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HERE COME THE BEADS

The madness of Mardi Gras looms in Louisiana, **T4**

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ALBERTA

Jasper a true northern light



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARMOT BASIN

Marmot Basin features nearly 680 hectares and more than 900 vertical metres of superb terrain. There's a free shuttle from the Jasper Park Lodge.

MARK SISSONS SPECIAL TO THE STAR

JASPER, ALTA.—Whoa, Nelly!

The feisty leader of the pack instantly eases up as I apply pressure to the break pad beneath my Sorrels, preventing the sled from descending too quickly along the winding alpine trail. Snow-bowed evergreen forests, surreal frozen waterfalls and an ice-strewn river in the shadow of Mount Robson, the highest point in the Canadian Rockies, surround us.

Barely 18 kilos soaking wet, Nelly may be her canine crew's smallest member, but she's the unchallenged leader of this team of eight furry dynamos hauling me on the ride of my life aboard the world's

A classic Canadian journey by rail into the untamed heart of the Rockies reveals lonely ski hills, classic dogsledding and a lovely, historic lodge

oldest form of northern transport.

Essentially unchanged for thousands of years, dogsledding is one of the many adventure experiences in and around Jasper National Park. Visiting the largest national park in the Canadian Rockies in winter is like holidaying in a Christmas card come to life; as much pristine wilderness and rugged scenery as Banff and Lake Louise, but with fewer crowds and less commercialization.

What does it take to be top sled dog?

"The lead dog needs to be fast and

smart to control the team," explains guide Sean Burleigh, a Prince George native who works for Valemont, B.C.-based Cold Fire Creek Dogsledding.

"It's the leader's job to ensure that the line stays tight and the other dogs aren't messing around. Nelly always does her best to keep everyone in line."

Occasionally glaring over her shoulder and snarling at the team, Nelly is in charge of a mix of huskies and husky-hound crosses named Odin, Limo (the younger), Kuma, Trek (the elder), Lumas, Omega

and Lexus (the cute one).

"These guys just want to go, go, go and never stop," says Burleigh as we cruise through serene wilderness toward the 25-kilometre long trail's halfway point, where we break for a campfire lunch.

Blessed with speed and endurance, these sled dogs clearly love what they do, and the competition among them is fierce. They eye us impatiently as we finish lunch, eager to hitch up and hit the home stretch, where they know treats will be waiting.

Even more beautiful is the sled

dog's genetic ancestor — the majestic grey wolf I spot crossing a frozen white lake just outside Jasper from the dining car window of The Canadian, Via Rail's flagship cross-Canada train.

As I watch the wolf reach the woods and vanish, Toronto-based troubadour Michael Gabriel sings Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" for his fellow passengers.

Exchanging twice-daily sets for a free cross-country trip, Gabriel provides a sentimental soundtrack for the dazzling panorama of snow, ice and rock rolling past as we near Jasper after an overnight journey from Vancouver.

JASPER continued on T6

TRAVEL

JUST THE FACTS

GETTING THERE: Travellers on the overnight trip from Vancouver to Jasper on board VIA's The Canadian can opt for Sleeper Touring class, which includes semi-private or private berths, fine dining, complimentary bon voyage champagne and hors d'oeuvres, plus exclusive access to a scenic dome car at the tail end of the train.

www.viarail.ca

WHERE TO STAY: The Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge boasts 446 rooms, spacious cabins and suites, year-round recreation, gourmet dining, a heated outdoor pool and a recently opened 10,000-square-foot luxury spa.

www.fairmont.com/jasper

RECOMMENDED OUTFITTERS:

Jasper Adventure Centre offers ice canyon walks, wildlife tours, snowshoeing and cross-country ski outings, among other activities. www.jasperadventurecentre.com.

Sundog Tours offers a similar range of outdoor winter activities, plus dogsledding on the outskirts of Jasper. www.sundogtours.com

WEBSITES: www.jaspertravel.com; www.friendsofjasper.com; www.skimarmot.com.



MARK SISSONS PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Via Rail's flagship train The Canadian travels overnight from Vancouver to Jasper, taking guests through the heart of the magical Rockies.

