

## Untamed Waterton

Consider a holiday away from it all but the beauty of nature, by Benjamin Freedland



Canada's wilderness is truly beautiful.

When New Zealand's picturesque southern Alps were selected as a stand-in for Tolkien's *Middle Earth* for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, many residents of Canada's two westernmost provinces mused as to whether their beloved Rocky Mountains and adjacent foothills, forests, and grasslands would have made an altogether more spectacular setting for Peter Jackson's cinematic spectacle.

While the many visitors acquainted with western Canada's two most famous mountain resort towns, Banff and Jasper, will all attest to the staggering beauty of the Northern (Canadian) Rockies, the sheer vastness and wildness of western Canada's mountain terrain is seldom appreciated as most international visitors do not venture far from Banff or Jasper before taking the bus or train back to Vancouver or Calgary. South of the bus or train is a third National Park region sits atop the south western-most corner of the province of Alberta, bordering British Columbia to the west, and the US state of Montana to the south. It is here in Waterton Lakes National Park and the neighboring Glacier National Park in Montana, that the Northern Rockies are at their wildest and most unadulterated, in a sparsely populated and relatively hard-to-access corner of the continent, and where human activity has barely made a ripple.

### Nature

Take a map of the North American continent and find the point of convergence between Alberta, British Columbia, and the US border. The surrounding perimeter, which encompasses Waterton Lakes National Park to the northeast, Glacier NP to the south, and BC's Kootenay region to the northwest, represents one of the wildest and most unspoiled corners of the continent. The crystal-clear glacier lakes and rivers that etch the landscape contain some of the cleanest, purest water anywhere in North America and are home to numerous native species of fish. Wildlife abounds in the region like few other places. Deer and mountain goats easily outnumber human beings here. Moose, elk, and bighorn sheep are also common sights as they

here are also home to a wealth of bird life, including woodpeckers, magpies, jays, and birds of prey such as the golden eagle and other distinctive animals such as the pikas, snowshoe hares, martens, and the region's innumerable gophers (the bane of Alberta ranchers' lives due to their cattle and horse leg-breaking holes) also call the area home. Perhaps more important than all, however, is Waterton's relatively small human population, mostly concentrated in the quaint, postage stamp-sized Waterton Townsite, a characteristic of the region's human (and without doubt non-human) inhabitants would like to see maintained.

### People

While the region's original human inhabitants, Piikáni (Peigan), Káínaa (Blood) and Siksiká (Blackfoot), who together form the long-resilient Blackfoot Confederacy) can rightfully claim a millennia of history in the area, Waterton's recorded human history is scarcely over a century old. Formed in 1895 as Canada's fourth national park and named after the network of glacier-carved lakes around which the park converges, Waterton Lakes NP remained largely uninhabited until the founding of the Waterton Townsite in 1911. Even with this development, the town's population remained small, due primarily to its remoteness from Canada's twin transcontinental rail lines. Nevertheless, Waterton's star did rise, particularly after the construction of the grand Prince of Wales Hotel in 1926-27, a development that sought to lure American visitors across the border during the prohibition era. The subsequent years saw Waterton emerge as a popular summer retreat, with many of the summer cabins built during this era still standing today.

The town was also once home to western Canada's premier big-band jazz venue, the Waterton Dance Pavilion. In 1932, Waterton Lakes merged with its state-side counterpart, Glacier, to form the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park as a salute to the bonds of peace and friendship between the two countries. Designated as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve in 1979, in light of its pristine mountain, highland, lake, and wetland ecosystems, Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park was subsequently made a World Heritage Site in 1995. While local business people, politicians, and park officials have sought to improve the

area's tourist infrastructure in order to facilitate more visitors, western Canada's best-kept secret remains a remarkably unspoiled place and few in the region that would care to see that situation change.



