

HIGHLIGHTS

Right on track

There's nothing rocky about the ride on Canada's famous rail journey, Rocky Mountaineer, writes **Russell Higham**

I'm stretching out in my reclining seat after an impeccably mannered waiter has taken my order for the three-course gourmet lunch I'll shortly enjoy in the restaurant car below. Nothing left to do now but sit back with a perfectly mixed aperitif the barman has just brought me and admire the view through giant panoramic windows, watching ospreys and eagles swooping outside as the majestic Rocky Mountains slowly pass by. One thing's for sure: this certainly beats the 7.53 to Charing Cross.

I'm aboard Canada's famous Rocky Mountaineer which, in 35 years of service, has probably been responsible for more ticks off travellers' wish lists than any other rail journey in the world. I flew to Calgary to embark at Banff – a 90-minute transfer away – and am now heading 500 miles west to Vancouver on the First Passage to the West route. Opting for the first-class GoldLeaf service means I'm on the top deck of a luxurious double-decker carriage with an outdoor viewing platform downstairs for those wind-in-the-hair moments.

Luggage is taken care of by the train's staff, who see that it's loaded and waiting in the room at each guest's chosen hotel in plenty of time for dinner. After being ushered back on board via a red-carpet welcome, a sumptuous breakfast is served and the enthusiastic staff give tips about what to look out for on that day's journey.

The scenery is breathtakingly beautiful. We pass vast, salmon-filled lakes with names like Shuswap and Kamloops, whose crystal-clear waters reflect the snow-capped mountains. Everyone is shrieking with joy as elk, moose, deer and bears make an appearance outside, so close it feels like we could reach out and touch them (well, maybe not the bears).

Many passengers are British. "It's like Scotland on steroids," one laughs, noting the same ruggedly beautiful landscape, albeit on an epically larger scale, and the historical connections between the two countries.

As we arrive, through lush forests, at our final destination, there are tearful farewells and I wonder how long it will be before I can ride this wonderful train again. Surely there can't be any rules against ticking off the same wish-list experience twice?

BOOK IT: Rocky Mountaineer's First Passage to the West starts from £1,428 for the two-day rail journey with one night in a hotel, dining and commentary. The journey is also sold as part of Canada tours or Alaska cruise-and-tour packages by operators including Titan Travel, Cosmos, APT, Newmarket Holidays and Great Rail Journeys. rockymountaineer.com



PICTURES: Rocky Mountaineer, Russell Higham