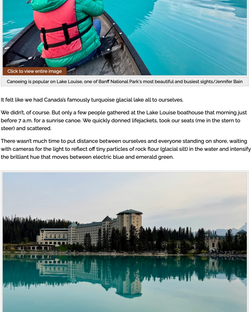
Quiet Escapes In Overcrowded Banff National Park

By Jennifer Bain
October 14, 2025



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Canoeing is popular on Lake Louise, one of Banff National Park's most beautiful and busiest sights/Jennifer Bain

It felt like we had Canada's famously turquoise glacial lake all to ourselves.

We didn't, of course. But only a few people gathered at the Lake Louise boathouse that morning just before 7 a.m. for a sunrise canoe. We quickly donned lifejackets, took our seats (me in the stern to steer) and scattered.

There wasn't much time to put distance between ourselves and everyone standing on shore, waiting with cameras for the light to reflect off tiny particles of rock flour (glacial silt) in the water and intensify the brilliant hue that moves between electric blue and emerald green.



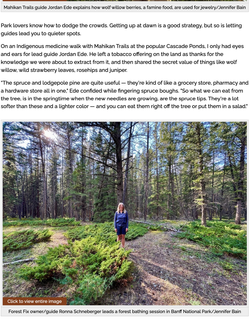
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A small crowd gathers at sunrise beside the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise — which evolved from an 1890 chalet — to sigh and photograph Lake Louise/Jennifer Bain

The sun never did rise that day, and we didn't quite make it 1.3 miles to the end of the lake before our time was up. But I got to imagine thirsty moose along the shore, listen to the forest coming to life, and photograph the historic Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise reflected in the still water.

Grateful to have experienced the lake when the rental canoe numbers were capped, I smiled at the young women in gowns doing photo shoots and the gaggle of people from a Korean credit union arranging themselves around a banner.

It was barely 8 a.m. and we are all pleased to have gotten here ahead of the mobs.



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When everybody wants the same easy mountain shot, traffic jams and parking problems ensue/Jennifer Bain

Banff National Park is Canada's Yellowstone National Park. Visitation to the beloved Alberta park in the Rocky Mountains has grown 31 percent over the last decade. Banff saw 4.28 million visits in 2023/24, the busiest year on record. Parks Canada says the park's Lake Louise area has seen an even more pronounced increase in visitation, not to mention traffic congestion.

At the Banff townsite, I couldn't bear to line up for a selfie at the welcome sign.

Installed in 2017 beside a narrow, two-lane road, the "BANFF" sign has become too popular for its own good so it's being relocated to a safer spot in front of the train station with a pretty mountain backdrop. But that move just got put on hold because the excavation unearthed vintage glass and undated construction material making it a potential archaeological site.



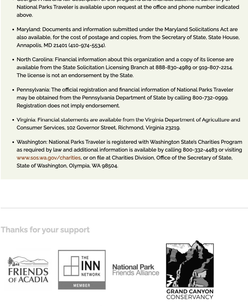
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Mahikan Trails guide Jordan Ede explains how wolf willow berries, a famine food, are used for jewelry/Jennifer Bain

Park lovers know how to dodge the crowds. Getting up at dawn is a good strategy, but so is letting guides lead you to quieter spots.

On an Indigenous medicine walk with Mahikan Trails at the popular Cascade Ponds, I only had eyes and ears for lead guide Jordan Ede. He left a tobacco offering on the land as thanks for the knowledge we were about to extract from it, and then shared the secret value of things like wolf willow, wild strawberry leaves, rosehips and juniper.

"The spruce and lodgepole pine are quite useful — they're kind of like a grocery store, pharmacy and a hardware store all in one," Ede confided while fingering spruce boughs. "So what we can eat from the tree, is in the springtime when the new needles are growing, are the spruce tips. They're a lot softer than these and a lighter color — and you can eat them right off the tree or put them in a salad."



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Forest Fix owner/guide Ronna Schmeberger leads a forest bathing session in Banff National Park/Jennifer Bain

This being a national park where harvesting is forbidden — unless you have Indigenous harvesting rights — I went forest bathing instead.

Forest Fix owner/guide Ronna Schmeberger offered four "invitations" over two hours at an unspoiled spot she likes to keep secret. With "sensing," I sat on a rock and really tuned into my senses. With "what's in motion," I walked slowly along the Bow River while acknowledging even the tiniest plant movements. With the "treasure hunt," I was drawn to a fallen tree wedged between two healthy ones before realizing I was surrounded by deer scat and wondering if that was my treasure. The final "connect to a being" invitation led me to a patch of dangerously dry moss where I wished for rain.

Forest bathing, known as shinrin-yoku in Japan, is the simple and therapeutic act of spending time in a forest. We listened to a poem about building friendships with nature, ate spruce tip shortbread cookies and drank spruce tea, but only after putting our thoughts and wishes for the forest into a cup and offering it to the land as a thank you.



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A forest bathing session in Banff ends with forest tea (starring spruce harvested elsewhere)/Jennifer Bain

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