

BREAKING THE ICE

On 1 July 1867, Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia united to create the Dominion of Canada. As the country celebrates its 150th anniversary, Hugh Francis Anderson discovers a land of jagged, ice-capped mountains and frozen alpine lakes ripe for all manner of extreme sports

The windscreen wipers beat furiously as I desperately try to keep my eyes on the road. A fierce breeze flurries powder from a nearby snowdrift into the air. In the distance, the headlights of a freight truck move towards me; the only reference point I have in the otherwise featureless white. I open the window to clear the condensation and a -25 degree wind blusters in. I'm on the Trans-Canada Highway, driving through Jasper National Park, in the heart of the Canadian Rockies.

This Rocky Mountain road trip began with a flight into Edmonton, Alberta. The first thing you realise about Canadian winters is that they're cold, really cold. With temperatures sitting at around -20, it almost hurts to breathe. The cold here is dry, bracing, just about manageable.

I have week-long list of adventures ahead. The first day, it's straight onto fat-bikes and a cycling tour of Edmonton. The route takes us through the city centre, past the might of the Alberta Legislature Building, and out onto the cross-country skiing tracks that line the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. An active lifestyle is the norm in this part of the world, where people appear unfazed by the cold. Heading onto the river, frozen solid and capped with a foot of fresh snowfall, it's difficult to fathom that beneath my feet millions of gallons of water is flowing. I travel on to the famed Edmonton Ice Castles; 10ft-high walls of sheer ice, roofs formed by icicles, and numerous tunnels,



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slides, thrones and walkways; it's a phenomenal place to behold.

Returning the fat-bike, I head towards Jasper, deep in the Rocky Mountains. When we arrive, the snowstorm I've been powering through for the past two hours shows no sign of abating. Foot upon foot of snow is piled beside the road. Thanks to the surrounding Rockies, intimate Jasper is an adventure-seekers paradise.

The next day is spent with the Cold Fire Creek dog sledding team. When I arrive, after a wild drive through snow-covered forestry tracks, it's to howling hounds, itching to run through the mountains. And run they do. There's something quietly magical about being pulled through a powder-white fantasia by eight dogs, where all that can be heard is the gentle glide of the sledge. It's like being in a Jack London novel. "They'll run for four hours before needing a break," says owner Amanda Sinclair. "They're so resilient, they were made for this, they love it."

Back in Jasper, a herd of elk has nipped down from the forest to parade along the high street. It's magnificent, and goes to show the quiet nature of this small town. Although the light is fading, my day is not yet done. After a short stroll down the main road, I meet Chris Krupski from Maligne Canyon Adventures, who will lead the Maligne Canyon Ice Walk.

During the winter months, the once wild river becomes an ice-ensnared cavern, where you can walk along the frozen water, which at this time of the year is some five metres thick. Head-torches on, we're off into the forests that surround the canyon. Although ☺

OPPOSITE PAGE Abraham Lake with methane bubbles.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Dog Sledding in Banff; the Canadian Rockies; an elk. ALL IMAGES courtesy of Hugh Francis Anderson and Olivia Clarke

erie in the frozen chill, it's utterly spectacular. Once over the safety barrier and down the steep bank, we're onto the frozen waterway. "This place is magical at night," says Chris. "The ice almost feels alive."

The following morning, I rise early and drive the short distance to Marmot Basin, an intimate yet highly versatile ski resort on the outskirts of Jasper. What I'm most impressed with here is the quality of snow. After 50cm of snowfall overnight, the conditions are sublime. I have never skied in such powder-perfect conditions. Deep into the afternoon, the snow remains like icing sugar.

The next day, my journey continues 200 miles to Banff along the Ice Fields Parkway. One of Canada's iconic landmarks, the spectacular road that cuts its way through the very heart of the Rocky Mountains. I'm blown away by the enormity of the white-capped, jagged mountain peaks that rise endlessly around me. This wintery nirvana, however bleak, holds unimaginable beauty.

NEED TO KNOW

Bon Voyage offers a nine-night fly and drive holiday in Alberta from £1,595.00 per person. Valid for travel in January or February 2018, the price includes return Air Canada flights from London Heathrow to Edmonton (returning from Calgary), two nights in Edmonton at the Matrix Hotel, three nights at The Crimson in Jasper, two nights at Sunshine Mountain Lodge in Banff and two nights at The Fairmont Springs in Banff, plus car hire for the duration. The price is based on two adults travelling, sharing room-only accommodation. 0800 316 0194, bon-voyage.co.uk; travelalberta.co.uk



Forty metres above the canyon floor, I suddenly appreciate the adrenaline-inducing appeal of climbing

Celebrating its 150th year this year, Canada is offering free entry into the national parks for all.

My stop tonight is the Sunshine Village ski resort, 15 minutes west of Banff. Only accessible by gondola, it is one of the largest resorts in Canada, with over 3,000 acres of skiable terrain. As I rise, the sun begins to set, and my accommodation for the night, Sunshine Mountain Lodge, is cast in a golden light. I have a feeling that I'm going to rest well.

The seemingly endless, near-perfect pistes of the Sunshine Village basin are triumphed only by the sublime off-piste opportunities available from the resort's highest point on Goat's Eye Mountain. It's clear why this is one of the most popular resorts around Banff.

Unlike Jasper, Banff is a luxury destination, filled with numerous eateries and high-end brands. After travelling through the bustling centre, I find Fairmont Banff Springs on the outskirts of town. It is a vast establishment, and appears like a magisterial palace through the dense pines. Inside, it is traditional North American luxury, with no expense spared.

As the sun rises on another clear morning, I drive deep into Banff National Park to Johnston Canyon. Meeting Jesse from Yarnuska Mountain Adventures, who will be my guide for a day of ice climbing, we walk into the forest and up the canyon, where walls of



DID YOU KNOW?

The name 'Banff' is derived from Banffshire, Scotland, the birthplace of two of the original directors of the Canadian Pacific Railway

ice shoot up the gorge. "This looks good," says Jesse. "I think you'll get a good feel for ice-climbing here."

So I clamber over the barriers, stumble down the steep bank onto the frozen river, and watch in anticipation as Jesse free-climbs the wall of ice to insert the anchors that will take our weight, should we fall. At 6ft6 and 17 stone, I'm a little dubious. However, after an in-depth tutorial, I'm pining to start climbing. As the first pick grinds into the ice – and takes my weight – I know this is going to be an incredible experience. Once at the top, some 40 metres above the canyon floor, with nothing but sheer ice and air below my feet, I suddenly appreciate the adrenaline-inducing appeal of climbing. I pledge to try this again.

The following morning, I ski another of Banff's nearby resorts, Mount Norquay. A much smaller offering, with just 28 runs, it is the perfect spot for a day of relaxed skiing. As I amble along the gentle runs, it dawns on me that I'm heading back to London the following day.

My Rocky Mountain road trip has been a phenomenal escape into the wilderness, where breathtaking scenery merges with adventure. A place of utter wonder, where you truly feel insignificant to the immensity of the mountains, for untouched nature, the Canadian Rockies is hard to beat. Over eight days, some 1,200 miles, and an unacceptable amount of maple syrup, I leave with a profound love of the place. I wholeheartedly believe all who visit would too. **C**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Ice climbing; Fairmont Banff Springs; ice cave; Icefields Parkway in Banff National Park; ice cave