

Heights, Camera, **Action**

When it comes to outdoor pursuits in the Canadian Rockies, Banff National Park never disappoints

BY HALEY SHAPLEY

Posing for the perfect photo, I leaned away from the mountainside and put on my most confident face. Only two carabiners kept me attached to my safety harness, yet I wasn't concerned—except with getting the perfect shot.

I was midway through Mount Norquay's new *via ferrata* ("iron road," in Italian) course, a series of iron rungs anchored into the mountain that allows even novices—albeit brave ones—to climb thousands of feet up. From my perch, Banff National Park stretched all around me. The graceful peaks, electric-blue lakes, and miles of green pines and firs seemed the stuff of oil paintings plucked from the depths of an artist's imagination.

The author ascends Mount Norquay in Canada's Banff National Park.

HALEY SHAPLEY





Cyclists cruise Bow Valley Parkway, the scenic route between Banff and the Lake Louise area. (Inset) The author doesn't let a little rain stop her biking fun.



Spin Cycle

“Road biking is the new golf,” Tom Couture of Banff Cycle told me while we readied for my lesson. I’d perched precariously on bikes plenty of times, but I’d never warmed to the idea of the road style, with thin tires that seem ready to skid at any time and curved handlebars that require a hunched position. Most serious riders come with their own pedals, shoes, and seat.

FROM TOP: COURTESY BANFF CVB/PAUL ZIZKA; HALEY SHAPLEY

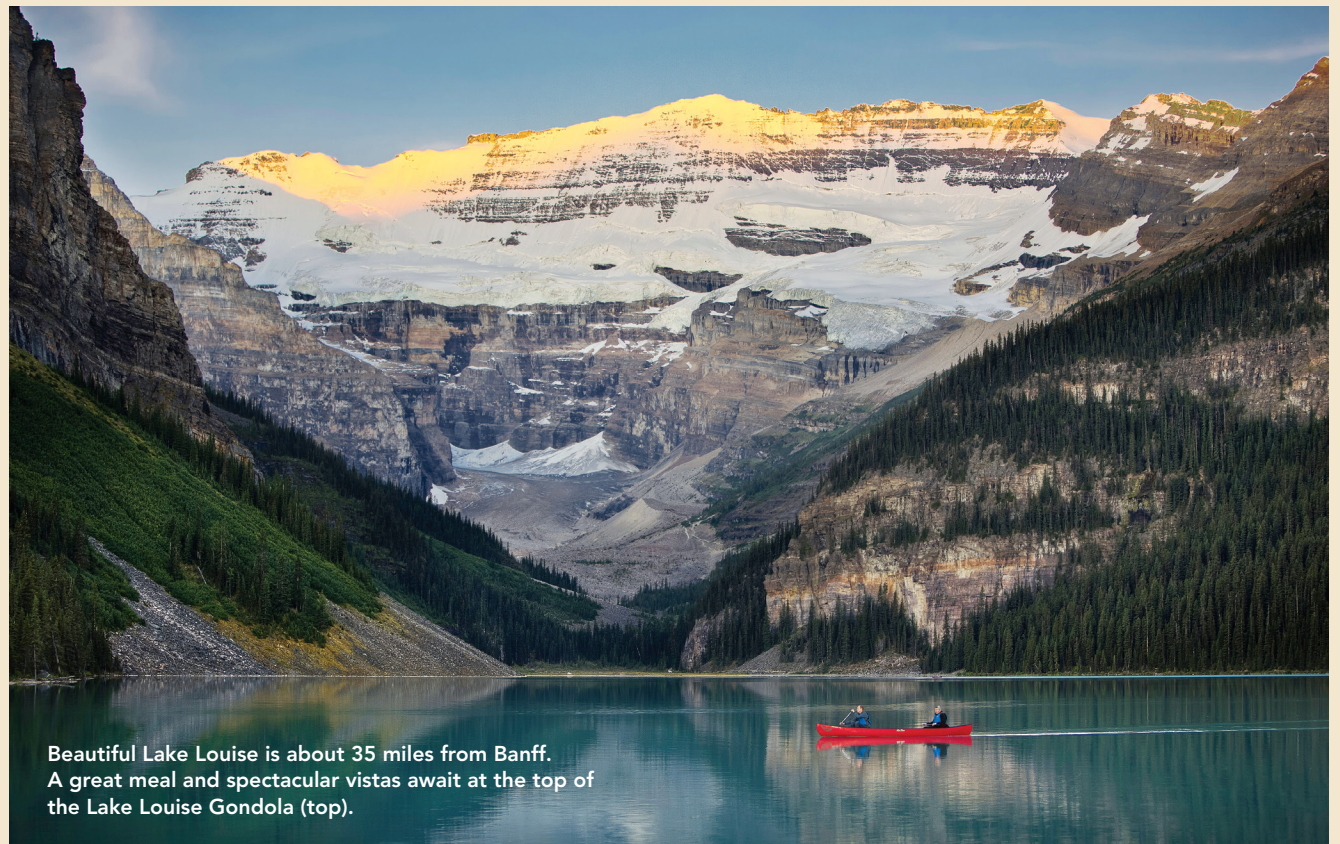


Lovely Louise

My trip wouldn’t have been complete without a visit to the park’s grande dame: Lake Louise (also the name of the adjacent town), a turquoise alpine lake about 35 miles from downtown Banff. You can reach Lake Louise most quickly via the Trans-Canada Highway, but I took the scenic Bow Valley Parkway, a two-lane road known for its wildlife sightings.

