

Winter in the Canadian Rockies

Banff-Banff — You Had to Be There

[WRITTEN BY DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER]



PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER

THE JOKE UP HERE GOES LIKE THIS: “What sound does a hiker make when he falls down?”

“Banff-banff” (pronounced bamf-bamf).

The jokester slams his hand on the nearest surface to add auditory impact to the joke.

Fortunately, I didn’t go “Banff-banff” when I was hiking on the trails, covered with ice and snow, in Johnston Canyon of Banff National Park. Even if I had, the opportunity to explore this beautiful part of the world in the midst of winter would have been well worth a few bruises on my backside.

Banff National Park in the Alberta province is Canada’s first and most popular park. Founded in 1885, it

is also a World Heritage Site based on its representation of the Earth’s evolutionary history and geological values. For non-scientists, that means the park is an endless Kodak moment, where glaciers, mountain peaks, waterfalls, canyons and lakes take your breath away at each turn.

A Winter Wonderland

Banff is a Scottish word, and the name of a region in Scotland from where many of the railroad workers who built the trans-Canada railroad came. To promote tourism to the area, the railroad also built a number of resort hotels along the route. These include the beautiful Banff Springs Hotel, which looks like a medieval Scottish castle. A few miles away, the Chateau Lake Louise looks more like a Swiss palace, reflecting the influence of the Alpine mountain climbers who helped make climbing in this part of Canada such a popular sport.

Most travelers choose to explore Banff in the height of summer months. Certainly 70- and 80-degree temperatures have their appeal; the week before I arrived in Banff, the temperatures and wind chills had been about 40° Fahrenheit below. But my February visit coincided with temperatures near 20° Fahrenheit, blue skies and occasional bouts of light, fluffy snow.

Beautiful Lake Louise, one of the most photographed sites in Canada because of its rich mineral blue hue in the summer months, was covered with 5 feet of ice

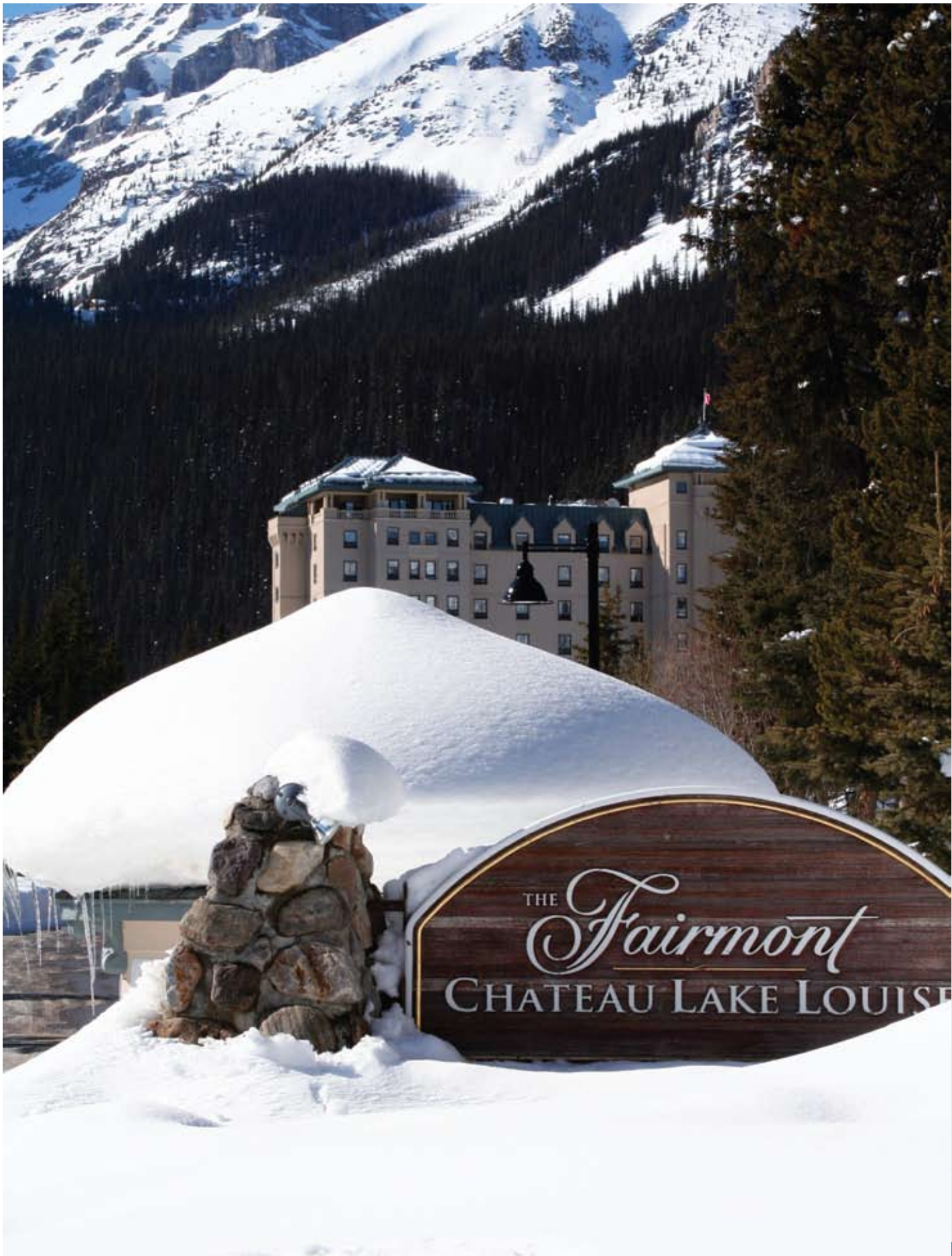


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PHOTO COURTESY OF DISCOVER BANFF TOURS

Snowshoeing on Bow Lake in Banff National Park

and another 3 feet of snow. It created perfect conditions for a Currier & Ives-style sleigh ride around the lake, while separate rinks allowed for rowdy ice hockey games or families with children to practice their bladed form.

over snow-covered trails through towering evergreens whose bows are bending low with layers of snow. Be sure to watch for bunny tracks, wolf tracks and other indicators of Mother Nature's survival in this frozen wonderland.

