Canada for your winter break makes a refreshing alternative to Europe's crowded resorts. On arrival, everything is covered in a pristine blanket of fresh snow, the sun is shining and it's freezing. Temperatures might be hovering around -25°C, but the light enhances the crisp, glimmering scenery. Apparently, we've hit the coldest weather for a long while but, well-prepared with cosy thermals, the big chill really doesn't stop us. We are struck by the quiet, relaxed, laid-back vibe and stunning landscapes. Locals boast that Banff gets 33 feet of snow fall a year from November through to April.

Everything about Banff, set inside a World Heritage National Park, is picturesque, even down to the street names: Bear Street, Wolf Street or Lynx Street. The little town is lined with wood-framed shops offering everything from ski gear to souvenirs and scrumptious food. The best bargains are up for grabs at Roots, where you can pick up casualwear and warm accessories like fluffy earmuffs or fleece jackets. There's even a mall where you can find

trendy labels like Gap, La Senza and Louis Vuitton!

The National Park is awesome; giant rocky peaks lined with fir trees jut out into the blue sky and frozen-solid rivers sparkle, thick with ice. The sheer space is liberating. It's so vast and untouched it makes me want to breathe it all in. Fresher air is hard to find.

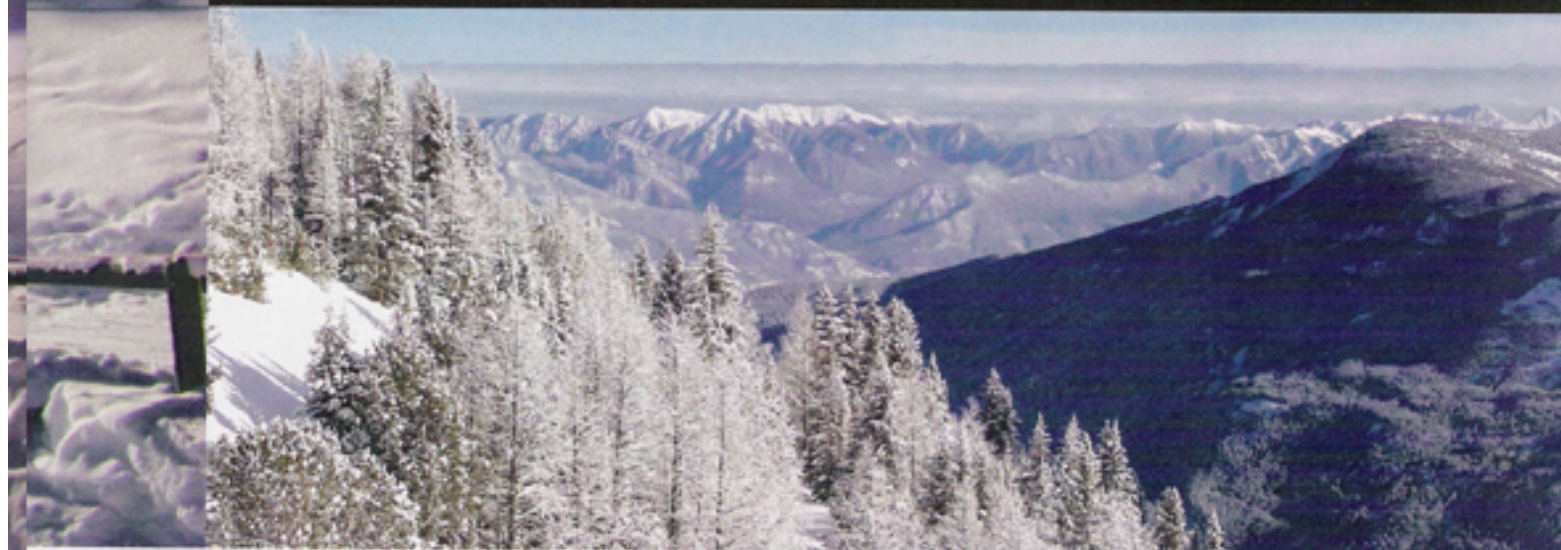
Banff is most popular with the locals in spring and summer for hiking and fishing, so the winter wonderland is about picture-perfect landscapes and lower rates.

Considered 'low season', room rates are slashed so it's an ideal opportunity to get affordable luxury. Hotel rooms are available from a £50 to £150, from the basic to the most luxurious – some even include ski passes as part of the package.

