

All Aboard: Canadian tourist train Rocky Mountaineer marks 30 years in 2020



Hosts in the bi-level GoldLeaf dome cars provide commentary on scenery, wildlife and history as the Rocky Mountaineer travels through Western Canada. *Courtesy of Rocky Mountaineer*

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Posted 1/24/2020 6:00 AM

"Train? You expect me to spend my vacation on a train?" asked my incredulous husband who has spent the past 40-plus years taking Metra to his office in the Loop. For him, the romance of rail travel had long since dissipated.

That is, until last spring when we boarded the Rocky Mountaineer in Vancouver for a two-day ride across British Columbia and into the Canadian Rockies.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the largest privately owned luxury tourist train company in the world. Rocky Mountaineer began in 1990 after the Canadian government decided to privatize its daylight rail service through the mountains of Western Canada. What started as a railway enthusiast's dream has grown into one of Canada's leading tourism providers.

Aboard Rocky Mountaineer, we relaxed in luxury coaches to take in gorgeous scenery, spotted wildlife and imagined the feats of engineering it took to build rail lines through mountainous terrain. During leisurely daylong journeys storytelling hosts spun educational tales of pioneer exploration as they identified rivers, summits, animals, lakes, forests and settlements passing our picture windows.

Did I mention the food? Executive chefs trained in Michelin-rated restaurants and five-star hotels prepared bountiful breakfasts and three-course lunches. Between-meal snacks and ongoing bar service ensured everyone stayed well-sated.



The Rocky Mountaineer travels through the Canadian Rockies passing Yoho and Banff national parks. - Courtesy of Rocky Mountaineer

First Passage to the West

Our journey took us on one of the railway's original itineraries, First Passage to the West, still the most popular of its four routes.

At Rocky Mountaineer's Vancouver Station a pianist and a bagpiper entertained us as hosts passed drinks for an early morning toast. With a toot of a train whistle boarding began. Those choosing SilverLeaf Service climbed into single-level coaches; GoldLeaf Service passengers boarded two-level dome cars. Both coaches have comfortable, reclining seats, all pre-assigned. Neither has overhead storage. Trains

do not have sleeper cars so passengers overnight in hotels with their luggage sent ahead by road. SilverLeaf passengers are booked in standard hotels, GoldLeaf in premium hotels where available with the possibility of an optional upgrade. Passengers take breakfast and lunch at their seats in SilverLeaf coaches while those in GoldLeaf cars are divided into two sittings and dine at tables in the lower level.

The distance by rail from Vancouver to Banff, Alberta, in the heart of the Canadian Rockies, measures just 595 miles, but Rocky Mountaineer takes it slow, breaking the journey into two leisurely days. Passengers don't disembark for sightseeing or excursions, but the engineer often slows down to allow time to drink in Instagram-worthy views. Trains usually stop only to change crews or allow freight trains, which have priority on the rails, to pass.



An open vestibule on GoldLeaf railcars allows Rocky Mountaineer passengers to take in the scenery outdoors from the moving train. - Courtesy of Rocky Mountaineer

Day one on the train took us along British Columbia's mighty Fraser River where every year about 10 million salmon return to the river and its tributaries to spawn, more than in any other river system in the

world. A staple on Rocky Mountaineer menus, salmon became my choice of entree for lunch. Between bites of pink fish and sips of a B.C. Chardonnay, I gazed at a thick forest floor strewn with ferns and moss-covered boulders and caught glimpses of the river beyond the trees.

In the afternoon the terrain turned more rugged around Hell's Gate, a 110-foot-wide gorge in the Fraser, before entering Rainbow Canyon. Minerals turn rocky slopes shades of purple, red, yellow and green.

"Osprey nest at 2 o'clock," said our host directing our gaze to a mass more than a yard wide built atop an iron bridge. Several times we spotted ospreys soaring above the train and once a bald eagle with an impressive 6-foot wingspan.

The landscape changed again to sagebrush and desert before the train pulled into Kamloops, B.C., a 19th-century fur-trading post now a city of about 90,000 residents. It felt good to get off the train and stretch our legs. After a light dinner in town we bedded down in our hotel to rest up for an early morning departure.



Passengers in Rocky Mountaineer's GoldLeaf cars take breakfast and lunch in a dining area on the lower level. - Courtesy of Rocky Mountaineer

A beloved train

On day two we waved to Doris. The Rocky Mountaineer enjoys celebrity status with local folks stopping to wave as the blue and gold cars pass. Doris might be its No. 1 fan. From the porch of her modest trackside house, she never fails to greet the train with a double wave -- and the crew and passengers wave back. After a few years of this, a crew member gave Doris his employee pass to ride the train. When Rocky Mountaineer's Kamloops staff heard she would be aboard they drove more than an hour to her house, stood on her porch and waved as the train passed.

Trans-Canada Hwy. 1 follows the route of the train for part of its journey, but in the mountains the tracks enter territory inaccessible by

road. Chinese immigrants supplied much of the labor to construct the rail line, a few dying of injury and illness in dangerous conditions.

"Get ready to look out your window for the view from Stoney Creek Bridge just ahead," advised our host. I made a beeline to the railcar's open-air vestibule and poked my head over the side to watch the train slowly round a curve and approach a metal archway spanning a canyon. Mountains rising on both sides of the single track suddenly gave way to a chasm hundreds of feet deep. Waterfalls plunged. So did my stomach.



Morning means fresh scones and jam served by Rocky Mountaineer hosts. -
Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

We also admired the builders' feats of engineering as we passed through two spiral tunnels. One digs into Cathedral Mountain, winding 3,255 feet in a 290-degree turn before emerging 50 feet higher. The other chews into Mount Ogden for 2,923 feet, turning 230 degrees and exiting 56 feet farther up the slope. At the top I looked

down from the train window amazed to see the track below doubling back on itself.

We reached the highest point on our journey, 5,332 feet, at the Continental Divide separating the Atlantic and Pacific watersheds and marking the boundary between Yoho and Banff national parks.

"Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife," advised our host. We'd already spotted bighorn sheep earlier in the day, but had yet to see a moose, elk, grizzly or black bear known to roam these parks. As evening fell all eyes trained on forests, lakes and streams as the train passed below turreted Castle Mountain. Would we spot more wildlife before full dark?

"Elk at 9 o'clock," someone cried as heads spun left. Minutes later Rocky Mountaineer pulled into Banff, our mountain home for the night.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Rocky Mountaineer.*

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Rocky Mountaineer

Details: (866) 754-7641 or rockymountaineer.com

First Passage to the West: Trains run April through October from Vancouver to Kamloops to Banff and reverse. Rates on itineraries from

1 to 20 nights range from about \$1,287 to \$12,763 per person, double, plus tax and gratuities, and depend on class of service and package options such as motor-coach tours, gondola rides, helicopter sightseeing, self-drive cars and cruises to Alaska.

Other routes: Vancouver-Kamloops-Jasper and Vancouver-Whistler-Quesnel-Jasper. Coastal Passage trains begin or end in Seattle, Washington

When to ride: Consider booking outside summer high season. April and May are great times to see wildlife: Bears come out of hibernation and hunt for food; birds of prey make regular appearances. Fall colors appear in September and October. The offseason tends to have more availability for hotel rooms and lower rates.

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