Atlantans may also need to learn to breathe in the cold air. Sure, it's invigorating, but at an altitude around 5,600 feet, take time to stop and smell the Old Man's Beard. That's the soft mossy stuff that grows on the sides of trees in high elevations, like Colorado and the Canadian Rockies. The indigenous people of the area used Old Man's Beard for medicinal purposes. Our guide offered us some, along with other pieces of bark and leaves to munch on, guaranteeing it wouldn't make us sick. And it didn't, but the hot chocolate and cookies mid-way through our two-hour hike were more to our liking.

Hit the Slopes

While a walk in the woods can be a silent reprieve, most people come to Banff in the winter for downhill or Alpine skiing. For those who have skied the Colorado Rockies, or even visited the Colorado landscape in summer months, the intensity of the Canadian Rockies in comparison is quite startling. The Canadian Rockies consist of sedimentary rock, thus the mountains are more jagged, sharp and twisted than their southern U.S. counterparts. And the impact on the skiing is equally intense and powerful.

Learning to Walk

Since ice and snow are not common in Atlanta, a visit to Lake Louise may require visitors to learn how to walk again. Ice canyon hiking can be serene, but requires very short, very deliberate steps in crampons. Snowshoeing requires a wider stride so you don't step all over yourself. Both efforts reap the rewards of the beauty of the snow-covered lake and the silence of winter.

Hiking Johnston Canyon, near Lake Louise, is only about a half mile one way, but in the hour-long trek, where ice crampons strapped to our boots kept us from banff-banffing on our butts, we encountered just two other couples. The frozen silence, broken by an occasional thump of snow falling from a spruce bow or the muffled trickle of water under layers of ice, was the most appealing part of the journey.

Snowshoeing affords the same peace and quiet



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The three ski areas in Banff are Norquay, Sunshine Village and Lake Louise with a total of more than 240 trails over 7,700 acres, but each with its own personality, challenges and rewards for the ski enthusiast. The smallest and closest to downtown Banff is Norquay with 200 skiable acres. Norquay is quite popular with the locals as the only mountain to offer nighttime skiing, as well as ski-by-the-hour rates, which allows you the freedom to spend just a few hours on the mountain rather than all day to feel like you've gotten your money's worth.

In contrast, Lake Louise, 35 miles

from the village of Banff, is the largest ski area in the Rockies with 139 runs over 4,200 acres on four mountains. Every chair lift has a green run for beginners and the views from any spot on any mountain are magnificent. Remember, you are in a World Heritage Site, so development has been limited and the mountains, in turn, are not bashful about showing off their grandeur with a fresh blanket of snow. Lake Louise is also the beginning point of the World Cup ski races, an immediate endorsement of the quality of snow, terrain and facilities here.

Sunshine Village is the highest resort



PHOTO COURTESY OF BANFF LAKE LOUISE TOURISM

PLANNING YOUR WINTER EXCURSIONS

Guided snowshoe tours, ice canyon hikes, dog sledding and more can be coordinated through the concierge at Chateau Lake Louise or the Banff Springs Hotel, or through a company called Discover Banff Tours. They do it all, including heli-skiing, snowmobiling and wildlife expeditions. Check it out and make reservations in advance at www.banfftours.com or call 877-565-9372.

If you'd rather enjoy the outdoors without a guide, but maybe with a bit of company, consider the Mountain Buddy program coordinated free of charge by Banff Springs Ski and Mountain Sports, an outfitter in the village of Banff. The program allows you to find a skiing buddy, join a hockey game or snowshoe with others who share the same interests. The Web site www.banffspringsski.com includes a schedule of different activities available, a chat room to visit with others who will be in the area when you are and other information such as trail and weather conditions.

For more information on skiing, visit the Web sites of Norquay, www.banffnorquay.com; Lake Louise, www.skilouise.com; or Sunshine Village, www.skibanff.com. For more information on winter vacation package in Banff National Park, visit www.banfflakelouise.com.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER

in Canada and often receives the most snowfall, so if you're a fan of the deepest powder, Sunshine is your spot. This resort crosses out of Alberta and into British Columbia, straddling the Continental Divide, which is kind of fun. The resort offers the SlopeTracker, a GPS system of sorts that monitors such things as top speed, number of runs, calories burned and hours spent riding. At the end of the day, and after you turn your system back in, you receive a poster quality printout of your day on the mountain.

Banff National Park's awe-inspiring beauty in the winter is an experience that should make everyone's Bucket List. The striking landscape and protected environment makes it incomparable to most U.S. ski resorts.

And if you happen to go banff-banff on the slopes, on the ice rink or in a canyon covered with layers of ice and snow, then you will be more authentic in telling the joke at your next office party. If no one gets it, then you are in a supreme position to respond, "You really had to be there." **PN**

GETTING THERE

No direct flights are available from Atlanta to Calgary International Airport (YYC), although all major airlines offer good connections through Chicago, Denver or Houston. Remember that a passport is now required for travel to Canada.