



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A family getaway to Banff that was anything but rocky

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BANFF, Alberta — The speed of our sleds didn't bother me — just 8 miles per hour — but seeing my kids at the helm of two dogsleds pulled by excited, yelping huskies proved a little unnerving. Our daughter, then 9, drove the sled holding my husband, and our son, 7, commanded my sled as we charged through forests and across open snowfields in Banff National Park.

Just one slip and they'll get trampled, said my motherly brain. But a guide stood next to each child on the sled's runners and kept a close watch.

From my vantage point on the front of the sled, cocooned in wool blankets and thick canvas, I could see the low-lying sun casting its golden light across the powdery fields and the chiseled mountains around us. Flecks of snow pelted my goggles and cheeks, and commands from our mini mushers rose above the symphony of barking dogs: "Hike" (Go), "Easy" (Slow down), and "Whoa" (Stop).

"That was so cool," beamed our son Sam, as the sleds ground to a halt. "My favorite part was the turnaround by the lake because we went really fast. I almost fell off because it was so sharp!"

To clarify, our guides kept the sleds in control and made sure the kids didn't go flying, but from a child's perspective, it sure felt like high-octane thrills. During our family trip to Banff last winter, we discovered one thrilling adventure after another from traditional winter fun, such as skiing, ice skating, and snowshoeing, to less-common activities, including ice canyon walking, dog sledding, and soaking in natural hot springs.

Banff offers easy accessibility — it's just 90 minutes from Calgary International Airport — three ski areas, a variety of lodging from youth hostels to several of Canada's most opulent and historic grand hotels, top-notch restaurants, and upscale but rustic towns and villages where development has remained in check since they lie within national park boundaries. (Banff became Canada's first national park in 1885.)

Much of the local culture and infrastructure caters to the area's furry residents: The region has 44 wildlife underpasses and overpasses along the Trans-Canada Highway that allow elk, bears, and other animals to move along the natural wildlife corridors here; the Bow Valley Parkway, a secondary road connecting Banff and Lake Louise, closes from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. come springtime to protect wandering wildlife; and people living within park boundaries are strongly discouraged from having fruit trees or outdoor gardens that attract animals.

It's nearly impossible to avoid a wildlife encounter during a visit here — even just see-



Howard Wright (the author's husband) drove a dog sled alongside Spray Lake and skied at Mount Norquay resort in Alberta, Canada. Lake Louise in Alberta's Banff National Park has miles of snowshoe trails.

mer homestead inn.

Another top activity included hiking Johnston Canyon, where visitors follow a snow-packed trail or meander along a cantilevered steel walkway up a chasm with frozen icefalls. We were disheartened to learn that local outfitters only take kids 8 and older. My husband took our 7-year-old bowling while my daughter and I did an organized tour, but in retrospect, we could have easily gone as a family on our own with no issues — and we saw plenty of other families hiking with young kids (just bring or rent micro-spikes to attach to your shoes for the journey). The route gains only 135 feet of elevation.

The 3.2-mile round-trip hike takes walkers along trails lined with spruce, aspen, and Douglas firs, some covered in old man's beard and wolf lichen. We detoured to a small cave from which we could see water plunging behind a thin veil of ice at Lower Falls, and a tinge of blue in the icefalls from minerals and glacial silt. Our guide, Raven Brascoupe (who made the guided trip worthwhile), pointed out black swifts nesting in the rocks near Upper Falls (these birds face extinction, she said) and explained how the limestone canyon had been hollowed out over time.

With our ski legs beneath us, we headed to Banff Sunshine Resort, an area known for its intermediate to advanced terrain, including the gnarly Delirium Dive with its 45-degree chutes only accessible to those with avalanche gear. We stuck to the wide-open bowls and intermediate runs above The Village — an area around 7,000 feet at the base of Mount Standish and Lookout Mountain — and enjoyed the expansive views of the Canadian Rockies, including Mount Assiniboine, known as the Matterhorn of the Rockies because of its pyramidal shape, which looms 11,870 feet. The kids loved riding the TeePee Town Luxury Express Quad, a heated chairlift with an orange bubble cover, and knowing they

had crisscrossed the border between Alberta and British Columbia from the top of Lookout Mountain.

Rather than drive back to Banff, we spent a night on the mountain at Sunshine Mountain Lodge, cut off from civilization once the gondola stopped running at 5:30 p.m. — a novel experience. This property is the only ski-in/ski-out lodge in Banff National Park. No roads lead here come winter, and staff bring guests' bags up by gondola (you can get out by snowmobile in an emergency).

We stood outside the lodge that night, right next to the chairlifts, and took in the striking silence and dark sky, then wandered into the local's dive pub, Mad Trapper's Smokehouse, located in the original 1928 lodge. Here, we had burgers, pulled-pork sandwiches, and fish and chips for dinner, and taught the kids how to play pool. The next day, we skied from our front door about 30 feet to the chairlift, and then took a 5-mile-long run down to the parking lot thousands of feet below.

We ended the trip with a stay at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, a treat for my husband, who used to rock climb overlooking the lake but had never stayed at this magnificent old railway hotel. On a clear day, you can see across frozen Lake Louise (a great place to ice skate) to spectacular Fairview

and Big Beehive mountains, and glacial Mount Victoria.

The property has miles of Nordic skiing and snowshoe trails that circle the lake, cut through forests, and wend their way into Lake Louise village. To make the most of our time there, we took the kids on a guided snowshoe adventure into a nearby forest on Fairview Mountain wearing bear-paw-style snowshoes made of wood and interlaced webbing.

"The snow doesn't gather on these — they're like sifters," said Paul Lapierre, our interpretive guide and a former candy store owner who had pockets full of sweet treats that he freely shared. Lapierre showed the kids how to walk in snowshoes — taking short steps and keeping knees bent — taught them how to dump branches covered with snow on each other or unsuspecting parents (they never got tired of this), and told us about the history of the area and stories about the wildlife.

Thanks to a local tip, we had dinner at Bill Peyton's Café in the village's international youth hostel one night. The cafe, named after a famous local guide, offered elk and teriyaki burgers, fish and chips, and Thai stir fry at reasonable prices, and a standard children's menus with welcoming por-

tions and healthy sides (try Timberwolf Pizza and Pasta Café, too, for another tasty and affordable option).

We spent our final day skiing at Lake Louise, where local wood was harvested to build the lodges and, as a longtime resident told us, "You can huck off a cliff or you can ski with your grandmother here." Every lift has a green run, and even the tree skiing is doable for intermediate skiers.

Our kids loved tracking down the ski area's "ghost chairs" — no-longer-used lift towers that remain in place because it would cause greater environmental harm to pull them out (keep an eye out for them on the Upper Wiwaxy run) — and picking their way down Lake Lindsay Way, the women's Olympic downhill run officially renamed this year after Lindsey Vonn. But the biggest thrill for them was seeing a full-size taxidermied grizzly bear in the main lodge — its head looming several feet above them — and then having a ski instructor tell them, as they skied down the slopes, that "you could be skiing over hibernating bears right now."

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