

GOOD PLACES

an uncommon journey

a luxury tour of National Parks

story Laurie Wallace-Lynch



Perched high up in a classic glass dome car on a historic Pullman Streamliner pulling out of Seattle's King Street Station, we are enjoying cocktails and fine wines paired with entrées like Fillet of Beef and Chicken Cordon Bleu.

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Our effervescent tour guide, Moira McCurry offers a celebratory toast to the 12 passengers aboard the *Uncommon Journeys Elegant Canadian Rockies* train/coach excursion.

The domed ceiling car frames panoramic views of small towns, glistening aqua riverbeds, and lush pine forests as we linger late over coffee and liqueurs, not wanting to tear ourselves away from the view as dusk turns to night.

There is something mysterious and intriguing about sleeping on a train that conjures up the romance of days gone by, when Hollywood movie stars travelled in private rail cars. The bunk beds are surprisingly comfy as the motion of the train gently rocks you to sleep. Sure there are

a few things that go bump in the night, and the bathroom is a bit cramped, but hey, this just adds to the adventure of riding the rails.

"Founded in 1990, *Uncommon Journeys* is the leading U.S. operator of deluxe rail and cruise programs supplying a gracious style and level of service that recalls the golden age of travel," says Kevin R. Tam, marketing director. "We are the only operator with our own private classic Streamliner train service aboard The Great Western Limited. Signature features include the full-length Vista Dome car with dining and lounge areas under a 90-foot long glass ceiling and wrap-around windows, freshly prepared meals on board, complimentary wines and spirits,



Banff Aerial Gondola Ride, Sulphur Mountain

afternoon tea, and comfortable Pullman sleeping cars.”

Unfortunately, our train trip is just one night. We are headed to explore national parks in both the U.S. and Canada, staying in historic and iconic lodges, and the rails simply do not go the route we are going.

Come morning we disembark in Whitefish, Montana headed for **Glacier National Park**. After a lengthy drive through the park, our destination is Lake McDonald Lodge, a historic Swiss chalet lodge built in 1913 on Lake McDonald. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the lodge has a wonderful Ralph Lauren-like decor with plenty of soft, plaid blankets strewn over log furniture with chess and checker-boards on tabletops just waiting to be played. We are staying in the lake-front cabins which look like little doll houses in the woods. Propped up on generous pillows set against the birch-bark bed frame; wine glass in hand, I am transfixed on the view of the sun slowly setting over Lake McDonald.

The *United States National Park Service* celebrated their 100th Anniversary in 2016, and what better way to celebrate it than to hop into a historic open-air Red Jammer convertible car? Red Jammers have been offering sight-seeing tours to park visitors since 1914. It is June, so the dozen people in our group bundle under thick woolen blankets as we ascend higher and higher to cross the infamous 50 mile Going-to-the-Sun Road, crossing the Continental Divide en route. Despite the lack of traditional guardrails, the driver pulls over long enough for us to take photos of a waterfall cascading from the mountains. Around a bend a wall of snow abuts the road having been freshly plowed just a week ago as the road is only open during the summer. A fresh dump of snow surrounds Logan Pass Visitor's Centre (on the Continental Divide, elevation 6,646 feet) where kids excitedly pitch snowballs.



Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise



Lake Moraine and the Valley of Ten Peaks, photo by Laurie Wallace-Lynch

From one national park to another, we head toward the Canadian border. It's seemingly in the middle of nowhere and instead of a big bridge or dozens of flags, it's a small cottage-like building. A swath is cut through the forest to indicate the international border.

Our visit to **Waterton National Park** includes a stay at the famed *Prince of Wales Hotel* where royalty has stayed. Doormen dressed in bright red Royal Stewart tartan kilts greet us as we walk into the soaring lobby and gape in awe at the equally soaring windows, which frame a cliff-top view of Waterton Lake. After a five-star dinner in the elegant dining room, I happily snuggle up in my room, surrounded by solid wood walls with a window that opens to enjoy the fresh air that works up to a gust as it flows over the lake.

One of the most memorable experiences on our journey is a stop at **Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is believed to be the oldest, largest and best preserved of the many buffalo jump sites across the Western Plains. A hilltop path leads to a view of the cliff where stampeding buffalo fall to their death as part of an ancient hunting technique used by the Plains People for nearly 6,000 years.

The plains soon turn to foothills, which become mountains as we enter the **Banff National Park** and the storybook town of Banff, Alberta. An idyllic and instantly recognizable locale from so many films and postcards, Banff's quaint downtown is surrounded by the glorious Canadian Rockies. The *Mount Royal Hotel* is conveniently located right on the main street within walking distance of a plethora of restaurants, shops, art galleries and museums. A must-see site is the original Banff hot springs at the **Cave and Basin Museum**. As you gaze into the rugged hole in the earth and steamy hot water below, it's hard to fathom anyone being brave enough to be lowered by rope into a black pit, but that's exactly what happened in 1883 when three railway workers stumbled upon the cave, putting Banff on the world map.

Today's **Banff Hot Springs** are enjoyed in an Olympic-sized Jacuzzi-like tub with a breathtaking view of the mountains. To gauge the scale of these majestic mountains, take a *Banff Aerial Gondola Ride* to the top of **Sulphur Mountain** for a 360-degree panoramic of Bow River Valley. You'll see the spires of Banff Springs Hotel in the background.

Enroute to yet another famous hotel, Fairmont Chateau

Lake Louise, we make a side trip to see the legendary Lake Moraine and the Valley of Ten Peaks—the same picturesque site which appeared on the old \$20 Canadian bills—one of the most photographed sites in North America. Silt from snow-peaked glaciers slides into the glittering, jade green lake. The view is so breathtaking that I immediately post a photo on Facebook and one friend responds; “Is that real?”

Chateau Lake Louise is yet another stop-and-gawk site in the Canadian Rockies. The hotel is recognized as one of Fairmont’s gems. Red canoes with Canadian flags flutter in the breeze on an aquamarine blue lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Spotting wildlife is almost a given in Banff National Park (founded in 1885) where you may spot a moose or mountain goat.

“I would do the entire trip again!” exclaimed Daniel Fox from California. His wife Rosa-edith Villasenor-Fox added: “I loved the train but wish that the train trip had been longer. Uncommon Journeys took us to unique places and provided experiences that we would not have discovered on our own.” ⑥



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Banff and Lake Louise Visitors Centre, www.banfflakelouise.com

Waterton Lakes Visitor Centre www.c.gc.ca/waterton

Travel Alberta www.travelalberta.com

Parks Canada, www.pc.gc.ca

Glacier National Park, Montana, USA/National Park Service www.nps.gov

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