

Exploring the Vastness of Banff National Park

By Claire Walter

To borrow on old travelogue cliché, Alberta's

Banff National Park is a study in contrast. Its 2,586 square miles comprise both wilderness and civilization. There are high mountains, deep



valleys, endless forests and abundant wildlife. Even though much of it feels and looks remote, it is just 70 miles from Calgary – and the Trans-Canada Highway runs right through it. It contains one large town (Banff), one smaller town (Lake Louise Village), two palatial hotels (the Fairmont Banff Springs and Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise) and three significant downhill ski areas (Ski Lake Louise, Sunshine and Norquay). It is a park among parks, with Kootenay National Park just to the south, Yoho National Park to the west (and in another province) and Jasper National Park to the north. It is Canada's oldest national park and also the one with phenomenal snowshoe opportunities.

It's a great destination for a snowshoe getaway or a multi-activity winter vacation with snowshoeing among the options. There's skiing (Alpine and Nordic), wildlife viewing, spa-hopping and enjoying the shops, galleries, restaurants and nightspots in Banff or quieter Lake

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Louise Village. As a bonus, winter is low season in Banff, so lodging is a bargain and the shops offer incredible values.

Snowshoeing Options

The most straightforward snowshoeing is practically from the doorstep of the Chateau Lake Louise. It is possible to

snowshoe across or around this iconic lake, and also to veer off into the trees for as long or short an excursion as you wish. The trail around the lake is 1.3 virtually flat miles. The view of the mountains with their exposed banded limestone of white and dark gray, or across the frozen lake to the gorgeous hotel, are oh-and-ah-worthy. An ascent of about 1,300 feet up a side trail to historic Lake Agnes Teahouse.

Snowshoe down to Lake Louise Village and from the Paradise Valley Trailhead on the south end of town, follow the Moraine Lake Road or the parallel Moraine Lake Highline Trail. The road is maintained for Nordic skiing to the Tower of Babel viewpoint, but it's wide enough to avoid any ski/snowshoe conflicts. From trailhead to Moraine Lake is about five miles. Off in the other direction, to the north, is a small portion the Great Divide Bike Trail, also maintained

for Nordic skiing. It is part of ambitious Continental Divide Trail that ultimately will reach from deep in Mexico to Alaska's far north.

The Bow Glacier, part of the Wapta Icefield, feeds the Bow River. It flows through the national park, passing Lake Louise Village and Banff before flowing out of the park eastward to Canmore and then to Calgary and beyond. The Bow River Valley offers abundant snowshoeing

opportunity routes of various lengths. The Trans-Canada Highway parallels the river with numerous access points.

One of the most popular excursions is the Bow River Loop Trail connecting both sides of the river into a mellow 5.5-mile route.



No route is more accessible than the Tunnel Mountain Trail, which takes off directly from Banff. From the St. Julien Road Trailhead, the route crosses Tunnel Mountain Road and then gradually switchbacks through a thick coniferous forest with intermittent views down toward town. The views from the Summit Ridge, nearly 1,000 feet above Banff, are stunning: Mt. Rundle, the frozen-over marshland of Vermilion Lakes, the Massive Range and miles down the Bow River Valley.

A particularly beguiling route begins with a gondola ride to Sunshine Village, a tiny high-elevation ski resort at the Alberta-British Columbia border. Snowshoers can hike a



perimeter route from the resort, through open meadows across the top of the chairlift-served ski terrain and down the other side. White Mountain Adventures, one of several Banff/Lake Louise guide services, offers a guided Sunshine Village snowshoe hike and uses chairlifts for the elevation gain. They have a secluded snow hut in the high country where they take a hot chocolate break.

Joining a guide and a group is a popular option in the Banff/Lake Louise

area, particularly since many groups and families are composed of skiers, snowboarders and those who don't really like to slide on snow. Martha's Winter Adventures offers nearly 20 half- and full-day snowshoe itineraries in Banff National Park, adjacent Kootenay National Park and Kananaskis Country, outside of national park boundaries.

Mountain Heritage guides' small booking office, called the Guides Cabin, off the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise' elegant lobby is a must-stop for snowshoers. The guides lead snowshoe hikes into the deep forest nearby and also offer outstanding full-moon hikes across and around the lake. The word "magical" does not do justice to the beauty and exhilaration of one of these hikes.

Incomparable Skōki Lodge

I've been to Banff many number of times, mostly in winter and occasionally in summer. For my money, for snowshoers, nothing but nothing in the park surpasses an excursion to Skōki Lodge. Located at 7,100 feet in the secluded Skōki Valley, this achingly charming retreat was built in 1930-



31 by the Ski Club of the Canadian Rockies and expanded to four years later. The lodge and three surrounding cabins only accommodate 22 guests.

Snowshoe in along a well-packed six-mile trail that starts near the base of the Ski Louise



ski area and crosses two passes. The hut hosts welcome you with tea, juice and baked goods. The serve dinner and breakfast buffet-style there's always fresh-baked read made at the lodge. If you're there for lunch, dig into the build-it-yourself sandwich buffet.

There's no electricity (kerosene lanterns and candles provide light and the heat comes from wood, coal or propane) and no running water either, though warm wash water is always available. If you venture outside on a clear night,

you feel as if you could reach up and touch the stars. Slip into a bed made with flannel sheets and down comforters, extinguish the lanterns and you'll never have a better night's sleep. The experience is intimate, old-fashioned and totally unforgettable.

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Claire Walter, based in Boulder, Colo., is an award-winning writer, journalist and blogger. Read about her travels at www.travel-babel.com.

Photos are courtesy of Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, Visit Banff/Lake Louise, Skoki Lodge, and Claire Walter.



Important Web Sites to Visit:

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/index.aspx>

<http://www.fairmont.com/lakelouise>

<http://www.whitemountainadventures.com/>

<http://www.marthashelihikes.com/winterwonderland.php>

<http://skoki.com/index.asp>





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