Johnston Canyon And Other Reasons To Love Banff In Winter

By Jennifer Bain
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If you're doing the Johnston Canyon icewalk, watch for ice climbers in Banff National Park in Alberta/Jennifer Bain

"Water is the most expressive element in nature," Canadian watercolor painter Walter Phillips once mused. "It responds to every mood from tranquility to turbulence."

The artist was especially captivated by the many moods of Johnston Canyon in Banff National Park. He painted the area often and so it's lovely to find an interpretive sign along the trail that shows a sketch of Phillips at work, one of his waterfall paintings and his quote about water.

I'll be admiring water in its frozen form on a guided icewalk on this March morning.

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Discover Banff Tours guide Rob Ashpole stands at a Johnston Canyon sign that's so old it must be from before Canada switched to metric in 1975/Jennifer Bain

Rob Ashpole has loaned me ice cleats and handled the 25-minute drive from the Banff townsite to the trailhead. "I prefer Johnston Canyon in the winter," the Discover Banff Tours guide admits. "It's a lot lighter and brighter in there because of all the snow." It's also not ridiculously crowded like in the summer.

Things are chilly but tranquil as I briskly stroll to Lower Falls, just 1.2 kilometres (0.7 miles). Wide trails give way to narrow steel and concrete catwalks built into the canyon and, as the rest of my group dawdles taking pictures, it's just me and the dramatic ice sculptures in blue-green hues in the canyon.

It's about the same distance on to Upper Falls, but this time it's all uphill and countless people (some in guided groups, some alone, in pairs or with family) start overtaking me. At the iconic Upper Falls, I don't linger long on the crowded steel platform overlooking the gorge.

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People gather on the viewing platform at Johnston Canyon's Upper Falls/Jennifer Bain

The falls — thunderous when the water is flowing — are frozen mutely in place. The crowd stands in mostly silent awe watching a couple of daring iceclimbers do their thing.

People have been drawn to Johnston Canyon since the early 1900s to ponder the power of water and how it has shaped the landscape. Almost a million visitors pass through every year and so I'm mindful of how important it is to stay on the trail to minimize the impact of so many footsteps. When endangered Black Swifts nest in the canyon, Parks Canada closes certain areas along the busy hiking trail to protect them.

The round-trip hike takes me two hours. Back at the Johnston Canyon Day-Use Area, waiting for my group to catch up, I devour a packed lunch from Patti's Pantry Catering. Smoked chicken and havarti sandwiches and oatmeal raisin cookies have never tasted so good.

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People cross a catwalk to get to Johnston Canyon's Lower Falls, which is hidden from view/Jennifer Bain

Banff really needs no introduction.

Established in 1885, Canada's first national park is the flagship of the national park system and it protects 6,000 square kilometres (2,300 square miles) of Alberta mountain wilderness. Some four million people come every year to see the Rocky Mountains, the turquoise glacial lakes, wildlife like grizzly bears and bighorn sheep, the town of Banff and the village of Lake Louise.

I've visited in bits and pieces over the last few decades — first as a skier and then as a traveler in search of stories — and have still barely put a dent in the park. This time, in town for a travel writer's conference, I have three nights and the lesser part of three days to explore in between visits to Jasper National Park and Elk Island National Park.

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The iconic Fairmont Banff Springs hotel was built by the Canadian Pacific Railway and opened in 1888/Fairmont Resort Hotels

My home base is the Fairmont Banff Springs.

The landmark hotel was built by the Canadian Pacific Railway and opened in June 1888 when it commanded the princely sum of $3.50 (Canadian) a night and people came for three or four months but only in the summer.

CPR general manager William Cornelius Van Horne was tasked with getting the railway through the mountains to British Columbia when Canada was just two decades old. Van Horne famously saw the "million-dollar view" in Banff and said "If we can't export the scenery, we'll import the tourist." He's also credited with this "magnificent castle in the Canadian Rockies" and other grand, Chateau-style railway hotels.

That's one of the stories I hear taking the daily hotel history tour. Another is the amusing fact that the builder read the architectural plans wrong and put the back of the hotel facing the mountains. The hotel, a National Historic Site of Canada, has a Heritage Hall filled with archival photos and the extended captions tell even more stories.

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There's a fun story behind the world-famous \

From the hotel, it's a pictueresque 15-minute walk along the Bow River to the Banff Trading Post, home of the mysterious and hideous "merman."

I caught wind of the merman story on a guided medicine walk through Cascade Ponds with Jordan Ede of Mahikan Trails, and then read about it in the trading post. According to a Stoney Nakoda legend shared by Enoch Baptiste about Lake Minnewanka ("Water of the Spirits"), his father once saw a half-human, half-fish creature rise out of the water. Others did, too, and the Stoney Nakoda people stopped camping, fishing and canoeing there until European settlers came.

From there, the true story is anybody's guess. Flamboyant entrepreneur Norman Luxton, who opened the shop in 1903 to sell Indigenous handicrafts, moccasins and mukluks, somehow acquired this particular merman and made the Garbert family promise to treasure it when they took over in 1961. It's in a glass cabinet in the middle of the store. It's emblazoned on t-shirts, postcards and the sticker that's slapped on paper bags if you buy something.