Just beyond the Park limits, minutes out of Banff, modern and plush family style suites are available at the Mystic Springs chalets in Canmore. The little town is within easy driving distance of everything, has fantastic restaurants, including a great Tapas bar, and a really friendly local community. Anthony Hopkins liked it so much, he bought a house here.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The resort caters for all levels of skiers, from nervous beginners to acrobatic snowboarders; Fluffy husky dogs are right at home in the sub-zero temperatures; Take a break from the slopes and hit the shops for a spot of retail therapy; Snow-laden fir trees line the rocky peaks; Breathtaking scenery in the National Park



Further out is Lake Louise, a must for ice-skating on the frozen lake or a twilight tour in a horse-drawn sled. Timber chalets, tucked away in the forest offer cosy alternatives to the bigger hotels. At Baker Creek, a family-run resort the snug Trapper cabins have typical mountain décor complete with fireplaces and Jacuzzis. The ultimate log cabin hideaway! In Banff, the Fairmont Banff Springs is a huge Scottish style castle in an idyllic setting. Dating back to the 1880s, with seven restaurants and 770 rooms the resort is like a miniature village. There's a gorgeous spa with panoramic views, halls decked out in shiny armour and a ski concierge to look after your cumbersome gear. This is also the place to celebrity-spot. Everyone from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Glenn Close, Carrie Fisher, Minnie Driver and Madonna has stayed in the fairytale castle. Who knows, you might even find the late Alec Baldwin in the steamy outdoor pool – we did! Banff is also good value. There are plenty of simple restaurants available and the posh eateries, such as the Buffalo Mountain Lodge, offer rich game ➤

## GETTING THERE

**CURRENCY** Canadian Dollars

**TIME DIFFERENCE** -7 hours

**FLIGHT TIME FROM UK**

11 hours

**BEST DEALS LONDON GATWICK TO CALGARY** with Northwest Airlines (via Minneapolis). Return fare is £601 approximately, including taxes. Call 0870 507 4074. [www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)  
**LONDON TO VANCOUVER** with British Airways. Return fare £563 including taxes, fees and charges. Call 0870 850 9850. [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)

## GETTING AROUND

Rent a 4x4 with Thrifty from £120 a week. [www.thrifty.co.uk](http://www.thrifty.co.uk)

## WHEN TO GO

You are guaranteed to get snow from November through to March. Christmas and New Year are the busier times, but the sheer size of the place means busy isn't an issue. For celebrity spotting, try early January at the annual Fairmont Banff Springs Sports Invitational where the stars turn up in aid of Robert Kennedy's charity.



**ABOVE** Take in the glorious views on the way up to the slopes **BELOW LEFT** Treat your aching limbs to a soothing massage at the spa at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel **BELOW RIGHT** Snowmobiling is the ultimate adrenaline rush **BOTTOM** Bright sunshine makes the below-freezing temperatures bearable



dishes labelled as 'Gourmet Rockies Cuisine'. A real treat. And the bill won't come as a nasty surprise. Service too, is excellent – a far cry from their busier European counterparts.

Even though you are within the National Park, you'll have to drive to the skiing domains. The good news is that there's ample car parking, and well-organised ski villages, with daycare centres, from £20 per day, food outlets with good menus, cheap ski hire and ski schools all under one huge timber roof. Everything has been thought of for a hassle-free experience.

For ski fanatics, flexibility is key. The £150 tri-valley pass enables you to visit either Norquay, Sunshine Village or the Lake Louise domains for five days out of seven, so you don't pay for days you don't visit and you can take a day off to do something else. Other options include half days or even hourly passes in the three different skiing areas. Lessons are also 'made to measure', for mums and toddlers, ski school groups or private one-on-one lessons.

