

# Way out West

Alberta might be best known for the Rockies, but don't dismiss its superlative cities, writes Laura French

@laurafrench121

I'm in the Canadian Badlands. Except I think it should be called the Canadian Goodlands, for it's quite the stunner: a 360-degree expanse of arid, amber-coloured mountains swirling off into the distance and, right in front of me, a cluster of bright-yellow autumnal trees, swaying gently in the breeze. It's blissfully silent – and eerily empty.

It might sound like your bog-standard trip out to the country, but as I look down at my new outfit – oversized dungarees, chequered shirt and oh-so-stylish hat – I'm swiftly reminded that it's not.

I am, in fact, about to descend into a disused coal mine several metres below this lunar-like surface, dressed as a miner and

brandishing a candlelit lantern. When in Rome.

A quarter of an hour later, I amble out the other end into daylight, pleased to have survived and ready to collect my weekly 'pay cheque' – all \$79 of it. Drinks are on me.

I'm at the Atlas Coal Mine, one of about 130 former mines in the Drumheller Valley, 70 miles northeast of Calgary. It might have closed in 1979, but today guided 'mine and dine' tours take visitors around a small section of it before stopping off at a former school for a traditional Hungarian lunch – evoking the nationality of many of the area's original miners. It's quite the experience, I can tell you.

It's not exactly what I'd

“

**These vibrant cities have a lot more going for them than just their proximity to the wild Canadian west**

envisaged when I'd pictured Western Canada, but that's exactly why I'm here – to explore Alberta's cultural, culinary and historical side, as part of Destination Canada's international mega-fam.

Visitors have a tendency to rush through Calgary on their way to the Rockies – just an hour-and-

a-half away – and barely spare a thought for nearby Edmonton, but it turns out these vibrant cities have a lot more going for them than just their proximity to the wild Canadian west.

## ► CALGARY

More than a million people flock to Calgary every July for the legendary Stampede – a 10-day extravaganza featuring rodeo, music, food, theatre and more – but it also has plenty to offer outside cowboy season.

At its downtown heart is a strikingly modern cluster of reflective skyscrapers, artsy sculptures, hipster coffee shops and high-end boutiques.

Stephen Avenue is worth a look-in for those wanting to





**RIGHT:**  
Atlas Coal  
Mine

**FAR RIGHT:**  
Calgary  
Stampede

**BELOW:**  
Heritage Park  
Historical Village



## First Class Holidays

has an Alberta Discovery self-drive, based in Calgary, from £454 per person. The price includes four nights' accommodation, five days' car rental and a two-hour bus tour in Dinosaur Provincial Park. Flights are not included. [fcholidays.com](http://fcholidays.com)

## Prestige Holidays

offers three nights at Calgary's International Hotel, tickets to the Stampede, two nights in Banff, one night at Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, two in Jasper at the Marmot Lodge and two in Edmonton at Sutton Place, from £3,224 per person. Includes Air Canada flights from Heathrow on July 12, 2018. [prestigeholidays.co.uk](http://prestigeholidays.co.uk)



→ part with a bit of cash, but go beyond that and you'll find the likes of Calgary Zoo, home to more than 700 animals and a string of interactive attractions, including a Canadian Wilds section featuring black bears that actually come in all colours, even white – who knew? Entry is from £14 for adults and £9 for children.

Those with a head for heights can ascend Calgary Tower for views over the city, and a revolving restaurant, or try the adrenaline-pumping Skyline Luge, which has you ambling up a hill on a serene chairlift before plunging down a hillside track in an engine-less kart, mountains just visible in the distance. It's well worth recommending to thrillseeking families, and good value at £14 for three rides (reopening for the 2018 season from May).

For an alternative way of seeing the



**The Skyline Luge has you ambling up a hill on a chairlift before plunging down a hillside track in an engine-less kart**

city though, suggest a Segway tour. River Valley Adventure Company offers hour-long trips along the water, where red and yellow trees and street-art murals line a peaceful, lush-green, winding track. It's a fun and quirky way of exploring the likes of East Village, a formerly neglected part of the city that's been revitalised with a crop of new buildings and significant

investment. The beginners' tour costs £36 (closed for winter; reopens in April).

## MUSEUMS EN MASSE

My highlight here was Studio Bell, a modern, interactive museum dedicated to all things music, which opened last year. Visitors can try their hand at playing various instruments, mix tracks, check out Elton John's former piano and see costumes worn by Canadian legends such as KD Lang, before hitting up the singing booth for some karaoke, all for £11 or £7 for children.

Just beyond the city, there's plenty to see too, including the 50-hectare Heritage Park Historical Village, Canada's largest living museum. Here costumed staff and more than 200 attractions – including shops, schools, churches and houses, some brought over from their original sites – aim to →



PICTURES: CALGARY TOURISM COMMISSION; HERITAGE PARK HISTORICAL VILLAGE



bring Canada's history to life with fascinating replicas including the 1920s home of Nellie McClung, a suffragette and one of the 'famous five' who fought for women's rights in Canada.

