

Wide blue yonder

The stunning lakes of Banff National Park, nestled among the Canadian Rockies under towering glaciers, may seem remote but can be easily reached, writes **David Kootnikoff**.

The only thing as bright as the sun is its reflection sparkling off the lake. It's one of those summer days when the sky above the Canadian Rockies is as blue as lapis. The white frosted crags of Victoria Glacier tower above, while, 700 metres below, the cool, turquoise waters of Lake Louise beckon like a delicious blueberry smoothie, the perfect antidote for a hot day.

The main hiking trail around Banff National Park's Lake Louise starts near the iconic Fairmont Chateau Hotel (www.fairmont.com) and continues for about three hours along the shoreline until it reaches the Plain of Six Glaciers. The path cuts through rambling fields of wild flowers and shady copses of pine trees. After a few twists and turns the source of the lake comes into view, looking like the melt from a vanilla ice-cream cone. The surrounding glaciers crush minerals into "rock flour", which creates the milky run-off that gives the lake its striking emerald-blue colour.

From here the path gradually climbs through alpine meadows, over glacial scree and a few snow patches. To cool off, people flop into the snow as the sprawling glaciers loom above like a pack of yetis ready to pounce. Victoria Glacier used to reach the lip of the lake but has receded about a kilometre in the past 150 years.

The path leads to a Swiss chalet-style teahouse and along the way there are rock climbers scaling cliffs, groups on horseback and a few ground squirrels.

The first Swiss climbers arrived at the end of the 19th century, at the Canadian government's invitation, to guide the few tourists that made it this far into the Rockies. They left behind the Plain of Six Glaciers teahouse. It's a perfect spot in which to relax and enjoy a slice of apple pie.

There are few wilderness areas that can match the Canadian Rockies for a combination of remoteness and accessibility. Located in the western province of Alberta, Banff is only 1½ hours west of Calgary by car. With not too much effort you can find yourself recharging your batteries with the natural energy of the Rocky Mountains while sipping tea in the shadow of a crackling glacier.

Most of this vast area was opened up by the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). From 1881 to 1885, the CPR brought more than 15,000 labourers from China to work on the most dangerous sections of the railway. For every mile of track laid in the Rocky Mountains, it's estimated that four Chinese workers lost their lives. Overall, some 600 perished and many of their bodies have not been found.

In 1882, a route finder named Tom Wilson became the first non-indigenous person to view the lake and within a decade it had become a popular spot for visitors from all over the world. The CPR built the first hotel and a log cabin, and, by 1913, the Chateau Lake Louise was playing host to an international clientele. Today, its descendent, the Fairmont Chateau, offers lakeview rooms from HK\$2,500 a night (depending on the season).

The same paths Wilson charted through the bush 127 years ago are now used by thousands eager to get away from the beepers and BlackBerrys of urban life. Banff had more than three million visitors last year alone but due to its size – 6,641 square kilometres – it rarely feels overcrowded.

From the teahouse the Highline Trail offers an alternative path to the shoreline route, adding a few hours to the duration of the hike. It veers away from the lake up towards the Big Beehive summit before descending to Lake Agnes, another glacial lake, about a quarter of the size of her sister.

After about an hour the path disappears into an alpine forest and begins a steeper climb, zigzagging upwards until breaking into the clearing at the top. The Big Beehive offers stunning views of the lake and surround-



Clockwise from left: crushed minerals, or “rock flour”, give lakes such as Moraine a milky tinge; the iconic Fairmont Chateau Hotel on Lake Louise; a Swiss chalet-style teahouse.

ing peaks and it’s easy to understand what Wilson meant when he wrote he felt “puny in body, but glorified in spirit” while gazing on the scene.

Huge rocks splay out like pieces from a giant jigsaw puzzle and skeletal pines dot the summit. The path then winds down the other side to Lake Agnes, where, at the far end, another teahouse sits perched on a cliff overlooking the Bow River Valley.

Between Lake Louise and Banff, the Trans-Canada Highway passes Castle Peak, a fortress-like mountain and the location of an internment camp for 600 prisoners during the first world war. In 1914, the then Canadian prime minister, Robert Borden, signed the War Measures Act, which resulted in the internment of 8,579 “enemy aliens”, of whom more than 5,000 were Ukrainians who had emigrated to Canada from territories under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The internees were put to work in the park for 25 cents a day and were mainly used to build the road between Banff and Lake Louise.

Banff is home to about 7,700 permanent residents and a thriving arts scene. The town has become something of a bohemian retreat and offers a wide

selection of restaurants and locally made arts and crafts. Wild Bill’s Legendary Saloon (www.wbsaloon.com) hosts live bands and serves up buffalo, elk and wild boar burgers along with frosty, local brews in a relaxed atmosphere.

Activities around Banff include horseriding and canoeing in the spring and summer months. Come winter, the average snowfall is three metres and Banff becomes one of North America’s largest skiing and snowboarding areas, with the Sunshine Village and Mount Norquay resorts nearby. When Lake Louise freezes over it’s transformed into an outdoor skating rink and plays host to an international ice-sculpting competition.

Only 20 minutes away by car is Moraine, another glacial lake and the inspiration for the design on Canada’s old 20-dollar note.

Half the size of Lake Louise, it too has an intense emerald-blue colour and sits like a burnished opal surrounded by the majestic Valley of the Ten Peaks. Accommodation can be found at the Moraine Lake Lodge (www.morainelakelodge.com), designed by the celebrated architect Arthur Erickson, from HK\$2,294 per night (until September 25).

Getting there: take Air Canada (www.aircanada.com) from Hong Kong to Vancouver and then on to Calgary. Banff is a 1½-hour drive from Calgary. Alternatively, from Vancouver take the Rocky Mountaineer (www.rockymountaineer.com) train to Banff on the Kicking Horse Route.