### Townsite Life

Back at the Townsite, visitors can expect a smaller, less-commercialized version of that which they would see further north in Banff and Jasper. The town is refreshingly free from chain coffee shops or fast food outlets, and many of the town's businesses are still owned by families who settled in the town in its first decade of existence. Open cafes and lakeside restaurants line Waterton Townsite's main street, where meandering deer mingle with visitors and locals and the town's art galleries and performance spaces spotlight a steady lineup of artists and musicians from surrounding communities. Local theater troupes contracted by Parks Canada can be seen performing vignettes on the history of the region and park rangers can occasionally be seen patrolling the area on horseback Mountie-style, harkening back to the park's legendary first warden, the famously roughish frontiersman John George 'Kootenai' Brown. Forever glistening alongside the townsite is Upper Waterton Lake, a lake whose bone-chilling, glacier-originated water scares off all but the most masochistic of swimmers, but is nonetheless a magnet for canoeists, kayakers, and windsurfers, the latter of whom benefit from the region's

notoriously windy weather. The park's rivers and lakes abound with trout and other freshwater fish, making the park a popular fishing destination and golf enthusiasts can enjoy the superb Waterton Lakes Golf Course to the east of the townsite. The park's devoted team of wardens provide a full range of services aimed at educating visitors about the region's diverse ecosystem and volunteer activities such as 'citizen science' programs and weed busting efforts targeting invasive plant species are open to members of the public keen to give something back to the park.

For travelers eager to escape from crowds and immerse themselves in pure, unadulterated wilderness, it is difficult to imagine a better choice than Waterton Lakes National Park and the neighboring Glacier NP. While the area is relatively harder to access than western Canada's better known national park regions, Waterton more than makes up for it, both in the wildness of its wilderness and in the timeless down-home charm of its namesake townsite. Where mountain view and prairie sky collide, Waterton glistens like Rivendell, the Elven outpost in *Lord of the Rings*, beckoning with the promise of serenity and adventure.



Nature supries around every corner.



Not a cuddly bear.

### Remote

While Waterton's relative remoteness remains one of its primary selling points,

this does mean that access to this stunning tract of mountain wilderness is relatively challenging. Unlike Banff and Jasper, no trains connect Waterton Lakes NP with the outside world, relatively few buses go there, and the nearest international airport (Calgary) is over three hours' car journey away. The most spectacular approach to the park is from the east, from the outlying municipality of Pincher Creek, where the mountains rise abruptly from the Great Plains in a spectacular collision of geological and ecological regions. It is here, that with the beautiful contours of the Prince of Wales Hotel stands sentinel over Upper Waterton Lake, the deepest body of water in the Canadian Rockies.

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Ranging in elevation from 1,290 meters at the townsite to nearly 3,000 meters at the summit of Mt. Blakiston, Waterton offers innumerable scenic trails, the best known of which is the Crypt Lake trail. This, an eight-hour jaunt through Rocky Mountain wilderness and around a lake that is often covered with ice even in August. The Crypt Lake trail makes for an accessible but fairly demanding hike and apart from a daily round-trip ferry link between the trail and the townsite, no amenities are to be found anywhere and hikers here can expect nothing but untamed backcountry. Another ferry service links Waterton Townsite with Glacier National Park, courtesy of Waterton Inter-Nation Shoreline Cruise Co., whose venerable 80-year-old vessel sails between Waterton Townsite and Gothaunt, Montana (well known as the US's least-busy international port) between two and four times a day (depending on the time of year). To the south in Glacier, is a further range of scenic hikes, as well as the spectacular Going-to-the-Sun Road, an extraordinary feat of road construction that was completed in 1933 and never fails to raise motorists' heart rates!

**Getting there and around:** Waterton Lakes NP is a three-hour southwesterly drive from Calgary, where the nearest international airport is located, and a 14-hour drive due east from Vancouver, western Canada's Asia-Pacific air hub. With no passenger train links to the area, the vast majority of visitors come to the park by motor vehicle. While there are no regular scheduled bus connections to the park, Greyhound Canada provides bus services from both Vancouver and Calgary to the nearby town of Pincher Creek, Alberta, from where visitors can hire a taxi to the park. During peak season (July-August) shuttle buses are often made available by the hotels in Waterton—inquire with hotel personnel. Car rental is probably the best option, and is available from international and domestic airports and from Banff, the nearest passenger railhead. **Once in the park:** there are numerous touring options, including Waterton Shoreline Cruises, Scenic Interpretive Red Bus Tours, and Tamarack Shuttle and Transportation Services. Guided tours by foot, horse, and boat are also available at various points during the year. **Other information:** A brand new website, [www.mywaterton.ca](http://www.mywaterton.ca), was launched in July of this year, offering visitors a comprehensive one-stop source of information on all things Waterton. The site offers extensive information on accommodations, restaurants, visitor services, local travel information, and much more.

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keep a keen watch for the region's endemic carnivores, which include wolverines, lynx, wolves, mountain lions, and of course, the region's iconic and much-feared black and grizzly bears. The alpine woodlands