Elsewhere, there's a section honouring the First Nations people, an amusement park with a Ferris wheel and a Gasoline Alley vintage car museum, with wagon rides and steam trains on hand to take visitors round it all. The park costs £16 for adults and £8 for children and is open May to early October; the Gasoline Alley Museum is open year-round.

Fascinating in a different way is the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, located in the Badlands about a 90-minute drive from the city. It's home to the world's biggest collection of fossils, all excavated from the surrounding valley, alongside huge, surprisingly intact, dinosaur skeletons and skulls – one is more than 70 million years old.

Guided hikes in the area are available, while families can try an excavation experience in a simulated, fossil-strewn quarry for £9 (entrance to the museum is from £11 for adults and £8 for children. Under sixes go free).

#### FARM TO FORK

What really struck me about Calgary, though, was its food scene. One evening we chowed



**RIGHT:** Fam group at Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm

**LEFT:** Elk Island National Park

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology



in stargazing programmes in the wider park – part of a dark-sky preserve – with a higher-than-average chance of seeing the northern lights. Elsewhere in the park there are black bears, coyotes, moose, beavers, deer and occasional lynx, alongside more than 250 species of birds. And in

winter guided snowshoeing tours can take clients out to see them all. Who said Alberta was just about the Rockies? **TW**

**FIND OUT MORE**  
[travelalberta.com](http://travelalberta.com)  
[canadaspecialist.co.uk](http://canadaspecialist.co.uk)

## What the agents thought



**Taylor Kellard, The Independent Traveller**

"I was surprised by Edmonton and Calgary, especially the emphasis on farm-to-fork cooking. I enjoyed their passion and creativity for food and hadn't realised the culinary craze in both cities. My highlight was Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm – it has something for the whole family to enjoy."



**Sarah Bell, Travel Counsellors**

"I've always thought of both cities as a starting point for the Rockies, rather than as destinations in themselves."



**Jane Haughey, Your Holiday Booking**

"Both cities would make a good add-on to a longer holiday, particularly for the Calgary Stampede. I especially enjoyed the food tour in Calgary and think the Heritage Village would be great for a family day out."



**The museum is home to the world's biggest collection of fossils, alongside ginormous dinosaur skeletons**

**FIND OUT MORE**

- [albertafoodtours.ca](http://albertafoodtours.ca)
- [atlascoalmine.ab.ca](http://atlascoalmine.ab.ca)
- [calgaryzoo.com](http://calgaryzoo.com)
- [heritagepark.ca](http://heritagepark.ca)
- [rivervalleyadventure.com](http://rivervalleyadventure.com)
- [skylineluge.com/en/calgary](http://skylineluge.com/en/calgary)
- [studiobell.ca/visit](http://studiobell.ca/visit)
- [tyrellmuseum.com](http://tyrellmuseum.com)

down on fall-apart-at-the-fork wagyu beef at Restaurant Rouge, once voted among the top 100 restaurants in the world. Another saw us stalk out the city's culinary hotspots on a waist-widening tour, complete with stone-baked Napolitana pizza, hoi sin-smothered duck wings and decorate-your-own cupcakes (the full three-hour walking tour costs £70 for six courses with Alberta Food Tours). Elsewhere, we found bakeries housed in former factories and OEB, a funky breakfast joint with several hundred items on the menu – this isn't the place to diet.

Things stepped up a gear on the gastronomy front as we made our way over to Edmonton, a three-hour drive away – most memorably at the Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm, just outside the city. The family-run farm, which is home to a petting area, kids' mazes, mini train and more, offers day tours as well as evening experiences. We opted for the latter and found ourselves indulging in the likes of tenderloin

beef, quinoa, caramelised carrots and deliciously sweet, cinnamon-spiced pumpkin to a backdrop of fairy lights and live folk music during three hours I'll never forget. The evening experience costs from £76 including dinner, wine, music and a tour of the farm.

Back in Edmonton, the vibe is fairly industrial. But the city still has its share of gems – not least North America's largest shopping mall, complete with full-on amusement park, wave pool and multitude of restaurants.

The standout here though was Elk Island National Park, known for its bison and home to about 600 of the colossal creatures, several of which we glimpsed roaming the empty, snow-covered fields beneath towering pines. Visitors can tour the bison-handling facility to learn more about its various species – which were brought over from Montana in the early 1900s to help with repopulation, after hunting had made them near-extinct. Alternatively, they can take part

## The Canada Specialists

LOW DEPOSITS

So much included!

Just some of our best sellers...

**Canada's Maple Leaf Trail**  
10 days from **£1,299**

**The Canadian Rockies**  
11 days from **£1,599**

**Rockies to Niagara Falls**  
14 days from **£2,049**

**5-Star Alaska Cruise & the Canadian Rockies**  
16 days from **£2,499**

Call: 0330 160 7999  
[www.newmarket.travel/agent](http://www.newmarket.travel/agent)

Online Training:  
[www.training.newmarketholidays.co.uk](http://www.training.newmarketholidays.co.uk)



ATAS

BOOK WITH CONFIDENCE

BRITISH TRAVEL AWARDS