



Photos: Banff Lake Louise Tourism

Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise heritage guide Bruce Bembridge shares some of the hotel's history with children. Many Banff hotels are offering early spring deals ranging from discounted nights to free days.

Banff, Lake Louise beckon as alternatives

Tropical getaways don't offer same enchantments

MICHELE JARVIE
CALGARY HERALD

As we clear the worst of winter but realize summer is still months away, Calgarians begin their annual search for hot destination deals.

Mauí, Dominican Republic and the Bahamas are always popular. Heck, even Mexico with its horrendous crime news still draws tourists in search of a tan.

But this year, why not embrace all that is white?

Save the airfare for a really good spring splurge closer to home where you don't have to worry about foreign exchange or taco tummy.

With temperatures hovering above zero and abundant snow, now is the perfect time to explore Banff National Park and Lake Louise.

If you haven't been in years, except to hit the slopes at Sunshine or Louise, take the time to reacquaint yourself. There are plenty of activities, from superb cross-country skiing in track-set trails to snowshoeing, skating and even rocketing down the ski hill in a rubber tube at Norquay. (Even if you're a wuss it's a blast!)

Norquay has mid-week, two-for-one deals starting at \$69 and on certain Thursdays you can ski or tube for an unbelievable \$2. The last two Toonie Thursdays are March 21 and April 11.

If you want to be close to all the action, stay at Sunshine Mountain Lodge for three nights and your fourth night and fourth day of skiing are free.

Many Banff hotels have early spring deals ranging from discounted nights to free days which make for an affordable long weekend. If you want a real treat, take advantage of specials at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise.

Most Calgarians have at one time wandered through the opulent lobby, maybe checked out the February ice sculptures or even experienced the magic of Christmas here. But to truly soak up the luxury, stay at least one night.

Spend the day outside in the fresh air on skis or snowshoes, then relax in the steam room or spa. Enjoy a meal worthy of any five-star restaurant in the richly renovated Walliser Stube and sleep like a baby on silky soft sheets. Attention is paid to every detail, down to the Canadian-made toiletries and fluffy robe in your room. The staff here treat guests like royalty even if you're just escaping from the city for a day.

So if you don't have the time or cash for Costa Rica or Cuba, a Banff break may be the answer. It won't colour your skin but it will clear your mind.

Try to time your getaway with some of these upcoming activities

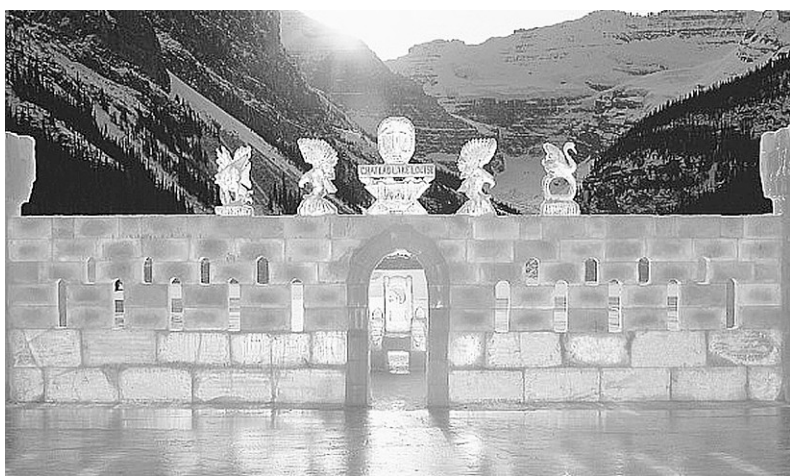
Today: A rare one-on-one conversation with Academy Award winning director Oliver Stone, who will be interviewed by Canadian author Ian Brown, followed by an audience question and answer period. Plus a screening of W. Oliver Stone's 2008 film on the life and presidency of George W. Bush.



Walkers check out the artistic icicles at Johnston Canyon.



A sleigh ride takes people around the edge of iconic Lake Louise.



Ice sculptures at Lake Louise glimmer in the winter sun.

March 16: The Blitz Snowshoe Fun Run is a great day of hiking or running groomed snowshoe trails while enjoying the scenery of Lake Louise.

