

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

ROAD TRIP BY MICHAEL BETTENCOURT

Pampered in the picture-perfect Rockies



An automatic BMW Z4 provided superbly refined accommodations for a Rocky Mountain getaway. Below, the romantic couple on the Athabasca Glacier beside the Ice Explorer, a bus on monstertruck tires.

(Michael Bettencourt for The Globe and Mail)

It takes about an hour of driving on the Trans-Canada Highway outside of Calgary before the Rocky Mountain views get truly majestic, but by the time you hit Canmore, and all throughout the Banff, Lake Louise and Jasper route, the mountains never feel like much further than an extended arm's length away. Even at the height of summer, the snow-capped peaks of the summits remind you that at heights like that, snow storms and winter weather are never far away — as we would later discover.

JASPER, ALTA. — The small, northern Alberta town of Jasper may not seem to be the most logical road trip destination for a relatively young couple celebrating their five-year wedding anniversary, especially with my co-pilot approaching the start of her third trimester of pregnancy as we thumpety-thumped our way to this isolated town of just more than 4,000 residents. But as part of a Rocky Mountain driving experience that alternated between awe-inspiring views of nature and pampering luxury resorts, the most northerly stop of our tour of Alberta provided copious amounts of what less romantic, but more enthusiastic, drivers may appreciate most about this tour: lots of seat time on some of the most amazing roads in Canada.

Unlike the manufacturer junkets for new vehicles that send us auto scribes jetting around the world for some precious few hours behind the wheel of the latest hype-mobile, this was to be a week-long driving tour available for any couple willing to fork out the not-inconsiderable cost of \$7,000-plus for this particular drive-it-yourself tour of Alberta, culminating in stays at postcard-pretty Fairmont resorts in Banff, Jasper and Lake Louise.

Arranged by boutique luxury travel firm Horizons & Co., in partnership with Fairmont Hotels and BMW Canada, the trip provides seat time behind the wheel of either a BMW 330Ci Cabriolet, a BMW Z4 3.0i convertible or a BMW X5 sport utility vehicle. Ours was an automatic Z4 with paddle shifters and 215 horsepower— not the most powerful convertible around, but a superbly refined one that offers reasonably spacious accommodations for two people and, importantly, a decent sized trunk for a two-seater. With no back seat in the Z4, if there wasn't room in the trunk for a week's worth of gear, a pile of luggage in your passenger's lap would not be a great start to any romantic getaway.

The experience starts out at Calgary airport, where a representative from DreamFleet, which handles the BMW account, greets you, leads you to the car, gives you a brief rundown of all major controls, and hands you a route book with suggested routes and optional activities, so you can leave your map books at home.

Our Z4 didn't come with a route book, but luckily it was equipped with a handy aftermarket Sony navigation system. So it was simply throw the bags in the back, hop in, drop the top, and head out on the open road, with Banff as our first destination.

All three cities are located within protected national parks, and you really do notice the difference in the crisp, clean air. It will make you want to drop the top as much as possible, especially after you get off the main highway and start working your way north on the curvier, but more scenic, Highway 1A. Our particular version of this trip compressed all three Fairmont resorts into three nights, which meant a higher proportion of driving versus leisure time than the regular itinerary, with about two hours of driving time a day. Although it doesn't sound like much, those two hours can easily become double that, since you'll continually want to stop for pictures: a roaring waterfall here, a family of elk grazing by the side of the road there, a turquoise lake framed by scraggly mountain peaks there. By the end of your time, it's easy to become a jaded photographer: "Yes, that sparkling blue lake with the mountains towering over it is spectacular, but the sun isn't quite in the right spot for a picture, and there's not even one mountain goat around now."

Pulling into the town of Banff, after a family of caribou grazing by the road became our first wildlife sighting, it was hard to recognize the town through all the construction. The city is ripping up the entire Banff Avenue main strip from April to October to replace 100-year-old pipes. But the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, about a 20-minute walk outside that downtown core, seems stoically untouched by the craziness, its Scottish baronial design and forested surroundings still seeming as castle-like and isolated as it was when they were built in 1882. There's also a heavenly comforting spa inside, with three separate waterfalls that cascade into mineralized pools, and on to your shoulders, at three different temperatures, naturally lit by two-storey-tall windows, as well as an outdoor heated pool. Back in the late 19th century, most guests at Banff were European ladies and gentlemen who would vacation here or in nearby Lake Louise for a month or so at a time, since the boat and train ride between continents would take two weeks or more in total. Although the area is most famous now for its world-class skiing, this Banff landmark was only a summer property until 1969, with Lake Louise becoming winterized in 1982, and Jasper in 1986.

Lake Louise is only a half-hour drive outside of Banff, but to break up the driving, we headed north on our second day, to Jasper, via the Bow Valley Parkway, stopping within a half hour at Johnston Falls. Here, visitors walk along a narrow pathway in a gorge cut by the fast-moving water, on the way to two deafening, spraying waterfalls. The chipmunks here are obviously used to the steady stream of visitors, and they will jump up on your lap at the mere suspicion of food.

It was on the grounds of Fairmont Lodge in Jasper that I saw the deer, with warnings all over its natural perimeter that it was nesting season, and that new deer moms could get seriously cranky with strangers poking about their offspring. The lodge is the "newest" of the three properties and it is also the most remote. Its first incarnation opened in 1915. It's more of a luxury lodge than a hotel, with separate log cabins available that contrast with the castle-like ambience of the others. Yet for true relaxation imbued with a common bond with nature, it's hard to beat.

From there, it was back down the Icefields Parkway, where a stop at the visitor's centre led us to a tour of the Athabasca Glacier. This hunk of six square kilometres of ice is toured for half of the year by a bus on monster truck tires, officially called an Ice Explorer. About halfway up the glacier, you can get out and walk around, which was right around the time when a 15-minute snowstorm hit, the first time either one of us experienced that in the summer. The novelty wore off quickly in the cold, and even quicker for the guy in shorts and sandals, but it was likely the most memorable part of the entire trip.

Prices for the package begin at \$3,495 a person, and \$3,995 a person in high season, for either of the convertibles, with the X5 4.8i costing \$500 more, not including airfare. The packages run until mid-October. If you want a manual transmission, the 330ci Cab is the only choice, and it is perhaps the best combination of roominess, comfort, sportiness and fuel efficiency — you are communing with nature, after all. The Z4 can be a little harsh over bumps, and not the easiest thing to get into and out of for less mobile folk, but a pure drive overall.

And if you're there celebrating anything with your significant other, you'll also want to take a picture of the personalized desserts by Chef Daniel Buss in Banff's Banffshire Club, no matter how jaded a photographer you become.

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