

Bearing down on thrills 'n' chills

MICHAEL MARTIN
gets cool in Alberta

MICKY "The Magpie" Martin stands poised at the top of the 300ft launch tower, the city of Calgary spread out beneath him.

I clamp the helmet down on to my head and adjust my goggles one last time. As I do so, my mind turns to my role model, the no-hoper-turned-superhero, Eddie "The Eagle" Edwards.

Twenty years ago, Eddie's inept bravery made him the unlikely hero of the Calgary Winter Olympics.

Now, perched in the same spot on the Eagle's eyrie, it is the Magpie's turn to write himself into the history books (or the Mirror's travel pages).

"Anything The Eagle can do, The Magpie can do better," I mutter under my breath. "Prepare to fly, little bird."

"Excuse me, sir?" replies the guide. "I guess you're a little nervous but don't forget you're harnessed to a metal cable via three points of contact, you have a parachute to slow you down and my eight-year-old daughter does this every weekend."

"Bloody moose-worrying spoilsport," I mumble.

OK, the Calgary Olympic zipline didn't quite emulate The Eagle's exploits but, hell, I had just spent five days in the Rocky Mountains.

SPECTACULAR

I had seen bears and moose and elks and glaciers and lakes so blue they looked fake, and "super awesomely jagged peaks", as our guide Ron described the famous mountains. I couldn't help getting carried away.

The Canadian Rockies have to be seen to be believed. Except that, when you see



DAREDEVIL: Ski jump in Calgary

them, you still don't quite believe they are real.

To British eyes accustomed to everything being kind of, well, average, the mountain range - particularly the part that runs through Alberta - is a bit too much to take in at first sight.

The peaks seem too pointy, the skyline too clean-cut, the streams too crystal clear and the air a tad too fresh.

You find the cynical British soul within you crying out: "Right, what's the catch?" Then, when you finally accept there is no catch, just endless, spectacular beauty, you meet the people - and it's déjà vu all over again.

The local Albertans are impossibly friendly, improbably helpful and disgracefully healthy. There must be a dark side, surely?

Whoever heard of people uncomplicatedly nice, happy and with a bob or two in their pockets as well?

Heading west from Calgary towards Banff National Park can be a little disorienting.

The breathtaking scenery is already lodged in many people's minds by Hollywood blockbusters such as *Brokeback Mountain*, *Legends Of The Fall* and *Unforgiven*.

In fact, our first destination, the splendid isolation of Mount Engadine Lodge, was a favourite hangout for Ang

Lee and his crew when he was working on his gay cowboy epic - filmed in the Canadian Rockies because it was cheaper than on the American side.

The director would make a beeline for the lodge after a hard day's filming - and it is not hard to see why. Towering 6,000ft above sea level in a remote valley, Engadine is a hidden gem.

I arrived in darkness, so the sight that greeted me when I opened the curtains the next morning was a pleasant surprise - to put it mildly.

The lodge's rooms look out on to a prairie divided by a meandering river, where moose and elks come to graze at dawn and again at dusk. Beyond the prairie is forest and beyond the trees is magnificent, majestic, snow-capped mountains.

The 30 minutes I spent later that day in Engadine's outside hot tub, with a beer in hand and all this as a backdrop, will live with me for a long, long time.

BEARS

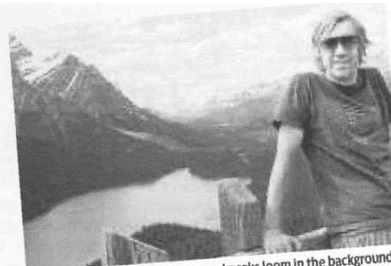
As will - for different reasons - the lecture from "Jay the Bear Man" on what to do if we bumped into a grizzly or a black bear. Bad news: not knowing the difference can be fatal. Good news (sort of): you can identify the species from the poo.

After two days enjoying the fresh air, wholesome food and limitless space around Engadine, I was beginning to realise why Albertans all look so healthy - and why the theme of our visit was "health and wellness".

Little did I know that, as far as the health kick was concerned, Engadine was just the pre-match warm-up.

Our next destination was the mountain resort town of Banff - although we stopped off for a canter through the prairie on horseback.

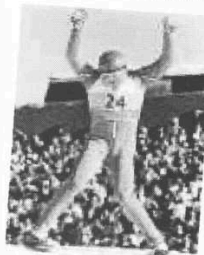
From our base at Banff's homely Fox Hotel, we were put



ROCKY ROADS: The snow-capped peaks loom in the background



RIDE 'EM COWBOY: Micky and steed



MY HERO: Eddie The Eagle



through a punishing regime of spa treatments, massages, body scrubs and the like.

The natural hot pools in Banff National Park made it Canada's first spa town, so we had come to the right place.

Exhausting stuff. So what better way to relax than a session of heli-yoga? Heli-yoga may be unfamiliar but, basically, it does exactly what it says on the tin.

A man named Ralph takes you up in a helicopter and drops you in a remote mountain glade, then a lady named Martha leads a yoga session.

As someone whose previous experience of yoga was limited to a couple of embarrassing Friday mornings at the local leisure centre, I had to admit to being a yoga sceptic.

But in a meadow in the foothills of the Rockies, with sunlight on my back and pure air in my lungs, it began to make sense. My Downward Facing Dog was not quite as many as before and my Cat Cow Stretch was - almost - graceful.

Admittedly, my Warrior looked more like a drunken pub brawler but, as they say, you can take the boy out of Glasgow...

GETTING THERE

- Seven-night fly-drive to Calgary from £803pp departing September 2008. Inc return flights from Heathrow from £716.50pp and car hire from £66.50pp. www.ba.com
- Mount Engadine Lodge: www.mountengadine.com Tel: 001 403 678 4080
- The Fox Hotel & Suites: www.bestofbanff.com