At Sunshine Village alone, the skiing domain covers 3358 acres accessible on the country's fastest gondolas and, the 107 runs are groomed daily. Up the road at Lake Louise, there are 117 runs over 4200 acres and you can catch the Grizzly Express all the way up the mountain without changing rides. Unique too, is the fact that

## WHERE TO EAT

**LUXURY** Fairmont Banff Springs, 405 Spray Avenue, Banff, Alberta (+1 403 762 2211. [www.fairmont.com/banffsprings](http://www.fairmont.com/banffsprings)). Check into the Fairmont Banff Springs hotel – a fairytale castle with luxurious rooms, a plush spa and fine cuisine. From £115 for a double room.  
**MID RANGE** Mystic Springs, 140 Kananaskis Way, Canmore, Alberta (+1 403 609 0264. [www.mysticsprings.ca](http://www.mysticsprings.ca)). A great option for families. Spacious apartments with all mod cons at the Park's 'gate'. From £84 per night.  
**BUDGET** Baker Creek Chalets, Lake Louise, Alberta. (+1 403 522 3761. [www.bakercreek.com](http://www.bakercreek.com)). Cuddle up by the fireplace, in a typical log-cabin style hideaway. A friendly family welcome and excellent restaurant. From £60 for a double.

ambient, cosy retreat. Caribou, elk and wild salmon on the menu! Prices from £30 a head.  
**MID-RANGE** The Grapes Wine Bar at the Fairmont Banff Springs, 405 Spray Avenue, Banff, Alberta. (+1 403 762 2211. [www.fairmont.com/banffsprings](http://www.fairmont.com/banffsprings)). A tiny wooden-panelled escape in the castle! Try the cheese fondues washed down with fantastic local wine. From approx £20 a head.  
**BUDGET** Coyote's Deli and Grill, 206 Caribou Street, Banff, Alberta. (+1 403 762 3963). A Southwestern menu featuring everything from pizzas to Blue Corn Chicken and Huevos Rancheros for breakfast. Prices from £12 a head.

## FIVE FAB THINGS TO DO

- 1 Go dog sledging through the picture perfect snow with Snowy Owl Tours ([www.snowyowl.com](http://www.snowyowl.com)).
- 2 Drive through the hauntingly beautiful Icefields Parkway for jaw-dropping views.
- 3 Hop onto a snowmobile with Toby Creek Adventures ([www.tobycreekadventures.com](http://www.tobycreekadventures.com)).
- 4 Get a relaxing Alpine massage at the Fairmont Banff Springs.
- 5 Hit the ski slopes with a tri-valley pass for Norquay, Lake Louise and Sunshine Village.

## WHAT TO BUY

**SWEETS** Chocolate and Fudge at the Bernard Callebaut Chocolaterie and the Fudge Factory on Banff Avenue. Delicious!  
**WINTER WOOLIES** Great knitwear and fleeces at the excellent Roots store.  
**SKI WEAR** Pick up good-value ski gear at one of the Mountain Magic Sportswear shops located on Wolf Street and Bear Street. Catherine Zeta Jones loved their gear so much she spent over £3000 here. For £1.50 you can get miracle hand and feet warming sachets to slip into your gloves or boots! Essential items for keen skiers.

## WHERE TO STAY

**LUXURY** Buffalo Mountain Lodge, Tunnel Mountain Road, Banff, Alberta (+1 403 762 2400. [www.crmr.com](http://www.crmr.com)). Enjoy Rocky Mountain gourmet cuisine in this

## FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.travelalberta.com](http://www.travelalberta.com)  
[www.banfflakelouise.com](http://www.banfflakelouise.com)  
[www.skibanff.com](http://www.skibanff.com)  
[www.skilouise.com](http://www.skilouise.com)  
[www.banffnorquay.com](http://www.banffnorquay.com)  
[www.tourismcanmore.com](http://www.tourismcanmore.com)

green, blue and black runs come down from each chair lift here so there's no risk of having to fling yourself down a black run if you are just a beginner! At Norquay, hotshot skiers can hit black runs like the Gun Run, and the resort promises to give you a money-back guarantee if you don't enjoy the experience!

Although it's popular, the area open for skiing around Banff is so vast that there's no sign of a queue. No jostling for the ski lifts, no waiting for a cup of hot chocolate at the bar – you can literally dart up the mountain and across to another slope without wasting a minute of your precious skiing time.

It's definitely worth having your own car to venture further afield. Explore the glaciers of the Ice Fields Parkway in a 4x4 en route to Jasper. And, keep an eye out for elk and wapiti which roam freely through the trees and dense snow.

Take in the surrounding nature by trying your hand at dog-sledging, ice-walking, or snow-shoeing through the forest. Tracking animal prints in the snow is a thrilling way to get close to local wildlife.

And if that all sounds like too much, you can always wallow away the hours in the natural hot springs, curl up beside the fireplace with a good book or simply take in the views through the panoramic windows with a steaming cup of local Cascade Peppermint tea in hand.