

# Rocky Mountaineer

## TRAVEL JOURNAL

Dara Beard



*The majestic Rockies, BC*



*Grand Clock at the Rocky Mountaineer Station in Vancouver*



*Ensemble Members enjoying breakfast in Gold Leaf Dining Lounge*

### All Aboard!

What am I doing in Vancouver, early on a drizzly morning, standing in an historic CN locomotive maintenance building? Well actually, I am hopping from one foot to the other in eager anticipation of boarding the Rocky Mountaineer - the "World's leading travel experience by train"! Travelling through the Rocky Mountains has been a long-standing entry on my travel bucket list, and I'm just about to add a very memorable tick beside this particular entry. "All aboard!" Yes, they really do make this evocative call, and I am guided to my luxurious seat in the domed GoldLeaf coach to start my unforgettable two day journey.

I had made two important choices prior to feeling the first exciting jolt of movement. Firstly, I selected the 'First Passage to the West' route through the mountains. I chose this, the most popular of 3 routes on offer, as it's also the most historic. All three routes are full of Rocky Mountain magic. But it was this track that first linked Eastern to Western Canada in 1885 as we truly became a nation. It's a potent mix of history and geography at its Canadian best.

My second choice was to travel in GoldLeaf (priced from \$1,799), the most pampered of the three levels of service offered (the others are SilverLeaf and RedLeaf - both very fine in their way...but this is my bucket list for heaven's sake!). This entitles me to the 360 degree views of the dome car, atop a dining room below that features the finest food served on the rails. I sit back in my viewing palace, take a deep breath, and wait to be astounded.

### Day 1:

I don't have to wait long. I am pleased that I chose to travel west to east, as the journey starts modestly in the Vancouver suburbs and then moves with gathering speed from the ordinary to the extraordinary. One moment I am in Canada's third city, the next

I am beside the great Fraser River, broad and brown in its wide green valley. The mountains quickly rise on either side and soon the river is powering through Hells' Gate just below us, the narrowest and fastest-flowing point of the Fraser River.

The sights come fast and furious now. At Cisco Crossing the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National tracks swap sides of the river. As the first route to be built, the CP engineers built their line on the least sheer of the two valley sides. So the later CN engineers had to make do with the opposite, more difficult side. All this is explained by an infectiously enthusiastic on-board host, who is also on the lookout for mountain wildlife.

The Thomson and Fraser Rivers merge at Lytton, minutes from entering Avalanche Alley. Here the track skirts the very edge of the boiling river under the shelter of avalanche protection sheds. The dry, rain-shadow scenery changes to pine forest and we follow the Thompson River to the looming black lava cliffs of Black Canyon.

Then back to desert landforms again as we pass Ashcroft (the driest town in Canada) before reaching Kamloops Lake. Here our host points out several bald eagles near the coloured rocks of Painted Bluff. We roll into Kamloops, our stop for the night, precisely on time at 6.30pm.

### Day 2:

It's a common misconception that you sleep on the train, but that is not the case. In order to see all the scenery in daylight, we spent last night in Kamloops enjoying a musical dinner show "Rhythms on the Rails". Another early morning start, but I'm ready and raring to depart for the most spectacular day of my trip. I am enjoying the company of my fellow passengers from all over the English-speaking world, but I am finding that I also spend time in the open air platforms between carriages, gulping in the fresh mountain air. When I am not in the



Chateau Lake Louise



dining car of course – I will never know how they produce such fresh, gourmet cuisine on a train!

We pass Sicamous on scenic Lake Shuswap (the ‘Houseboat Capital of the World’) and a line of osprey nests atop telegraph poles in Osprey Alley. Next comes Craigellachie, where on 7 November, 1885 ‘The Last Spike’ was driven in, linking Montreal to Vancouver by rail. I have Pierre Berton’s book of the same name in my hand and Gordon Lightfoot’s Canadian Railroad Trilogy in my ears as we reverentially pass this historic site.

Stoney Creek Bridge is the classic railroad bridge: steel girders arch 325 feet above the creek below. On to the wide, forested Rocky Mountain Trench and another mighty river – the Columbia. And now we reach the famous Kicking Horse Canyon where we crisscross torrents of glacial melt water. Here, faced with a seemingly impossible mountain wall, the engineers created the Spiral Tunnels. We curve around inside the mountain, climbing ever higher until we burst out into mountain wonderland beside Wapta Lake.

And there’s more: the Continental Divide at 5,332 feet above sea level is the highest point of the journey and we change time zones and provinces as we enter Alberta. Morant’s

Curve, where all the classic Rockies train photos are taken; Castle Mountain, which really does look like a giant’s fortress; and just when I am thinking it can’t get any better – a mother brown bear and her cub are sighted train-spotting beside the track. When we slowly ease into Banff, I am exhausted from sensory overload.

### Epilogue: Banff and Lake Louise

How do you follow two days of wonderful scenic grandeur? Put yourself in the hands of the Rocky Mountaineer team to whisk you off to Banff National Park. William Cornelius Van Horne, General Manager of the Canadian Pacific Railway, foresaw the tourism potential: ‘Since we can’t export the scenery, we’ll have to import the tourists’. The iconic Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel was the result – a castle in the Rockies with incomparable views and the best oatmeal in Canada! From here a short trip up the Icefields Parkway with story-book peaks to left and right brings me to Lake Louise. Reproduced on countless Candiana calendars, the vista over the turquoise lake, framed by forested peaks, leads the eye to the Plain of Six Glaciers. And now I am that figure in the calendar, in a canoe on this impossibly gorgeous lake – the perfect end to my bucket list trip through the Rockies.

Waterfall from Glacier



Welcome Cowboys

Gold Leaf Car



Gold Leaf Dome Car

