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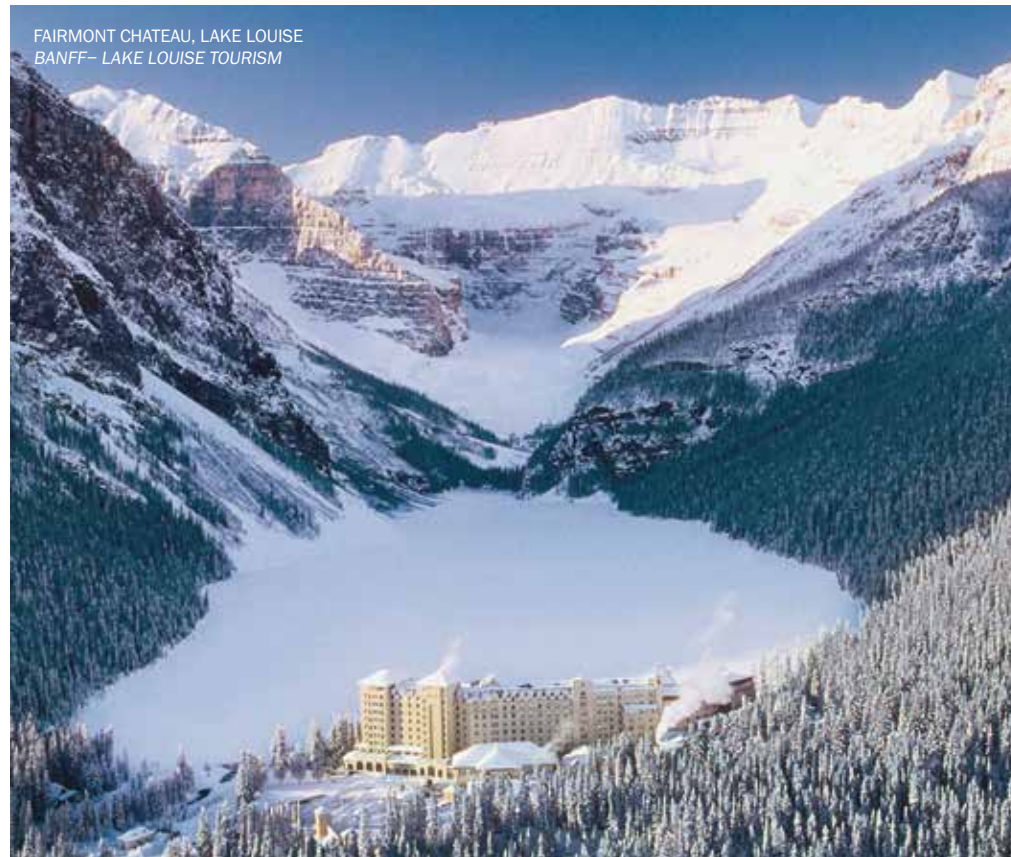
BANFF

CANADA'S PROTECTED PLAYGROUND
BY RICH SILVER

It seems that everyone who has been to the Banff-Lake Louise region of the Canadian Rockies says it's the most beautiful place they've ever skied. Now, after experiencing Banff's breathtaking landscape first hand, I'm a believer.

Three ski areas actually lie within the boundaries of the Banff National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where dedication to preserving the environment provides unspoiled natural beauty, spectacular views and nearly 8000 acres of world class skiing.

The Lake Louise ski area with its long frontside cruisers and easily accessible backside powder bowls, is as good as it gets. It has only eight lifts covering its massive terrain yet it's surprisingly easy to navigate. But, just when you think you've tackled it all there's another fluffy snowfield over the ridge, or the moon-



like Rock Garden to test your ability. Here's a special ski tip: contact Lake Louise ski area and inquire if they can hook you up with longtime local, Sandy Best, to take a couple of runs in "Sandy's secret stashes."

At the end of a long day on the mountain, the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise is the perfect spot to relax, unwind and relish the jaw-dropping views overlooking the lake.

