

Rockies Roadtrip

By David Godsall

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The Alberta Rocky Mountains become even more spectacular when viewed from behind the windscreen of a BMW coupe.

A roadster is a very special thing. It is almost completely useless, a car with room for two people and, if you're lucky, two sets of clubs. And that's it. As in: the kids and that unruly pair of Bernese mountain dogs will be spending a few days with grandma and grandpa because mommy and daddy are going to have some fun, and there's just no room for anyone (or anything) else.

A weekend escape in one of these becomes infused with the romance of an automotive table for two, the exhilaration of open-air motoring (complete with the rare pleasure of applying sunscreen before embarking on a road trip), and the sense of adventure that comes from the forced spontaneity of the vehicle's meagre cargo capacity. A roadster is more than sporting, roofless transportation for two; it's the decadence and simplicity of the jazz age, it's a page out of *The Great Gatsby*, a hedonistic indulgence.

So when I was asked by Fairmont Hotels and luxe travel purveyor Horizon & Co. to take a spin around the Canadian Rockies in a BMW Z4 (one of the finer specimens of the breed), staying in and reflecting upon some of the region's finest hotels, I gave the proposition less than a moment's hesitation. I arrived in Calgary a few weeks later feeling like the world's single most lucky journalist.

My girlfriend and I were met at the airport by a DreamFleet representative, from whom I picked up my wheels. If you're wondering who in their right mind hands over to someone like me the keys to a gleaming, electric-blue German sports car with little more than a smile and a handshake, the answer is these guys. (Well, there may have been a credit card imprint involved at some point.) I tossed my spartan bag in the trunk, slid into the amply bolstered beige leather driver's seat, and reached for that magical little button on the centre console that invites the full expanse of the Prairie sky into the cabin. There was a whir, then a thunk, and I was officially on vacation. Clare wrapped a silk scarf around her hair, as Lauren Bacall might have done, and donned her ludicrously oversized sunglasses, embracing the glamour intrinsic to any trip in a car like this.

The sun was sagging behind the Three Sisters as we approached Banff National Park's eastern gate. I noticed for the first time that vacationers travelling in the Rockies typically opt for heftier modes of conveyance: minivans, SUVs and that most heinous of leisure vehicles, the RV. Gazing up at a taupe



leviathan called the Southwind 27, I imagined the sounds of Shrek DVDs and the smell of spilt juice boxes and gripped the leather-wrapped wheel in sublime satisfaction. Lining up to pay the toll I spotted another couple in a ragtop two-seater, their smiling heads, like ours, barely peeking above the sculpted flank of the car. A curious thing happened. It wasn't quite like the wave that boaters exchange; it was more of a subtle, knowing nod.

Our first destination was the palatial Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, a Scottish baronial-style structure that looks, from the bridge over the Bow River, as if whittled from raw rundlestone by the same forces of water and weather that shaped the mountains in its backyard. The valet took my keys and I took his compliments on my ride, my companion having earlier promised not to reveal the Z4's true owners. We checked in just in time to relieve our road-weariness in the azure luminescence of the Willow Stream Spa mineral baths. The aromatic mists and the delicate patina of the tiles juxtaposed against the raw wilderness backdrop of Sulphur Mountain provided a sense of sanctuary that made our hour in that place feel like three.

Over dinner at the Alps-themed Waldhaus Restaurant, we were introduced to another persistent feature of any luxury Rockies trip: exquisite meals composed of prime cuts from the region's unique four-legged bounty. Opulent tenderloins and succulent shanks abound. Vegetarians beware: the jewels of every top-tier Rockies menu are always served medium rare. Lingering with our sangiovese after the meal, we noted authenticity of the dining experience and wondered: Of the experience that hotel's first guests enjoyed in the summer of 1888, how much is available to visitors now? The only mineral in the natural hot springs discovered by Banff's railway workers was sulphur; we nearly needed a geology degree to decipher the brochure for our spa treatments today. The traditional venison dish I ate could certainly have been on the menu in 1888—probably without the lingonberry preserve or the roasted organic pear in the accompanying spätzle.

