



PHOTOS BY PAMELA IRVING

Canadian Rockies

Where the trickster and buffalo roam the road less traveled

BY PAMELA IRVING

The 1A Highway is a little-known gem meandering between Calgary and Canmore in the Canadian Rockies of Alberta, Canada. Most people take the busy Trans-Canada Highway, which gets you there much faster. But my husband and I are enjoying our leisurely drive—we are here to explore and enjoy, after all. It is a braw day in October, the air so crisp you could take a bite out of it. This road less traveled winds along the Bow River Valley and we are

treated to a dazzling sun glinting off the clear running waters below. Mount Yamnuska, famous for its rock climbing schools, provides stunning views.

To the Stoney Plains Indians, the coyote is known as the trickster, a shape-shifter that has a cosmic sense of humor and is known to stir up trouble. Here in the wild, it is little surprise that the trickster crosses our path; but, we wonder what trouble he might conjure during the trek.

The 1A cuts through an Indian reservation, and a derelict building that once housed a gas station provides dubious atmosphere with its many bullet holes. The hand-painted sign at the entrance to Nakoda Recreation Park on the Stoney Reservation looks more like a warning than an invitation. That could explain why the road is so quiet: fear of the unknown, and the knowledge that it takes twice as long to get to Canmore this way than it does on the Trans-Canada.

We go off-road, looking to delve deeper into the heart and soul of this land. Buffalo are grazing in the distance and two Chinook natives ride by bareback on a single

horse, their long black hair blowing in the wind. With a slight wave, they disappear along the brow of the hill. We get out of the truck, ramble to a promontory on a canyon's edge that cuts through the Bow and wander along horse paths in the late afternoon sun. There is an eerie silence; the Chinook winds bring warm weather, but there is a chilly underbelly.

As we round a corner, we happen on a black bear foraging for late berries and any grub he can get. This close to winter, shouldn't he be in bed? The Rockies are home to both black and grizzly bears. While bears are very shortsighted, they have an excellent sense of smell, and our Yogi friend sniffs the air to see if we would make a good last supper. We walk—not run—back to the truck.

Leaving the wild area behind, we arrive at our destination—the town of Canmore, playground of the Rockies. Years ago the town consisted of 800 people, a soon-to-close coal mine, the historic Canmore Hotel, a grocery, a gas station and Ziggy's Pizza.

Today, all of these memory markers are

gone, except The Canmore Hotel, which has just a bit of rough still visible. The town now boasts world-class accommodations and restaurants, and a population of 16,417 permanent residents.

In Canmore, you do not have to go very far to get where you are going; anything you need for your healthy lifestyle can be had in town year round, from summer hiking and climbing, to winter skiing and snow-shoeing. Several excellent ski hills are located nearby, including Mt. Norquay, Sunshine Village and Lake Louise in Banff. Heli-skiing, caving and dog sledding are all available for those who like to ramp up their adrenaline.

Restaurants, pubs, cafés, spas, art galleries, festivals, gear rental and accommodations are all within walking distance in the heart of town. Stay for a night or a week in one of the many condominium hotels, surrounded by high-end finishing and views of famous Canmore landmarks like the Three Sisters Mountains. And Canmore is just 10 miles from Banff National Park and less than an hour away from Calgary, the commerce and cosmopolitan center of Alberta.

Grassi Lakes Hike

One of my favorite hikes is the Grassi Lakes trail just behind the town site. It is named after Lawrence Grassi, who pioneered trail building in the area, and stretches 2.4 miles

return, gaining 820 feet in elevation and offering views of the Canmore valley.

The twin emerald colored spring-fed Grassi Lakes sit amid sheer limestone faces as an embodiment of nature and the still lakes provide the perfect mirror reflection.

For more adventure, the surrounding rock has several bolted sport climbing routes suitable for beginners to advanced climbers. Historians may enjoy the Indian pictographs estimated to be 8,000 years old. Images of shamans holding medicine wheels add resonance to the ancient spiritual life of this area.

On the five-minute drive back to town, we pass the Nordic Centre, the site of the 1988 Winter Olympics, now home to many ski trails in winter and great for cycling in summer. Canmore sits along the Bow River with a ubiquitous trail system weaving beside the banks and through town. We rent “townies”—high handle barred bikes with seven gears—and blast past people fishing for trout on the river; bipedal transport-joggers pushing strollers; skate skiers conditioning for winter months; and of course, more townies.

The perfect way to decompress from your biathlon of hiking and biking is a hot stone massage at Satori Day Spa. Igneous rock is hand harvested from the West Coast.

Round, smooth and ebony, the stones are warmed to a temperature that suits you. They will roll out any kinks in the back, legs, feet and even between your toes.

We have dinner at the Trough Dining Co., one of Canada’s best new restaurants according to *en route* magazine. Having imported duck from Brome Lake in Quebec, the chef prepares the special oriental duck comfit, crystallized in ginger sauce and served with a Pinot Gris from the Golden Mile Cellars of the Okanagan Valley, B.C. *Quelle belle!* To round out the evening we drop by the Communita Cafe for live, original music.

When we return to our suite at Blackstone Mountain Lodge, the skies are dark and the outdoor hot tub beckons. We soak and watch the crescent moon rise over the Three Sisters. It is then that I have an epiphany about the trickster. He has been very, very kind to us this trip. His message: Slow down, take the road less traveled and have a good time, my friends. That’s what life is about. **AF**

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