

ROCKIES ROAD TRIP

Adventures abound for a mom and her two boys amidst the glaciers, lakes and forests of Alberta's Rocky Mountains.

Maligne Lake in Canada's Jasper National Park

PHOTOS AND STORY BY
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Jenn and her sons Finn (center) and Zevin (left) saddle up for a ride through the foothills of the Kananaskis.



One summer I placed a bet on the Rockies and won. Over six days and 1,400 miles I was sure my two young boys, Finn and Zevin, then 7 and 5, would love this ambitious road trip chock full of grand adventures through the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, Canada.

The drive along one of the country's most scenic highways promised gorgeous views of gemstone lakes and towering mountains. This region is home to three of Canada's most beautiful national parks—Banff, the first and most visited; Jasper, the most northern of the parks with glaciers and diverse wildlife; and Elk Island, where endangered plains bison and wood bison roam.

An hour out of Calgary, we found ourselves among beautiful foothills that serve as the Rockies' scenic entryway: the Kananaskis region. For a rare and highly valued moment, the boys were speechless. Mountains surrounded them for the first time ever.

And it was official—we had arrived in bear country! Although we hadn't seen any, signs were everywhere, serving as reminders to stay safe. From the security of our van, we scoured the thick forests in the hope of spotting a grizzly bear. It had been at least 10 years since I had seen one in the wild, and I hoped for all of us that we would spot one—from a safe distance, of course.

After making it to our campsite at Sundance Lodges' Kananaskis Campground, we unloaded our van and all of our camping gear. Once settled, the boys hopped on their bikes and darted down trails winding in and out of deserted campsites while I walked behind. We took a backcountry trail that led to a cliff and a sweeping view of magnificent Mount Lorette.

With tons more tolerance for the cold temps than I, my carefree sons skipped stones and played in the Kananaskis River's chilly glacier-fed waters. I relished the moment, pausing to soak it all in. Our special day was topped off with time around the campfire roasting marshmallows and then cuddling within the cozy confines of a heated Sundance Lodges tipi.

The trip kicked into high gear again the next day along the alpine hiking trails of Sunshine Meadows, just outside of Banff. A ski hill in the winter, Sunshine Meadows straddles the provincial boundary between Alberta and British Columbia and offers unobstructed views of some of the Rockies' highest peaks. In summer the wildlife is abundant, the flora rich and the hiking is amazing. The boys took in another first: a guided 2-hour, 1.5-kilometer hike to Rock Isle Lake. Jovial, excited and awakened by the freedom to run, they dashed up the trail. We spotted a pine marten, found a recently overturned rock where a bear had been digging for flower bulbs and interacted with an entertaining ground squirrel. It was an easy introductory trail.

Few road trip routes compete with the constant unmoving beauty found while driving this stretch of



PIONEER HISTORY is on display at Heritage Village (below). Bottom: Zevin gets a riding lesson at Boundary Ranch.



MAP ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT SCHILLER



WILDFLOWERS line the trails at Sunshine Village (above). Right: This prairie dog met Jenn and her boys on a hike to Rock Isle Lake. Far right: Zevin skipping stones at Bow River.



JENN'S TOP PICKS

The journey through Canada's Rockies is full of adventures. Here are a few must-sees along the way.

- 1 Heritage Park Historical Village**
Take a walk back in time to Canada's pioneering past at this living history museum. heritagepark.ca
- 2 Boundary Ranch**
Jenn's boys loved the ranch's old-fashioned trail ride, which led to some stunning views of the Rockies and the Kananaskis Valley. boundaryranch.com
- 3 Sundance Lodges**
After a day of hiking or riding, relax inside a heated tipi in the middle of the forest. sundance lodges.com
- 4 Icefields Parkway**
This scenic drive stretching 144 miles from Banff to Jasper is considered a national treasure of Canada. icefieldsparkway.ca
- 5 Glacier Skywalk**
Take a walk in the clouds over Jasper National Park on this skywalk. Brewster.ca
- 6 Maligne Lake**
The largest natural lake in Jasper National Park is known for the color of its water and the surrounding snow covered peaks. Spirit Island is a boating destination. pc.gc.ca



Maligne Lake



The boys can't resist the freedom to run wild.



Bison bull in the road

“It was a standoff. A giant but docile male bison stood in the middle of the road. Studying us for a moment, he nonchalantly walked by.”

country. The road between Banff and Jasper, known as the Icefields Parkway, has been recognized many times as the most scenic drive in the world. This was noted within our van as collective gasps filled the air, growing in volume, especially as we neared Jasper National Park.

By 9 a.m., we were instantly transported from summer to winter with a visit to Jasper’s Columbia Icefields, the largest icefield in the Canadian Rockies. Whisked away via Terra Bus, my awestruck boys were delighted with its monster truck appeal, thoroughly enjoying the ride over to the Athabasca Glacier.

Standing on 200 million tons of ice, more than 900 feet thick, or as high as the Eiffel Tower, was completely surreal. I proved to be mother of the year as my boys refused to wear boots and instead opted for thongs. On the ice. We explored the white landscape beside a host of tourists who were better prepared for the conditions than we were, wearing winter gear and filling empty water bottles with fresh glacier water found trickling down icy crevasses.

After a short bus ride we arrived at Glacier Skywalk. This glass-floored observation platform 918 feet in the air juts out 100 feet from the side of a mountain. The only thing that separated us from the glacier-formed valley and waterfalls below was glass. Fog that morning was thick and the platform slick. My boys skidded and played around the curvature of this design marvel.

Our journey wound down the next day at Elk Island National Park, just outside Edmonton. Exhausted from our whirlwind adventures, we took it easy biking a bit, then driving around admiring sweet marshy spots that are home to dozens of birds. We circled the bison loop and saw a few in the distance. On the way back to camp we got a closer look.

It was a standoff. A giant but docile male bison stood in the middle of the road. Studying us for a moment, he nonchalantly walked by.

Though we saw no grizzly bears, the bison experience made up for it. Sleeping under the bright stars that night, I realized I won my bet. 🌞