Alberta is known for its beef and bison, so for dinner, why not try some regionally inspired and locally sourced meats and fish at The Deer Lodge, just a short walk from the hotel. No visit to the area would be complete without a stop at The Post Hotel, an elegant yet intimate, old world luxury hotel where Andre and George Schwarz welcome guests with "good food, good wine and good company." Each year the brothers host the

annual "Wine Summit," featuring their incredible 30,000-bottle wine cellar, a must for oenophiles.

The Sunshine Village ski area, sitting right along the Continental Divide, is just a 15-minute ride from the town of Banff. It boasts a seven-month-long season, virtually no lift lines, the longest vertical drop in the Canadian Rockies and 3300 acres of light dry powder with terrain for every ability level from beginner to expert. Tree skiers will love it and extreme skiers can test themselves on the thrilling Delirium Dive. Hop on the Continental Divide chairlift and you can even ski in two provinces, Alberta and British Columbia, on the very same run. The eco-conscious Sunshine Village Hotel also has one of the most unique hotel check-in experiences. Drive up, park your car, drop your luggage and take the gondola up to the hotel where your luggage will be waiting in your room. Change into ski gear, click into your skis and off you go, right out the front door. The cozy Chimney Corner Lounge provides a perfect slopeside après ski spot.

The gateway to all this natural beauty is the town of Banff. Touristy, yes, but a quintessential ski town, ringed with mountain peaks and pulsing with culture, dining, shopping, nightlife and festivals all year round. As a mat-

ter of fact, winter isn't even considered the peak season, so hotel rates are reasonable and outdoor activities abound. Hiking, biking, canoeing, golf and horseback riding in the summer; ice skating, snowshoeing, dog sledding, sleigh riding and the incredible ice canyon walking in Johnston Canyon just outside of town in the winter. There is even a family friendly ski area right in town - Norquay - which has lots of beginner terrain, night skiing with a fully lit terrain park, snow tubing park and fire pits for roasting marshmallows and enjoying hot chocolate.

All of this can be experienced at the very special hotel fondly known as "The Castle." Celebrating its 125th anniversary, The Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel with its stately facade and majestic entrance hall, truly lives up to its nick-

name. Whether in the comfort of your suite, the tranquility of The Willow Stream Spa, taking afternoon tea or floating in the outdoor heated pool/hot tub, you feel more like a visiting Royal than a hotel guest.

Banff is a unique place. The town is buzzing with excitement and thankfully there is no development or condo sprawl, just natural beauty as far as the eye can see. After all, you are in a national park; kudos to Canada for keeping the perfect balance of "preservation and playground."

Fly non-stop from Newark to Calgary on Air Canada. Banff National Park, the town of Banff and the ski areas are an easy two-hour ride away.

Some helpful sites:

- www.banfflakelouise.com
- www.skibanff.com
- www.BanffTours.com
- www.travelalberta.us
- www.skilouise.com
- www.fairmont.com

JOHNSTON CANYON ICE WALK AND FAIRMONT LAKE LOUISE SNOWSHOE

There are those of us who just can't sit still, but thanks to the abundance of adventure-activities at both Fairmont Lake Louise and Banff Springs, you'll have to search for "down-time." Top of the list is the Johnston Canyon Ice Walk. Pile into a Discover Banff Tour mini-bus for a short ride to the Canadian backcountry, where ice-cleats affixed, you'll enter a frozen world. A four-hour trek takes you past the lower and upper falls, through grottos and over suspended catwalks where the blue ice falls away to the gorge below. Keep your eyes peeled for those intrepid souls who scale the towering frozen liquid with ice axes and crampons. But remember, although your Egyptian cotton sheets are just a short ride away, you're in the wilderness and that means boots, hats, gloves and by all-means, a few layers.

And if you're hankering for that "Call of the Wild" adventure, the concierge at Fairmont Lake Louise can arrange for a guided snowshoe trek. Meet your guide, lash those snowshoes to your boots and head across the frozen lake and up into the high country. There are animal tracks aplenty, fauna and foliage to identify as you begin to warm up to the task. Trudging through the snow-pack will raise that heart rate as you breath in the sharp, cold, mountain air. As you approach tree line and the valley opens up before you, you'll be channeling Jack London.

-Bruce Koffsky