

ALBERTA UNCOVERED

Get off the beaten track in Canmore

Mountain town offers loads of adventure

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

The disco era of 1979 also marked the end of the coal-mining era for Canmore. Back then, the quiet little town was rather dull, offering nothing more than a quick coffee and a fuel up.

Now, thankfully, the disco craze is gone and the adventure craze is on. If you have guests coming for Christmas and want to escape the big city, pack everyone up for a two-day excursion. If you're like me and don't own a second home in Canmore, here's the chance to find out what you're missing.

Three adventure companies combine their talents to offer unique and diverse ways to explore the Canmore region by caving, tracking wild animals and dogsledding.

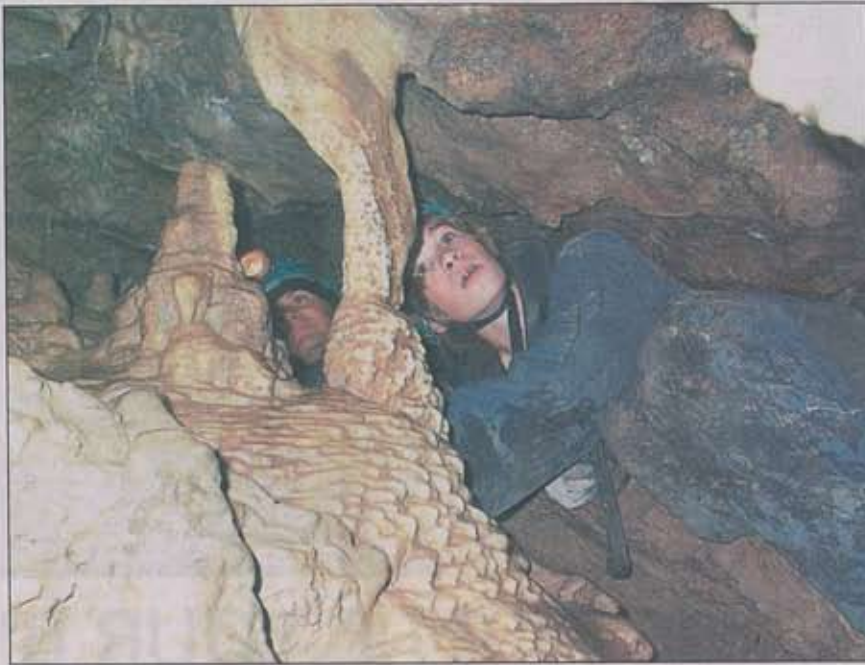
Hiking is always a great way to explore a region, but why not mix in a bit of native culture at the same time. Mahikan Trails will take you on a stroll or strap you into a pair of snowshoes to follow the tracks of coyotes, lynx, cougars, snowshoe hares and the ever-present ungulates.

It's amazing how much you learn and see when someone attuned with the landscape points out the subtle signs of wildlife.

Mahikan Trails leads a great winter hike up through Grotto Canyon. The narrow canyon is home to a trickling creek in the warm months, but during winter, the water escaping from the cliffs becomes an ice climber's haven.

Thousands of years before climbers stabbed at the waterfall ice, native people used the canyon in their travels. It's getting harder and harder to find the evidence, but by hiking in with guides from Mahikan Trails, you'll discover red ochre pictographs and hear about the spiritual and cultural nature of the area. Maybe you'll find out the meaning behind the faded painting of the man with outstretched arms.

Crawling through caves using a speck of light emitted from a hard hat seems crazy, but it's one of those adventures that throws the whole group out of their comfort zones and tests



Rat's Nest Cave offers plenty to discover during four-hour caving excursions. If crawling under a mountain doesn't appeal, join Mahikan Trails to discover the native history of the region.

what they perceive as challenging.

It's not exactly a walk in the park and physical fitness is an attribute, but more important is the willingness to try something new. Canmore Caverns is the only guiding company taking groups into the bowels of Grotto Mountain and, believe me, it's an experience. We entered apprehensively, but came out exhilarated.

Just because it's cold outside, don't assume you can't go in. Even in the middle of winter, the caves stay at 5 C.

Upon entering the heavily gated opening, we instantly locked our harnesses onto a secure rope — within two metres of the opening is a big, black, endless pit.

OK, there is a bottom, and more adventuresome folks rappel into the cave system that way. But we chose the gentler route — sliding on our butts down a narrow ledge sporadically dotted with tiny pieces of poop.

This is the Rat's Nest Cave, so of course you're bound to find signs of their presence. But it's not rats like you'd find outside Alberta. These are pack rats, and they mark their routes through the subterranean system by leaving a scent trail.

