

ROCKIN' ROCKIES

Chill out in Banff and rub shoulders with the stars...



Above: Head to the river to see the scenery at its best (main). **Below left:** Nell Nelson tries heli yoga. **Below right:** The Fairmont Banff Springs resort is huge!

Following in the cowboy boot footsteps of Brad Pitt and Jake Gyllenhaal, *OK!* decided to get saddled up and head to the Canadian Rockies for a wild adventure...

WHY SHOULD I VISIT BANFF?

If you're looking for a wild outdoor adventure amid dramatic rugged mountain scenery but with a spot of celeb spotting, shopping and pampering on the side, the Canadian province of Alberta offers all this and much more.

Once you've jetted into the capital city of Calgary, it's an easy one-and-a-half-hour drive to the picturesque town of Banff. As Canada's highest town, at 1,463m above sea level, it might not just be the sight of Alberta regular Brad Pitt that leaves you breathless!

The year-round holiday resort of Banff, located in the heart of Banff National Park (a World Heritage site), is the perfect place to base yourself if you want to explore the majestic jagged peaks, glacial lakes and countless rivers of the Canadian Rockies. Banff has a real outback feel, with breathtaking scenery around every corner – even the streets are named after the surrounding wildlife such as bear, lynx and caribou.



WHEN SHOULD I GO?

Banff has a long ski season from mid-November to early May with three main ski areas – Sunshine Village (the largest) and the smaller resorts of Ski Norquay and Lake Louise. Banff kicks off its ski season in early December with a Winterstart Festival, which includes a magical Santa Claus Parade. If you want to spot a celeb – such as Catherine Zeta Jones, Meg Ryan, or Alec Baldwin – make sure your trip coincides with the annual Fairmont Banff Springs celebrity charity ski competition, held every January.

WHERE SHOULD I STAY?

While *OK!* is not averse to a spot of camping, staying at Mount Engadine Lodge, a homely wooden chalet near Canmore, was a more preferable option. With its wrap-around wooden deck and amazing mountains views, this six-room retreat allows you to be close to nature but also offers up some lovely homemade food, roaring fires and a hot tub. It's on the deck here where the late Heath Ledger and director Ang Lee hung out during breaks while filming the fishing scenes in *Brokeback Mountain*.

If you want to stay right in the middle of Banff, check in to Fox Hotels & Suites. With an abundant use of wood and stone, the family friendly Fox has an Alpine-chalet feel. Adults will love the margaritas in Chili's restaurant.

If all-out opulence is more your scene, check in to the Fairmont Banff Springs (www.fairmont.com). Dubbed Canada's 'Castle In The Rockies', this 770-room hotel is virtually a village in itself featuring 12 restaurants, a golf course, an ice rink, indoor bowling and four pools.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Learn to ride cowboy style on a horse trek organised by Rafter Six Ranch (www.raftersix.com). Paul Newman and Kevin Costner have both visited.

Get a real high and learn a new sport, heli yoga, an amazing combination of zen and adrenaline. Yoga guru Martha McCallum told *OK!* to crouch down on the ground as the Icefield Helicopter (www.icefieldheli.com) zoomed in to land – its blades whirring continuously, this is no time to be precious about your hair! At 100mph we whizzed over some breathtaking landscape before landing in a lush meadow for the ultimate 'down dog' yoga session, followed by a gourmet lunch by the riverbank.

All that melting snow means lots of rivers and a good way to take in the scenery is in a two-person non-capsizable canoe. The Blue Canoes (www.banfftours.com) trips start off on the Bow River in Banff. *OK!* loved canoeing once we got the hang of steering – much to the relief of a nearby Canada goose and her chicks!



Above: Hit the shops in downtown Banff. **Left:** Brad Pitt's worked and played here

WHAT SHOULD I EAT?

Alberta is beef country. As well as all the mountains, the province has wide-open prairies, so steak is a menu staple. The Sleeping Buffalo Restaurant in Banff (www.crmr.com) offers steak and local specialties such as moose, elk and caribou.

OK! tucked into a grilled buffalo rib eye with a raspberry black peppercorn sauce. For a snack to keep you going in between shopping and spa-ing in downtown Banff, stop off at the Bison Mountain Bistro (www.thebison.ca) for cowboy-size portions of buttermilk waffles, eggs benedict and Canadian bacon.

Another foodie extravaganza was the Bavarian-styled Waldhaus restaurant, at the Banff Springs resort, where *OK!* adored the truffle fondue and black forest gateau while looking out at the snow-capped mountains.



WHERE CAN I SPA?

Banff started as a spa town in the 1880s, when three Canadian Pacific workers discovered hot sulphur springs. For mountain views and steamy hot spring pools, visit Banff Upper Hot Springs (www.hot springs.ca), which opened in 1932. If you really want to splash out, spend a day at the Willow Stream Spa at the Fairmont Banff Springs. This is a 38,000sqft lavish spa, with cascading waterfalls, pools and an outdoor hot tub. After all our outdoor activity, *OK!* felt that a Rockies Rehydration body wrap with aloe vera essential oils was essential. For a more laid-back vibe try one of the organic treatments or the hot pool at the Red Earth Spa (www.readearthspa.com) at the Banff Caribou Lodge.

WHAT CELEBRITIES MIGHT I SEE?

This wonderful scenery doesn't just attract tourists but also top film directors. After Brad Pitt filmed *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* here, he brought Angelina Jolie and the kids back for a holiday and visited the dinosaur collection at the Royal Tyrrell Museum. When Heath Ledger spoke about filming *Brokeback Mountain* in Alberta, he said: 'At times you felt you left the whole world behind – you were somewhere else.' Marilyn Monroe filmed her riding scenes for *River Of No Return* at the Rafter Six Ranch and recovered from her horseback accident at the hotel. Apparently bell hops drew lots on who would push her wheelchair.



WHAT SHOULD I BUY?

In Banff you'll find everything you need for a true Rockies experience, plus there's also Louis Vuitton, Tommy Hilfiger, La Senza and a Roots Canada boutique.

Pick up the latest ski gear designs, as Catherine Zeta Jones did, in Mountain Magic Sportswear. If you want to go down the wild west route, dive into Lammle's Western Wear & Tack. With more than 4,000 cowboy hats and shelves of cowboy boots, *OK!* couldn't resist a pair of suede pointed cowboy boots and nearly got carried away and bought a cowgirl diamante belt!

Pop in to The Banff Tea Company, which offers 160 blended teas with unique flavours such as Six Glacier Tea with spearmint, or pick up some 100 per cent natural lavender soap at The Rocky Mountain Soap Company.

HOW DO I GET THERE?

BA Holidays (0844 493 0758; www.ba.com) offer a seven-night fly-drive, including return flights from Heathrow to Calgary, and car hire with Alamo, from £803pp, departing September 2008. Price is subject to availability, based on two sharing and includes all UK taxes. There is a £15 per person surcharge for telephone bookings.

A one-night stay, including all meals, at the Mount Engadine Lodge (www.mountengadine.com) costs from £190. A one-night stay at the Fox Hotel & Suites (www.bestofbanff.com) costs from £132 per night for double occupancy in a superior hotel room. **OK!**

REPORT BY NELL NELSON EDITED BY
ANNABEL MACKIE, *OK!* TRAVEL EDITOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ALAMY, PHOTOLIBRARY.COM, REX

WHERE IS BANFF?



For more information on planning a holiday to Alberta see www.travelalberta.com. Visit www.bestofbanff.com and www.banfflakelouise.com for local information. If you want to take a film location driving tour, visit www.albertamoviemaps.com.