A 5-km snowshoe trail is designed for all ages and abilities. For those looking for more of a challenge, register for the 10-km snowshoe run/walk on trails around The Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. Register at www.banfflakelouise.com

March 29-31: The Easter Bunny will make an appearance at Lake

Louise over the Easter long weekend.

April 13: Get creative with cardboard for the annual Cardboard Box Downhill Derby. Using only cardboard, string, tape and glue, build the fastest sled in town! Prizes will be given for top three times and the best three designs. Get a team of 1-4 people together and out-design, outwit and out-sled your competition.

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RED: Great tree skiing

FROM HI

Red placed a whopping eighth on the list of 46 destinations, ahead of New Delhi and Singapore.

My first impression, though, is dubious when I see the hill's archaic infrastructure. The resort has just three chair lifts, all old and rickety, and none that are high speed. Such doubts disappear at the summit. The snow is perfect; the runs are long and steep, with a huge vertical drop of about 885 metres. Red is renowned for its phenomenal tree skiing and snow ghosts that appear on sunny days, but its offerings are much broader than good glade runs.

Imagine a cone with three chairs that take you to the peak. The whole circumference of the hill is at your disposal for skiing. With more than 682 hectares (1,685 acres) of skiable terrain, locals say they never get bored. They ski different faces of the mountain, depending on the weather, the time of day, where the sun is facing, and where there is the promise of the best snow.

"The terrain is incredible. There's tons of snow," says Vanessa Lunn, who lives in nearby Castlegar and comes skiing every weekend with her children. "I've been skiing here for years, and I'm still finding hidden spots on the mountain. It's just a fun place to ski."

Two of five mountains have so far been developed. For another \$10 cash, skiers can pay a waiting snowcat to take them to a third peak, on Grey Mountain. That opens another 405 hectares (1,000 acres) of undisturbed terrain. Expansion plans include eventually adding a quad chair to service Grey Mountain, at which point the snowcat would likely move to the fourth peak marked for development under the master plan.

Located just eight kilometres north of the U.S. border, Rossland attracts international visitors flying into Spokane, Wash., as well as from Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver and everywhere in between. The greatest obstacle is access, with flights to the two local airports often cancelled due to inclement weather.

Air Canada flies daily from Calgary and Vancouver into Castlegar, jokingly referred to as Cancel-gar.

Pacific Coastal Airlines flies daily from Vancouver, into Trail Regional Airport. The most reliable routes are to international airports in Spokane, Wash., or Kelowna, B.C., a 2.5-hour-drive or 3.5 hours, respectively, from Rossland.

WestJet is eyeing Castlegar as one of their regional destinations, but so far, no decision has been made.

Flying into "Cancel-gar" is no laughing matter. On my flight, 24 men from Ontario were on board for an all-guys weekend of back-country cat skiing. They paid good money for the trip with Big Red Cat, which boasts it is the biggest cat operation in the world. The men practically held their breath until we landed, fearful that bad weather might have forced the plane to return to Calgary.

Tamara Norrish and her gang of 12 from Calgary played it safer by driving. They return each year for the skiing and the characters. They stay at a local "Bed and Bevvies" run by a self-described "ski bum" who moved to Rossland in the 1970s and never left.

Rossland is rich in history, and itself, worth exploring. Founded in 1897, it sits within an extinct volcano. At an elevation of 1,023 metres, it's one of the highest cities in Canada. An old gold mining town, it boomed in 1887 with a population of 7,000, four banks, 17 law firms and 42 saloons. Most of the original buildings still exist, and it's not uncommon to have supper in a restaurant that once served as a busy brothel. What distinguishes Rossland is how well it has been cared for and preserved. It has clean streets, fresh paint, bright signs and an old-fashioned spirit that lives on through the town's characters, and into the modern world.

Calendar of events

- March 31:** Slush Cup and Deck Party at Red Mountain Resort
- April 4 to 5:** RCAC Concert Series at Miners' Hall
- April 27:** West Kootenay Under-19 Film Festival at the Royal Theatre in Trail
- Aug. 31:** Battle of the Border at Redstone
- Sept. 6 & 7:** Rubberhead Mountain Bike Festival
- Sept. 7:** Rossland Fall Fair

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