

TRAVEL

Bears steal spotlight at Waterton Lakes Park

by MICHELE JARVIE
Southam Newspapers

WATERTON, Alta. - Some people go for the postcard scenery. For other it's an excuse to dip into the United States. But I think most people visit Waterton Lakes National Park to see a bear.

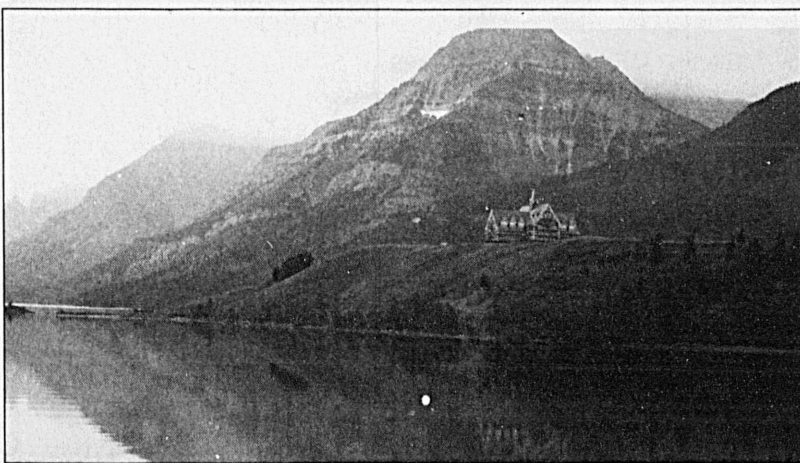
And for good reason. This tiny town of breathtaking beauty has a very high bear-to-person ratio.

I was barely in the park for 10 minutes before I came across two small cinnamon-coloured bruins rambling along a hill just a stone's throw from the popular resort town in the southwest corner of the province.

While the town has much to offer

tourists, bears seem to steal the spotlight. Parks Canada brochures handed out at the gate have useful information about day hikes, weather, local activities, dining choices and accommodations. But a good chunk of space is devoted to advice on bears: how to identify the species; how to avoid bear encounters; and something that struck a nerve for me - what to do if you're stalked or attacked.

Reading this on the beautiful drive into the park, I was ready to stay inside my hotel all weekend. But my fear quickly turned to fascination as I watched the two bears frolic in the summer grass and amble across the



A rare moment of windless calm on the lake at Waterton Lakes National Park. The Prince of Wales Hotel and its reflection can be seen in the distance

highway. Pretty soon, I was in tracking mode. I even dashed off once to follow a report of a large black and two small brown bears in a meadow near the stables.

This is how tourists get into trouble, I told myself, and I left to explore Waterton's other attractions, like its most famous landmark.

The majestic Prince of Wales Hotel sits astride a grassy bluff overlooking the townsite. With grace and dignity befitting her age, the 72-year-old hostelry stares down gales which blow relentlessly down the lake from the United States.

Built in 1927 by the Great Northern Railway company of Minneapolis, Minn., the grand old dame has hosted generations of the rich and famous. Its most recent celebrities include Clint Eastwood and David Letterman. In fact, the late night funnyman and I shared the same luxurious suite, albeit two weeks apart.

Recently refurbished, the chalet-style hotel continues to set a standard for elegance and service. The linens are crisp and expensive, the soap is soft and creamy and there isn't a television or radio in sight. With its expanse of dark wood, the hotel could be dreary but floor to ceiling windows in the lobby bring in light. The massive, tiered, wagon wheel-like chandelier also adds to the warmth to the room.

But this old-world charm doesn't come cheap. Rooms start at \$212 and run to \$700 for one of two beautiful suites.

Budget travellers can still experience the hotel by downing a brew in the lounge or participating in the British tradition of high tea. English tea, with scones, preserves and cream is \$9.95.

These kinds of prices are standard in Waterton which attracts a huge number of Americans each year. But there are deals here to be had for penny-pinching Canadians.

