

After Hours



Rockies by rail

Coming eye-to-eye with a wild bear is just one of the highlights on a train trip through the Canadian Rockies.

BY FIONA HARPER

HIGH summer in the Canadian Rockies and a pall of thick smoke hangs over the mountainside town of Jasper. More than 300 bushfires, wildly uncontrollable, are marching across British Columbia as western Canada suffers an extreme-heat alert.

Jasper's usually spectacular Rocky Mountains backdrop has disappeared. An eerie shade of grey cloaks the town, blocking out the sky. It's a scene we in Australia are all too familiar with.

Stepping off from The Canadian train onto Jasper's platform is the first opportunity to stretch our legs since we departed Vancouver the previous evening.

A charismatic town, Jasper has always attracted travellers — first by horse, then rail and today increasingly by motorhome.

The town had a reputation for being somewhat wild and lawless in the past, but these days the billiard tables have mostly been replaced with souvenir stands. A blur of shacks between the spruce in her early days, Jasper consisted mostly of pack horses and pool halls, drifters and dreams.

The town is surrounded on all sides by national park, and deer are a common sight on the streets. So I'm not surprised to see an elk reclining on the bank of the railway track as we head out of town.

Regally splendid with a fine set of antlers, her fawn-coloured coat blends into the earth, camouflaged nicely were it not for those striking antlers.

It's the first of many wildlife sightings that send a ripple of excitement through the carriages as we make our

way eastwards over four nights towards Toronto.

It's a route that opened up in the 1830s, with the first transcontinental railroad completed some 50 years later. Twelve thousand hardened, resilient men laboured in freezing conditions to build the most ambitious railway project in the world at the time.

Sometime after our arrival, I'm about to tuck into pan-seared pickerel (a local freshwater fish) when I spot my first wild bear. I'm astonished to see there's actually three of them. Two nonchalantly pick at a pile of discarded timber railway sleepers, while the other stands tall on his rear legs observing our train.

As we slide past, our eyes are almost level and I estimate him to be the height of a small adult. His pelt is the colour of the night, thick and

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glossy. We are close enough for me to distinguish the texture of his charcoal-coloured nose.

I am so elated, tears spring to my eyes. The excitement throughout the dining car is palpable. Even the crew, who regularly work this route, are quietly thrilled at such a close encounter.

The exceptions are my two dining companions, who live nearby and are about to disembark. For them, bear sightings are rather ho-hum.

Just like their partners in crime — deer and moose — bears are more of a pest than a novelty, destroying domestic gardens their main offence.

Adjourning to the lounge after dinner, convivial wildlife bragging rights are delightedly compared among passengers over nightcaps.

Many passengers, like myself, are onboard for the

long haul between Vancouver and Toronto. Others choose a more leisurely option, stopping over at Jasper, Winnipeg, Edmonton, or some of the many other towns on the network.

Another service bustles through every couple of days, allowing a two-night stopover en route. The rail network is extensive and VIA Rail runs a tight ship, making for an efficient, comfortable journey.

As yet another dawn appears beyond the starched linen of my bed, I peer out of my window searching for wildlife.

Never tiring of the ever-changing landscape that rushes past the panoramic window, I also quietly yearn for a repeat sighting of another glorious black bear.

The writer was a guest of the Canadian Tourism Commission and VIA Rail.



An ever-changing landscape rushes past the panoramic windows.



Pacific Central station in Vancouver is the west coast departure point.

FACTFILE

The train trip: The Canadian runs three times weekly between Vancouver and Toronto. Passengers choose either non-stop travel over four nights, or two-night stops at towns along the way. Sleeper Touring class includes all meals and daily cabin servicing. A sleeper cabin for the four-night trip starts at \$1543pp (twin share).

More information: VIA Rail (www.viarail.ca); Canadian Tourism Commission (www.canada.travel).

When to go: Autumn (September to November) for spectacular pre-winter colours; or summer (May to August) for extended, warm, sunny days.