We spent the rest of the night deciding on an activities itinerary that would enable us to explore other "old Rockies" experiences in exciting, luxurious, or otherwise new ways. First on the agenda was fly fishing on the Bow River. My companion knows how to fly fish—I, embarrassingly, don't. Humiliated by her prowess, I suggested we move on. And moving on, happily, meant getting back behind the wheel. Jasper was our destination, but we were planning a few roadside diversions (and one alpine adventure) along the way. We ducked into the Bison Mountain Bistro and General Store, on Banff's Bear Street, to pick up some gourmet picnic supplies, then hit the road equipped with peppery bison sandwiches and a local chèvre chosen on the advice of a knowledgeable server.

Considered by most who've driven it (and by the UN, which designated it a World Heritage Site in 1984) to be one of the most beautiful stretches of asphalt in the world, the Icefields Parkway is a destination in its own right. It opened in the 1940s, but the route was well travelled by mountaineers for years prior and it was this earlier experience that we were after. We wound our way up to the Columbia Icefields with the crisp mountain air biting our faces, as J. Norman Collie and Herman Woolley would have experienced on their historic first ascent of Mount Athabasca. There were, of course, a few differences—our progress was hindered only by convoys of vacationers, not exhaustion or the elements, and we glimpsed the spectacular expanse of white icefields from a monstrous all-terrain bus—but it was essentially the same experience.

Arriving at the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, we were greeted by a few locals who seemed to embody the aesthetic of the hotel: the herd of elk passing through presented an air of blissful indifference to picture-snapping guests as they consumed the well-manicured landscaping. We figured any hotel that could make elk feel so at home would suit our old-Rockies theme perfectly. After another outstanding meal of local fauna, an excellent cut of Alberta beef tenderloin, we retired in anticipation of the next day's ridgeline packhorse trip. The smell of old saddle leather and the slow rhythm of the horse's gait conjured a vivid sense of continuity with the golden age of Rockies exploration we sought to discover. It also exposed another mountain recreation skill I'm lacking and provided some of the most beautiful vistas of the trip.

The return journey was predictably pleasurable. With the aid of a clever GPS-powered, PDA-based "tour guide," called GYPsy Guide, we found a host of natural and historic landmarks—like mountain man Jimmy Simpson's Num-Ti-Jah Lodge on the shores of Bow Lake and the astonishing Weeping Wall—that we might otherwise have driven obliviously past. We were also treated to a steady stream of interesting factoids: did you know the Icefields drain into three oceans? Were we not headed toward the majestic luxury of the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, I would have been disappointed to approach the south end of the Parkway.

Pulling up to this icon of the Rockies, the first thing I noticed was not its grandeur, but its valet; specifically, the young man's attire. We shared a moment as he held the BMW's door. He looked at me as if he was daring me to think of a quip worthy of his absurd traditional Swiss clothes. I looked back, desperately trying to think of something good before settling, pathetically, on "nice socks." He grinned. Clare and I unpacked in a suite overlooking the turquoise splendour of the lake and, determined to play along, made a reservation for the über-Swiss Wallister Stube.

Our meal was a coma-inducing three-course fondue marathon. If you're thinking that so much cheese and chocolate seems at odds with the sophistication of a hotel of this calibre, you haven't tried this fondue. White wine livened the traditional blend of gruyère and emmental; the chinoise featured such beautiful cuts of beef it felt sinful to dip them in hot broth.

We wanted to cap our trip with a final flourish, an experience to capture the romance of the old Rockies and the elegance of the new. We visited the Chateau Deli for picnic supplies while the valet retrieved the Z4, then drove to nearby Moraine Lake and picked up a canoe. After a short paddle across the lake—a far less crowded and equally spectacular alternative to Lake Louise—we found a rocky outcropping on which to luxuriate. Paddling back, it occurred to me that, despite the busloads of tourists, these mountains haven't changed in the 120-or-so years since the CPR first crossed them. Then, as the BMW pulled up, I realized it's the way we experience them that's changed.