

# St. Louis Post-Dispatch

TRAVEL

## Rolling through Western Canada on the Rocky Mountaineer

By Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Post-Dispatch

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The Rocky Mountaineer winds along Morant's Curve following the Bow River in the Canadian Rockies.

Credit: Rocky Mountaineer

“Get ready to look out your window for the view from Stoney Creek Bridge just ahead,” advised our host aboard the Rocky Mountaineer as the train traveled through Western Canada.

I went one better and made my way to the rail car's open vestibule. Fresh alpine air caressed my face as I poked my head over the side of the platform 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.

My first thought after catching my breath: How in the world did the railroad build a bridge in such rugged terrain?

Feats of engineering prove as astounding as the scenery, both part of the experience of a two-day train journey from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Banff, Alberta, aboard the Rocky Mountaineer. As the rail cars roll along, hosts spin stories of pioneer history and exploration, point out wildlife along the route and identify rivers, summits, lakes, forests and settlements passing picture windows.



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

Credit: Rocky Mountaineer

Did I mention the food? Executive chefs trained in Michelin-rated restaurants and five-star hotels prepare bountiful breakfasts and three-course lunches. Between-meal snacks and ongoing bar service ensure no one goes hungry — or thirsty.

## First Passage to the West

In 1988, Canada's government-owned railway began running daylight passenger trains through the picturesque Canadian Rockies and Columbia Mountains. After two seasons the service was privatized as Rocky Mountaineer. My journey took me on one of its 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 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 preassigned. Neither has overhead storage. Trains do not have sleeper cars, so passengers overnight in hotels with their luggage sent ahead by highway.

The distance by rail from Vancouver to Banff measures 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 views and snap photos. Trains usually stop only to change crews or allow freight trains to pass.

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 entrée 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.



An open vestibule on GoldLeaf railcars allows Rocky Mountaineer passengers to take outdoor photos from the moving train.

Credit: Rocky Mountaineer

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 my legs. After a light dinner in town I bedded down in my hotel to rest up before an early morning departure.

## A beloved train

On Day Two we waved to Doris. The Rocky Mountaineer is something of a Canadian celebrity with 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 free 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 she passed.

Trans-Canada Highway 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, a few dying of injury and illness in dangerous conditions. When the job was done, some stayed in Canada. Today, Chinese Canadians make up the country's largest Asian ethnic group.



Rocky Mountaineer slowly crosses the 484-foot-long Stoney Creek Bridge on the east slope of Mount Tupper. The bridge towers 295 feet above the creek bed.

Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

I 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 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 dark?

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



Rocky Mountaineer follows the rivers of Western Canada on its First Passage to the West route between Vancouver, British Columbia, and Banff, Alberta.

Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

## IF YOU GO

Rocky Mountaineer: 1-866-754-7641, [rockymountaineer.com](http://rockymountaineer.com)

First Passage to the West: Trains run April through October from Vancouver to Kamloops to Banff and reverse on itineraries from four to 11 days. Rates range from \$1,657 to \$7,819 per person, double, depending on class of service and package options. Tax and gratuities not included.

Other routes: Vancouver-Kamloops-Jasper and Vancouver-Whistler-Quesnel-Jasper. Coastal Passage trains begin or end in Seattle, Wash. Routes can be combined in round-trip Circle Journeys.

Packages: A wide range of options can be added before and after train journeys, including motor-coach tours, gondola rides, helicopter sightseeing, self-drive cars, even a cruise to Alaska on Holland America Line.

Meals on board: Food and drink are included in the fare. In single-level SilverLeaf coaches passengers take meals at their seats, those in GoldLeaf bi-level cars are divided into two sittings and dine at tables in the lower level.

[https://www.stltoday.com/travel/rolling-through-western-canada-on-the-rocky-mountaineer/article\\_e11323bf-2b05-555f-8f93-852a572a9995.html](https://www.stltoday.com/travel/rolling-through-western-canada-on-the-rocky-mountaineer/article_e11323bf-2b05-555f-8f93-852a572a9995.html)