For the record, Ede's version makes the most sense. He says Luxton cleverly charged people 5 cents to see the merman back in the day, and 25 cents to cruise Lake Minnewanka. After he died, his daughter may or may not have found a receipt from an Asian build-your-own-monster company for the back half of a fish, part of an elephant trunk, a monkey head and a hairpiece.

Some believe that Lake Minnewanka — which is long and deep and known for its turbulent waters — is still home to a legendary lake monster.

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The Banff Park Museum National Historic Site is the oldest natural history museum in western Canada/Jennifer Bain

Just over the Bow River Bridge from the Banff Trading Post, my favorite spot in downtown Banff is the Banff Park Museum National Historic Site, which is credited with "adding class to a frontier town."

The 1903 landmark building is the oldest surviving federal building in any Canadian national park. Inside, Western Canada's oldest natural history museum houses more than 5,000 vintage botanical and zoological specimens.

Most of the specimens were collected between 1890 and 1930 when it was common to kill animals for identification and study. The oldest thing in the taxidermy collection is a Red-breasted Merganser collected in 1860. A 1907 female bison in the habitat display was part of one of the last pure-bred herds. There are eggs, bees, a beaver diorama and a "cabinet of curiosities" donated by locals.

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The story of Canada's first national park begins in this cave at what's now Cave and Basin National Historic Site/Jennifer Bain

The most important place I visit in Banff is Cave and Basin National Historic Site on Sulphur Mountain not far from downtown.

First Nations people have known about the cave and thermal springs here for more than 10,000 years, but three railway workers happened upon them in 1883 and sparked a series of events that led to the creation of Canada's first national park.

Now home to endangered Banff Springs Snail (more on them in a future story), the tiny cave is inside a building and receives a steady stream of visitors. There's much to learn in the story hall and from short films, and there are also seasonal activities and walking trails.

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Tucked behind the main building at Cave and Basin is a one-room exhibit about how Canada treated interned civilian enemy aliens as POWs during the First World War, in places that included Banff National Park/Jennifer Bain

Don't miss the sobering internment exhibit in a separate building.

During the First World War, Canada feared that immigrants from enemy countries — Germany, Austria-Hungary, and later Turkey and Bulgaria — might be disloyal and labelled them "enemy aliens." The federal government interned 8,579 of these people.

The government also slashed national park budgets during the war and let the parks use enemy alien internees as low-cost labor. Internment camps opened in Banff, Jasper National Park, Mount Revelstoke National Park and Yoho National Park. Internees constructed roads, cleared land and are belatedly credited with playing an important — albeit involuntary — part in building Canada's western national parks.

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You can rent vintage swimwear to visit the Banff Upper Hot Springs/Jennifer Bain

It's about learning — not actually swimming — at Cave and Basin now, so to actually soak in the area's famous thermal waters you must head to Banff Upper Hot Springs.

The bathhouse with outdoor pool first opened on Canada Day 1932 but has been lovingly restored. The water is kept at a rather scorching temperature — between 37C and 40C (98F and 104F) — and it's full of sulphate, calcium, bicarbonate, magnesium and sodium.

Alas, I read the fine print on a tiny sign. The flow of natural spring water isn't enough to fill the pool during the winter so I actually bathe in heated municipal water. But honestly, I hardly notice as I admire the mountains while getting a kick out of wearing a historic one-piece swimsuit rented for just $2. The lifeguards, by the way, wear ski jackets and hats and stroll the pool deck to keep warm.

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Under what's left of the Sulphur Mountain Cosmic Ray Station National Historic Site and a 1903 weather observatory, travel writers Jennifer Bain and Maureen Littlejohn sit in two of the red Adirondack chairs that Parks Canada places in scenic spots across the country/Jennifer Bain

For my last night, I take the Banff Gondola up Sulphur Mountain to Sanson Peak and then follow a short boardwalk to the Sulphur Mountain Cosmic Ray Station National Historic Site and a 1903 weather observatory.

Back in 1956, the National Research Council built a cosmic ray station here for the 1957-58 International Geophysical Year. It was the highest of nine stations in Canada and reportedly the most important. Geophysicists studied supernovae (exploding stars), the origin of stars, the relationship between energy and matter, and the nature of our own solar system here until 1978. The building was dismantled in 1981 and all that remains is its concrete foundation, a platform cut into the surrounding rock, and a bronze plaque.

Most people walk right by the plaque in their quest for summit selfies.

Before dinner, there's time to poke around the Above Banff Interpretive Centre. After dinner, the sun sets on cue with an explosion of color. I ride the gondola back down the mountain with a friend, enjoying the night sky and a few final quiet moments in Canada's busiest national park.

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To get to the Banff Gondola, our conference group took an Open Top Touring vintage-inspired automobile driven by supervisor Aprille Walker/Jennifer Bain

Stories about: Banff National Park, Banff Park Museum National Historic Site, Sulphur Mountain Cosmic Ray Station National Historic Site, Cave and Basin National Historic Site, Jasper National Park, Mount Revelstoke National Park, Yoho National Park, Elk Island National Park

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