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FEATURE

FIVE OF CANADA'S GREATEST HIKING TRAILS

Canada's dramatic landscapes draw walkers from around the world. But with so many regions to choose from, it can be tricky to know where to start. Here's our pick, with routes to suit novices or seasoned scramblers. By Elnor Davies

West Coast Trail, British Columbia

DISTANCE: 46.6 miles

DIFFICULTY: Hard

DURATION: 6-8 days

Between the Vancouver Island villages of Port Renfrew and Bamfield, this trail spans terrain from coastal rainforest and cascading waterfalls to sandy beaches and sea caves. There are mightier trails in Canada, but this is for skilled adventurers: expect scrambling, ladder-climbing and river crossings.

It's open from May 1 to September 30. The paths are well-maintained and the weather is manageable, but those wanting a quieter hike should avoid the July-August high season.

Visitors must have a National Park Entry Pass — mandatory for entry into Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, where the trail is located — and a West Country Trail Backcountry Use Permit. parks.canada.ca

Meadow Lake Boreal Trail, Saskatchewan

DISTANCE: 83.9 miles

DIFFICULTY: Easy to moderate

DURATION: 6-10 days

A great introduction to long-distance hiking, this trail is relatively flat and well signposted. In Meadow Lake Provincial Park, it begins near the Cold River Campground in the west and extends east towards the village of Dorintosh.

With forestlands and glassy lakes, the Boreal Trail is most beautiful during spring and fall. It's a hotspot for birds, insects and deer, and wolves and black bears are common; hikers should use campsites' bear-proof food lockers and prepare meals away from sleeping areas.

The 13 campsites along the trail operate a 'leave no trace' policy and require registration before arrival. Hikers must have a Backcountry Permit, available from parks.saskatchewan.ca or the Meadow Lake Provincial Park Office.

Above: Sea views from British Columbia's West Coast Trail

IMAGE: GETTY



Lake O'Hara Alpine Circuit, British Columbia

DISTANCE: 6.8 miles

DIFFICULTY: Hard

DURATION: Day hike

For striking landscapes with no need to camp, this loop is ideal. Combining four short routes into a strenuous — but rewarding — circuit, the path meanders around Lake O'Hara in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains.

Hikers must be comfortable map-reading and route-finding, traversing exposed terrain, and following avalanche protocol. Until late June, many higher paths are still snowbound.

This extreme environment means the circuit is closed from October to May, and periodically throughout the year to allow wildlife to move undisturbed. Access is limited by a shuttle bus reservation system and, to minimize human impact on the ecosystem, groups must be fewer than six people. parks.canada.ca

Ganaraska Trail, Ontario

DISTANCE: 310.6 miles

DIFFICULTY: Easy to hard

DURATION: 10-20 days (complete trail)

This epic trail connects the town of Port Hope on Lake Ontario to Glen Huron in the Niagara escarpment. It incorporates many diverse landscapes, including the sandhills of the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Kawartha lake district and the rugged Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park.

With such a long route, hikers can pick a leg to suit their skillset and interests. Explore towns and villages on leisurely country roads or traverse the wilderness on demanding climbs.

The path is maintained by nine clubs who make up membership of the Ganaraska Hiking Trail Association. Practical details on each section should be sourced from the relevant club. Visitors need a day pass to enter the Ganaraska Forest. ganaraskaconservation.ca

Mont-Mégantic Loop, Québec

DISTANCE: 7 miles

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

DURATION: 4-7 hours

By day, this wonderful trail in the Mont-Mégantic National Park has impressive, panoramic views over the surrounding Appalachian Mountains. At night, it's one of eastern Canada's best locations for stargazing — part of the world's first International Dark Sky Reserve. The Mont-Mégantic Observatory sits at an altitude of 1,100m and offers astronomy evenings in the summer.

Access is limited between sunset and sunrise. Before visiting, hikers should check online advice from **SÉPAQ**, the park's managing body, at sepaq.com.

This part of Canada is beautiful year-round, but winter provides a glittering, tough-to-beat combination of snow and stars. Snowshoes can be rented at the park's visitors' center.