A pristine and uncrowded wilderness

JASPER from TI

Experiencing the Rockies' elemental beauty up close from the window of a long-distance train also gives me a unique sense of their magnitude, along with a deeper appreciation for the incredible feat of engineering and immigrant labour that made this journey possible.

When that window is attached to a dome-roofed panorama car where I sip complimentary champagne and contemplate a succulent dinner of poached salmon and cheesecake, all the better. After a starlit nightcap, I retire to my private cabin, slip under a down duvet and fall asleep to the gentle rocking of the rails.

"If you want to see the real jewel of the Canadian Rockies, here it is. Jasper is truly authentic," says long-time local resident Murray Morgan the next morning as we explore a pristine park trail on snowshoes, searching for fresh animal tracks in the shin-deep snow. Morgan owns Jasper Adventure Centre, which offers guided outdoor activities year-round. "There are fewer people in Jasper than in Banff or Lake Louise and the wildlife is here. So are the adventure activities," he adds.

Later, as we strap on tread-enhancing cleats and set off on a canyon ice walk up Twin Gap Creek to explore caves, fossils and towering waterfalls transformed into glisten-

ing ice sculpted by wind and time, Murray recalls what drew him to settle in Jasper nearly 20 years ago.

"In five minutes, I can be outside of town and onto a hiking or cross-country skiing trail," he says. "Within 20 minutes, I can be away from all human sounds. If you're looking for the Banff of 20 or 30 years ago, here we are."

Like Banff, at the southern end of the spectacularly scenic 230-km Icefields Parkway, Jasper was originally a railway town. Wealthy tourists soon followed, although not nearly to the same extent as in Banff, largely due to Jasper's comparatively remote location.

Today, around 500 of Jasper's 4,500 inhabitants still work for the railways, giving the town a blue-collar feel. Jasper's not just a transient "Disneyland" mountain resort, as many locals accuse places like Whistler of being.

Also like Banff, Jasper boasts a historic mountain hotel, the venerable Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge. Built nearly a century ago by the great railway barons, what began as an eight-bungalow wilderness retreat now spreads across 365 hectares fronting picturesque Lake Boisvert, which is partially cleared in winter for ice skating and pond hockey.

Vacation getaway over the years to movie stars like Marilyn Monroe, Bing Crosby and John Travolta, as



Dogsledding tours can be arranged by numerous Jasper adventure outfitters. Powerful sled dogs are often purebred Alaskan huskies.

well as tycoons like Bill Gates and even Queen Elizabeth II, Jasper Park Lodge is home to an equestrian stable and a sizeable herd of resident elk, some the size of camels.

Lodge guests can also catch a free shuttle to Marmot Basin, a ski resort within the park offering nearly 680 hectares and more than 900 vertical metres of superb terrain, as well as the longest high-speed quad chair lift in the Canadian Rockies.

During my day on Marmot, I bare-

ly encounter a hundred fellow skiers and boarders. The mountain's mellow vibe is just one of the reasons that so many who come once end up as locals. The other reason is the champagne powder.

"If you're here on a powder day you'll have the time of your life," says my mountain host, Jeremy Badcock, a Brit who chose Marmot after sampling many other alpine hot spots. "Snow just explodes around you when you ski Marmot's

powder-packed back bowls. You feel like you're floating on air."

According to local resident Joe Urie, a former Yukon miner who runs a Jasper B&B and guides for Sundog Tours, many locals would like to keep Marmot Basin an uncrowded destination.

"Sure, Jasperites would love to get the volume of visitors that Sunshine and Lake Louise get," Urie says. "But if all those folks did show up, the locals would start complaining that there were too many people on the hill and on the trails. We want the tourists but we don't want what comes with them — commercialization and crowds like they get in Banff and Lake Louise."

With a five-hour drive to the nearest airport and a government-mandated cap on town expansion, there's little chance of Jasper being overrun soon. That is precisely what makes this vast expanse of wilderness, and its refreshingly authentic settlement that calls itself "the little town in the big park", such a winter holiday gem.

Mastering the "Mush!" for a day, as I did on that first morning through woods lovely, white and deep, is but a bonus on a classic journey by rail into the untamed heart of the Canadian Rockies.

Mark Sissons is a freelancer based in Vancouver. His trip was subsidized by Jasper Tourism and Via Rail.