



Rails to Trails

JASPER'S HISTORIC LODGE LINKS TRAIN AND TERRAIN FOR THE QUINTESSENTIAL WINTER VACATION

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**BY HILARY
 NANGLE**

➤ THE LAST TIME I RODE THE TRAIN TO JASPER, I WAS 11 years old, bouncing in my seat in anticipation of a summer family adventure. Decades later, with a lifetime of far-flung travel under my belt, I find that I'm once again that little girl, my nose pressed to glass, waiting for the Rockies to appear as a shadow on the horizon of the great plains. I am returning to the lakefront lodge of my childhood

memories — the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge — and to the wildlife-rich national parkland that surrounds it. But this time it's winter; this time, instead of being greeted by the hustle and bustle of a summer tourist town, I find Jasper slumbering under a down comforter.

I have traveled to Jasper aboard Via Rail's Snow Train, in deference to the lodge's history as much as mine. Like its more flamboyant sisters — the Banff Springs and the Chateau Lake Louise — the lodge dates back to the glory days of rail travel. But while the other two hotels are scene-stealers, shouting for attention amid the natural grandeur of their settings, the lodge's low-slung, cedar-and-stone building — more camp than castle — politely whispers. Begun in 1915 as a luxury tent city for well-heeled rusticators traveling

on the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, it evolved throughout the years into a permanent lodge and cabins, attracting Hollywood stars, American tycoons, and British royalty who came to revel in Jasper National Park's summer playground. But in winter, it was all but dead.

Even today, Jasper's location — four hours by car from Edmonton — and lack of year-round accommodations conspire to limit winter visitors, and that's noticeable not only in town, but also at Marmot Basin, the moderately sized ski area (not resort; that's too high-falutin' a word) just south of town. Knowing I'll have the 1,675 acres of open bowls, glades, and trails practically to myself is what brought me here.

On the 15-minute drive from the train depot to the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge,* we pass the resort's welcoming committee, a trio of elk grazing in the snow at the head of the resort's drive. "They're almost always here," my driver says. In summer, such a scene would have resulted in a traffic jam. In winter, we are their only audience.

The main lodge, built in 1952 after the original burned, bows to its setting. Inside, two intricately carved totem poles oversee the lobby, but they can't compete with the wall of

COURTESY OF FAIRMONT HOTELS & RESORTS

PERFECT PLACES

windows framing the masterpiece outside. A turquoise pool, where the muffled shrieks of children rise with the mist, gives way to a fringe of fir ringing the frozen expanse of Lake Beauvert, with Mount Edith Cavell's craggy silhouette as the backdrop.

I shift my gaze inside, absorbing the flow from lobby to Emerald Lounge to the Great Hall and the chic, retro-lodge decor, which prizes comfort over prissiness. A massive, two-sided stone hearth rises from multicolored slate floors to the sky-lighted peak in the cathedral ceiling; a few Aboriginal Haida artworks, landscape paintings, and taxidermy animal trophies adorn the stone and log walls; willow rockers are juxtaposed with upholstered and leather couches, camp-style arm chairs, and wing-backs in conversational groupings loosely defined by area rugs. The sheer size of the space tempers the hodgepodge of colors and patterns.

Pathways tether the main lodge to the guest rooms, suites, and cabins peppering the shoreline and woods. I could call a shuttle for transport between my lakefront suite and the lodge, but I prefer to mosey, to immerse in the stillness and quietude of winter, hoping to chance upon elk conferring along the fringes of my chosen routes, and spy stars racing across the night sky.

The Edith Cavell dining room overlooks a panorama dominated by its namesake. Eager to squeeze every minute out of my few days here, I arrive at opening for the hot-and-cold breakfast buffet that will power me through the day, though the classic eggs Benedict might weigh me down a bit. The clunky, converted school bus that shuttles guests to and from Marmot Mountain is a bit of a departure from the well-orchestrated luxury that defines the lodge, and I find myself the sole first-run devotee on the cliff-hugging 20-minute zigzag up to the base lodge. At 5,570 feet, Marmot's base elevation is Canada's highest, and guarantees not only a long season but also reliable snow.

I catch the first chair up Eagle Ridge with Colin Borrow, director of the snow-sports school. "Look," he says, pointing to glimmering lights in the still-shadowed valley far below. "Don't you feel like the Grinch looking down on Whoville?" Marmot's terrain swoops and soars, challenges and coddles, delivering far more than its modest stats promise. Although only seven lifts zipper the various



peaks, three are high-speed quads. Even as the day progresses, no lines form.

By early afternoon, the lodge is singing its siren song. I'm ready for a proper tea and a bit of pampering in the spa, to lust over the artwork in the lodge's Mountain Galleries, to score a seat at Oka Sushi, Chef Tatsuhiko Okaki's vest pocket restaurant, to sip wine by the fire and watch daylight

cede to nightfall. I settle for three out of four, too full from the tea sandwiches, pastries, and sweets to consider more than a glass of riesling and a cup of soup in the great hall. I push sushi to another night.

Gazing out at the moonlit panorama, I mull options for the morrow. The beauty of the lodge is its location; it puts the elk at my doorstep, the peaks in my view. It makes it possible to slip away to ski, snowshoe, even dogsled during the day, or to walk deep into the river-carved world of Maligne Canyon at night. And afterward, I return to curated civilization.

Still pondering possibilities, I pad back to my suite under a shimmering white canopy of the world's largest Dark Sky Preserve. I scan the skies hoping to spy the shimmying red, green, or white dance of the Aurora Borealis. I wait and watch, wish upon a shooting star, and then slip into my suite and light the fire. ●

It's a glorious train ride to Jasper, Alberta, in the middle of one of the most beautiful nowheres on Earth, and the riding at Marmot Basin isn't too shabby either.

FROM TOP: COURTESY VIA RAIL CANADA; COURTESY MARMOT BASIN (2)