A terrific way to spend a free evening is at a Parks Canada talk - every night at 8:30 p.m. in the Falls and Crandell Theatres. Topics include Wildlife Junkies, Rekindling Old Flames, and Pathways to Pastways. There also a Friday night talk at the Belly River Campfire on Women for the Mountains.

In addition, wardens host special events, such as an eight-hour, 14-kilometre-long trek from Waterton to Goat Haunt ranger station, in Montana. The hike is led by Canadian and American park interpreters. The return trip is via boat.

If you want to strike out on your own, there are several good day hikes, ranging from the short but infamously arduous Bear's Hump (one hour) to the longer Crypt Lake route (seven hours). The visitors' guide at the park gate lists most of the area walks and hikes.

Haunted History Walking Tours delves into Waterton's past every Friday in July and August. You can stroll through the streets and learn about the park's ghosts stories, native legends, history, architecture and famous local people. Led by a history student, the price of \$4 for adults and \$2.50 for seniors (children are free) shouldn't scare you away.

While wandering around town, you can't miss Cameron Falls, nor should you. A good way to reach the falls on the western edge of town is to rent a surrey from Pat's. A canopied contraption that seats two adults (somewhat) comfortably, surreys are a hot ticket at \$8 for half an hour or \$16 for a hour. Families and couples can be seen cycling side by side down the quiet tree-lined streets.

Some come to windsurf on the lake, famous for its high winds. Others rent mountain bikes or mopeds (again from Pat's) to ride up to Red Rock Canyon or Cameron Lake.

One of the more pleasant ways to pass a few hours is to take a 2 1/4-hour shoreline cruise to Goat Haunt Ranger Station in Montana's Glacier National Park.

Another attraction is the venerable Waterton Lakes Golf Course. Older than the Prince of Wales hotel, the first nine of this course was built in 1921. The greens were a mix of sand and oil so the sand wouldn't blow away in the harsh winds.

If you go

■ Parks pass costs \$4 for adults, \$3 seniors and children \$2.

■ Waterton parks information 403-859-5105.

■ Canadian Wilderness Tours can be arranged through the Kilmorey Lodge or the Aspen Village Inn. Prices start at \$40 for a 90-minute program for one person or \$20 each for two.

■ Boat cruises run from mid-May to late September. During July and August the boat leaves at 9 a.m., 10, 1, 4 and 7 p.m. Cost is \$20 for adults, \$12 for youth aged 13-17, \$8 for children aged 4-12. Call 403-859-2362.

■ Haunted History Walking Tours start from the lobby of the Lodge at Waterton every Friday at 8 p.m.

■ Waterton Lakes Golf Course is 18 holes. 9 holes is \$16, 18 is \$28. You can play all day for \$40.

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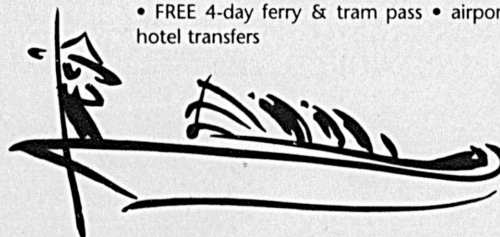
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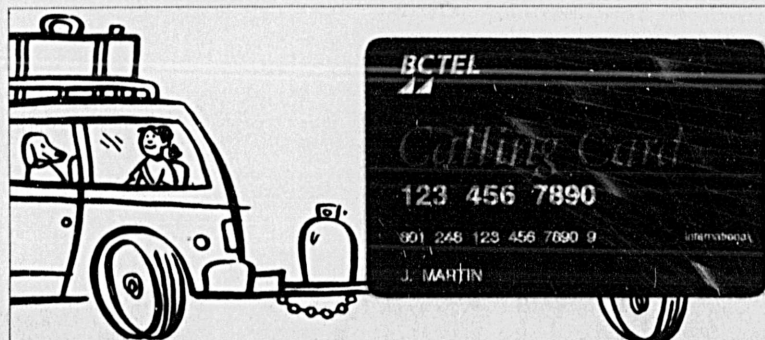
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