After a quick, but muddy four and a half hours, we climbed back into daylight exhausted and overjoyed. We had squeezed through the laundry chute, dropped through the box, crawled

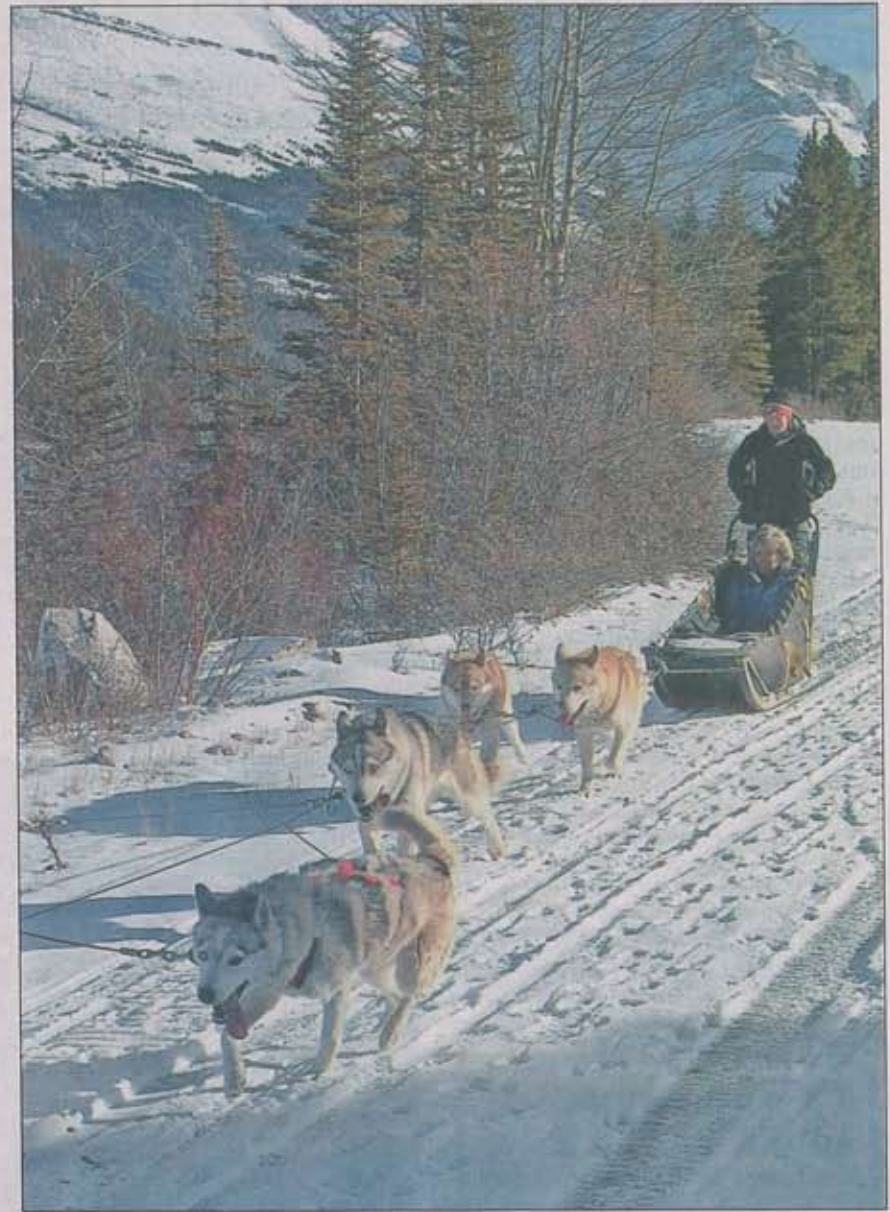
through passageways and narrow tunnels and studied countless stalactites, stalagmites and soda straw formations on the way down to a beautiful tranquil pool of water. Some of us conquered fears of tight places in the squeeze challenge, while others (me) hung back in the large grotto to take photos.

If getting muddy or hiking up frozen creeks is too strenuous, maybe you'd like to relax in the sled behind a team of dogs as they thunder across Spray Lakes. Better yet — you can guide your own team.

Three dog sled companies operate in Canmore, but Mad Dogs and Englishmen will combine your dog sledding experience with caving and canyon hikes.

It's up to you how much you participate with the dogs. If you want to help harness and feed them, you're welcome to join in and learn. But if you're tired from crawling on your belly through the caves, sit back and enjoy the scenery, the fresh air and the thrill of the ride.

Once you're done, don't head back to Calgary just yet. Now's your chance to pretend you're a local. First stop by the Rocky Mountain Flatbread Co. and order the best pizza in town. If you fancy something a bit more upscale, there are dozen of great restaurants here.



Photos, Joanne Elves for the Calgary Herald

You can sit back and enjoy a dog sledding ride, or guide the team yourself.

Then head to a cozy condo or one of the town's many hotels and recline in front of a fire while the kids burn off their endless supply of energy in the heated outdoor pool.

Bellstar Hotels and Resorts has a few properties in Canmore that you can buy or simply borrow for a few nights. Each condo is fully equipped so all you have to bring are pyjamas and food for breakfast. The company also offers ski and stay packages or ones that combine caving, dog sledding or spa treatments.

Spa treatments? Send the kids on an all-day excursion so you can enjoy that adventure on your own.

If you go

- Canmore: tourismcanmore.com.
- Bellstar properties include Lodges at Canmore, Canmore Crossing, Mystic Springs (all pet friendly) and Fire Mountain Lodge: 1-877-737-6782 or bellstar.ca.
- Canmore Caverns: 1-877-317-1178 or canadianrockies.net/wildcavetours.
- Mahikan Trails: 1-866-776-4453 or mahikan.ca.
- Mad Dogs and Englishmen: 403-609-3670 or maddogsexpeditions.com.
- Snowy Owl Sled Dog Tours: 1-888-311-6874 or snowyowltours.com.
- Howling Dog Tours: 1-877-364-7533 or howlingdogtours.com.