

JASPER ON TRACK

Aboard the Rocky Mountaineer, Fiona Tapp witnesses the rebirth of Jasper, Alberta as the historic mountain town rises from wildfires with resilience, renewal—and unforgettable rail views

It began with three afternoon lightning strikes during a rainless storm in July 2024, resulting in raging fires out of control. By 10 p.m. that night, the evacuation of over 20,000 people had begun. Kevin Lazzari, a tour guide with SunDog Tours, a local company focusing on wildlife watching and glacier adventure trips, says it was the biggest fire in Jasper in 100 years, and the first time in his life that a mandatory evacuation order was issued. "It was chaotic," he says. "We only had one choice; we went west." Townsfolk were displaced for weeks.

Arriving this past spring on only the fourth Rocky Mountaineer train to make the trip since the wildfires, I was relieved that the train station and much of the town were untouched. However, in residential neighbourhoods, the extent of the damage was overwhelming. Empty lots and charred remains stood alongside intact homes, seemingly spared by a stroke of luck or the whim of a wind gust.

While looking out over Maligne Canyon, the remains of vast burned forests looked like black bristles in a hairbrush. Over 32,500 hectares burned, but Pyramid Mountain, which changes colour as the sun hits each triangle of quartzite or Roche Bonhomme (known as Old Man Mountain to locals), endures.

I took the Rocky Mountaineer's two-day journey through the Clouds route from Vancouver to Jasper via Kamloops, travelling in GoldLeaf service in the upper

deck, complete with enormous glass-domed windows. Wendy McMichael, the senior on-board manager, said that even after 14 years with Rocky Mountaineer, she never gets tired of these views. "Seeing the terrain change due to time and weather systems and nature is just amazing; I am still plastering myself to the window when we spot wildlife!" I was just as excited to spot elk, deer, and even a black bear during the ride.

When it was time to eat, we descended the stairs to the dining car to peruse the menu of gourmet meals, including smoked salmon avocado toast on artisan sourdough with shaved beet for breakfast, made with locally sourced ingredients. What you won't find on the menu, according to Chef Zach Cleland on his inaugural ride, is french fries, as, due to the movement, deep fryers are not allowed in his compact 21 by 9-foot (6.4 metres by 2.74 metres) moving kitchen.

We followed the Fraser River for 460 km from Vancouver to Kamloops. The train ride is an all-daylight experience, so you won't miss a thing as you get closer to those Rocky Mountain views. Staying at a hotel in Kamloops, the journey continued the next day, and as if by magic, my luggage was transported to Jasper for me.

There is an outdoor viewing platform on-board that allows you to see sights like the Pyramid Falls—visible only by rail—and the majestic Mount Robson, the tallest in the Canadian Rockies, appearing on cue.

Along with impressive vistas and chances to see sights from otherwise inaccessible spots, it's the small details, linen table cloths, engaging stories from our on-board hosts, wines from the region, and warm cheese scones served at your seat that elevate what could be just a form of transport into a true bucket list experience.

Landmarks like the historic Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, where I stayed, sustained relatively minor damage. I joined wildlife tours, plunged into glacier-fed Beauvert Lake, and marvelled at the stars in a dark sky preserve, where Cree Knowledge Keeper Matricia Brown shared powerful fireside stories—all as I planned my next adventure back.

Jasper remains the ultimate destination for adrenalin-fuelled exploration, but choosing a rail journey here now is about more than just the adventure; it's about giving back to a destination in full recovery mode. **✎**

TRAVEL PLANNER

To plan your Jasper adventure, visit jasper.travel, sundogtours.com, warriorwomen.ca, rockymountaineer.com and fairmont.com



MUST-SEE STOPS

EVIL DAVE'S GRILL serves up Alberta beef and small plates ideal for sharing.

THE MALIGNE RANGE offers malt whiskies and charcuterie boards featuring local cheeses.

AALTO, a lakeside restaurant, boasts stunning views of Pyramid Mountain.

For luxurious sleeps, consider the Fairmont Waterfront Hotel in Vancouver, Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, and Fairmont Château Lake Louise to round out your train experience with mountain elegance.

PHOTOS: ROCKY MOUNTAINEER / FIONA TAPP