Sure enough, a slowing line of cars alerted me that something worth spotting was ahead. There, I saw a black bear lackadaisically feasting on berries 20 feet from the side of the road. A few miles later, a deer sprinted in front of me, loping into the depths of the forest as quickly as it had appeared.

In summer, you can take in the Lake Louise landscape on a hike, a horseback ride, and by canoe/kayak. For this quick trip, I opted for the Lake Louise Gondola. As I boarded, I considered that the ride might pale in comparison to the views on the drive I’d just made. But I forgot those as I spotted the aqua lake in the distance, flanked by gray mountainous triangles triumphantly standing guard, a panorama I savored over lunch at the Whitehorn Bistro, located at 6,700 feet.



Beautiful Lake Louise is about 35 miles from Banff. A great meal and spectacular vistas await at the top of the Lake Louise Gondola (top).

FROM TOP: HALEY SHAPLEY; COURTESY BANFF CVB/PAUL ZIZKA

I came with, well, none of that, but a willingness to try out the sport.

A few minutes later, I was flying. The lightweight bike frame and aerodynamic position of my body made it easier to ride than ever before. I sped up hills, but when it came to sailing down them, I kept my fingers firmly pressed on the brakes. “You’re ruining

all the momentum you’ve worked to build up,” Tom coached me.

“I know,” I replied, “but I’m staying alive.”

It began to pour, but we rode on, pushing to the crest of a hill where the Fairmont Banff Springs has been housing visitors since 1888. The castle-like hotel looked somewhat foreboding

with the fat raindrops bouncing all around it; the gray clouds surrounding the structure made me feel as if I were riding into the setting of a fairy tale.

Inside, Tom treated me to a warm beverage at the bright and cheery Whitebark Café over conversation about snow kiting and just how many Banff shops have *moose* in their names.



Mountain Encounter

Nothing could beat my time on Mount Norquay, though.

After making the tough decision about which color helmet to wear (I chose orange to match my shirt, naturally), our six-person group boarded the chairlift two by two for the 15-minute ride.

The 60-year-old Italian woman next to me chatted nervously, mostly about being 60 and Italian.

I gave her an encouraging grin, and we pressed on. Implied danger has a way of bonding people.

We soon began our ascent by foot, crossing a wooden suspension bridge and scaling rocks along the way.

The cable I was attached to via clips on my harness provided simultaneous feelings of security and freedom. And the metal handholds and footholds let me clamor over the rocks with ease as though I were Spider-Man.

As I crested the top of a rock, I caught glimpse of a shiny object being slid onto Casey's finger. Matt was proposing, and Casey, quite verbal until now, was too stunned to say much—although she did manage to get out the “yes.”

I hope the marmot makes the guest list. ❖

Freelance writer Haley Shapley is based in Seattle.

Tourism information is available from the Banff and Lake Louise Tourism Office. (403) 762-8421; banfflakelouise.com.

Your AAA travel agent can provide trip-planning information. Visit your AAA branch, call (800) 814-7471, or go to AAA.com/explore.

If You Go Stay

BUFFALO MOUNTAIN LODGE

Buttery-soft duvets, stone fireplaces, and tall ceilings make the rooms tough to leave. Summer rates start at \$289. (403) 410-7417; crmr.com/buffalo.

BREWSTER'S MOUNTAIN LODGE

This centrally located lodge is decked out in log furniture, Western decor, and historical photos. Summer rates start at \$235. (403) 762-2900; brewstermountainlodge.com.

FAIRMONT BANFF SPRINGS HOTEL

The AAA Four Diamond hotel with tall leaded windows stands like a magnificent mountain fortress. Rates start at \$479. (403) 762-2211; fairmont.com/banff-springs.

Eat

THE BISON

The menu is, as the name implies, heavy on game. Try the signature braised bison short ribs. (403) 762-5550; thebison.ca.

MAPLE LEAF

A warm atmosphere and long menu (including a huge wine list) make this classically Canadian restaurant a choice option for a night out. (403) 760-7680; banffmapleleaf.com.

NOURISH BISTRO

Banff isn't the easiest place to be a vegetarian, but this spot helps. The Num Num Nachos with 27 ingredients are a fan favorite. (403) 760-3933; nourishbistro.com.

WHITEHORN BISTRO

This restaurant in Whitehorn Lodge at the top of the Lake Louise Gondola offers a varied menu that includes seafood risotto, fondues, and bison meatballs, served with dramatic alpine views. (403) 522-1310; skilouise.com.

Do

BANFF CYCLE

This operation offers road bike rentals, ride support, and tours. (403) 985-4848; banffcycle.com.

BANFF HOT SPRINGS

Among three local hot springs, the Upper Hot Springs facility in Banff National Park offers the most amenities, including a large pool, café, and a spa with massage and skin-care services. (800) 767-1611; hotsprings.ca.

BREWSTER ADVENTURES

Atop an affable horse, ride through subalpine forest to the edge of Lake Louise or a mountain teahouse. (403) 762-5454; brewsteradventures.com.

MOUNT NORQUAY

The *via ferrata* is open daily during the summer. Guides are required. (844) 667-7829; summer.banffnorquay.com.

WHYTE MUSEUM OF THE CANADIAN ROCKIES

In this small but worthwhile museum, learn about the intrepid explorers who settled the area. (403) 762-2291; whyte.org.