

Bear Hunting the Canadian Rockies

Photo: Tom Ryan



A not so shy bear.

Cute and cuddly they may look, but friendly and harmless they ain't!

By Kerry Heaney

Despite their toy shop appeal, Canadians treat bears of all shapes and sizes with the same sort of respect Australians reserve for crocodiles and sharks. Encounters in the wild make good table talk but hikers are advised to be well prepared with bells attached to their pack to tell bears of their approach and pepper spray for those bears who don't heed the warning. Check the dung, hikers are told. Normal droppings belong to the less aggressive black bears. Droppings that contain bells and smell of pepper mean man-eating grizzlies are in the area!

I didn't start out hunting for bears but I did think, especially after sighting tens of bear-proof rubbish bins and bear warning signs, that one would cross my path. Hopefully it would cross my path in the distance or when I was safely enclosed in a car, but close enough for a memorable photograph.

Recovering from the jet lag that hit me like a freight train was first priority on day one at Kananaskis, just an hour's drive out of Calgary, Alberta. Actually, I'm not sure if it was day one, day two or somewhere in between as time zones, lack of sleep and an unsettled stomach

A perfect autumn day at Green Lake, opposite the Flying U Ranch, B.C.



Photo: Kerry Heaney

had left me totally confused. However, a solid night's rest in a sumptuous two-level townhouse-type room, complete with log fire and a view to-die-for in the Delta Lodge Signature Club at Kananaskis, certainly did the trick. My hosts excused me for nodding asleep during dinner and were happy to show off their picturesque surroundings in the morning. It wasn't hard to be impressed and I didn't even have the time to sample their fine array of spa and beauty treatments.

As we headed off down the road I caught my first glimpse of a 'bear in the vicinity' warning sign. Large sign, but no bears in sight. I should have taken the hint, but instead my enthusiasm was kindled. Plenty of opportunities during a twelve-day trek both sides of the Rockies to spot a couple of bears, I thought!

Then it was out into Alberta's expansive plains to a place that sounded interesting from the start. An interpretive centre with a soul, Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump didn't disappoint. Guide Lorraine Goodstriker, a member of the Blood tribe by birth, shared the stories of her people as we walked through levels that wound their way up the side of the mountain. At the top was the cliff from which buffalo were forced to plunge to their death to sustain an age-old way of life. There were plenty of impressively sized stuffed buffalo inside and, according to

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- For free brochures, maps and information on Canada, contact Canada Travel Information on 02 9954 3377 or the Canadian Tourism Commission web site on www.canada.trav.net
- Avoid e-tickets for overseas travel. They can make tight connections impossible when luggage cannot be checked through to a final destination.
- Don't forget to tip in Canada. A tip of around 15 percent applies for service attendants including barbers, hairdressers and taxi drivers etc. Porters usually receive \$2 per item.
- Kerry Heaney travelled courtesy of the Canadian Tourism Commission and Air New Zealand.

Photo: Kerry Heaney



Kananaskis country, Alberta

Lorraine, the spirits of her ancestors, but no bears.

No bears in sight along the Elk River as we drove into township of Fernie, British Columbia, either. However Fernie is better known for its beautiful packed powder runs and half pipes for boarders - that's snow talk. According to the locals, the powder is so deep you need a snorkel! Of course, this was a little hard to imagine on the mild Indian summer days I experienced in October.

Over a delicious dinner that night at restaurant in a 300 year-old German barn carefully transplanted into nearby Kimberley, another powderhound's delight, we heard some scary bear encounter stories. Or perhaps it was just the combination of too much wine and sauerkraut that makes me remember them like that!

Basking in the warmth of the thermal pool at Fairmont Hot Springs the next

evening, after a hard day on the St Eugene Mission Golf Course, Canada seemed like a land of milk and honey with bears only to be found safely stuffed on gift shop shelves. Close to one million gallons of odourless mineral hot spring water bubble out of the ground at Fairmont Hot Springs every day. The Ktunaxa people discovered its curative powers long ago and their small rock baths still remain today. In winter when snow covers the ground, the steaming pools are even more popular. Those who don't indulge in bathing enjoy the resort facilities and the two championship 18-hole golf courses.

It was worth the walk, even carrying heavy camera equipment, to stand on top of Sulphur Mountain at nearby Banff and feel like the king of the world. Admittedly, an eight-minute gondola had done most of the hard work leaving just the last few metres for the adventurous. It was there I patted a black

Fairmont Hot Springs.



Photo: Kerry Heaney



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bear - well not really, but that's what I told those too lazy to make the climb! Down in Banff I saw my first bear. It was only a statue of a small bear at the crossroads, but it definitely wasn't going to eat me if I got too close!

Banff is a beautiful but busy town, an island of condensed urban civilisation located right in the middle of a national park. Tourists, particularly Japanese, love it and the multicultural signs everywhere reflect their influence. However it is not unheard for coyotes to prowl the alleys at night, while elk browse in suburban gardens and beavers fell trees along the river.

Still on a bear hunt, we stopped to admire the view from the shore of Green Lake, British Columbia. Next door was the 40,000-acre Flying U Ranch founded in 1849 and more than 100 horses waiting for riders. After some of the best borsch I have tasted we jumped on some horses and headed off into the wilderness. Well not quite wilderness, but wild enough to host a beaver lodge, lakes and 100 miles of unsupervised trail rides. Cowboy Mike Dickson kept us all on horses as we ambled, trotted and then galloped. Later over a drink in the 1880's style Longhorn Salon with a cardboard John Wayne standing guard in the corner, I learnt not only could Mike ride but he also had written and produced his own CD of country music. You can stay in your own log cabin complete with wood-burning stove at the Flying U, enjoy meals around the rock fireplace in the log ranch house and hop a hayride or take in a square dance before retiring.

After this burst of wholesome fresh air, it was off to the Hills Health & Guest Ranch for some serious pampering. A favourite destination for celebrities, including Tom and Nicole, The Hills offers everything from horse whispering courses, hiking and hayride or sleigh ride sing-along parties to more than 50 healing spa treatments. I sampled a deep nourishing relaxation facial which left me energised for days.

It was on the second last day of the trip that it happened. There on the side of the road, half hidden by grass was a bear. Quickly we turned around for a better look only to see it race off into the undergrowth. Well at least I saw one, though a bear's backside doesn't really cut it!

Any disappointment was quickly put aside when we arrived at Whistler and togged up in a mound of yellow plastic gear to head up the side of Blackcomb Mountain on ATVs. With motor bike style controls and four soft balloon tyres these all terrain vehicles were easy to control, even for a novice like me. We raced through the dirtiest mud pit in the west before heading through old growth forests and alpine meadows up to Crystal Hut on the 6000-foot north ridge. The hot tub wasn't operating so we just sipped hot chocolate as the sun set and the temperature dropped to -5 degrees.

As we drove towards the airport the next day I discovered July is the best bear spotting month in Canada. That's more than enough reason for another trip!

Up close and personal with John Wayne at the Flying U Ranch.

