

GOING PLACES #1

KATE POCOCK

THE CANADIAN ROCKIES

**VIA THE KICKING
HORSE ROUTE**

There are train trips, and then there are rail journeys. There's the weekend chug-a-lug to visit Aunt Lucy, and then there's the *Rocky Mountaineer* – “the most spectacular rail journey in the world” ...

Take off your watches and put them away,” ordered our jovial onboard attendant, Alex, once we’d walked the red carpet and settled into our plush red train seats at the Vancouver station. For the next two days, we could forget our timepieces. Let the conductor and railroad worry about time and schedule as we rolled through some of Canada’s, if not the world’s, best picture-window views.

Alex’s second rule was also a hands-on directive. “Remember to wave,” he reminded us. “Or at least do moose-ears at the people on the platform on the way out,” he joked. Indeed, for 16 daylight hours we could all wave like Royalty to people along the track, river rafters and mountain gondola riders, cars stopped at level crossings and even fellow train-ers as we glided around long curves.

Then Alex instructed us about wildlife. Our fellow seatmates hailed from Germany, Japan, Britain and Australia, as well as from North America. They were thrilled to be within camera distance of



mountains and animals they’d only seen in ads. “If you see a bear or an eagle or an elk, yell so everyone can see it,” Alex advised. We got ready to yell “bear” or even “rocky mountain sheep” (the *Rocky Mountaineer* mascot) in half a dozen languages.

Alex then passed out free copies of the *Rocky Mountaineer* newspaper, filled with nuggets of history (more than 6,000 Chinamen helped build the railway), site trivia (Canmore was named after a Scottish king) and a map showing where we should have our cameras ready for a large osprey nest on top of a telephone pole or the magnificent Pyramid Falls. Then, with a blast of the train whistle, a lurch and a joyful wave to the *Rocky Mountaineer* staff on the platform, we set out on what is rated as one of the best rail experiences in the world.

For more than 100 years, since the Last Spike was hammered into the rail at Craighellachie, British Columbia, in 1885, Canadians have crisscrossed the country by train. But it was the vast, dramatic scenery of western Canada that provoked excitement for postcards sent home. “If we can’t export the scenery, we’ll import the tourists,” said William Van Horne, president of *Canadian Pacific Railway*. And import them he did, from all continents, to “ooh” and “aah” at the mountains they’d seen in railway ads.



But before any impromptu trivia games, wildlife spotting or fraternising with fellow seatmates though, it was time for breakfast. As the train rolled past the lush farms of the green Fraser Valley, Alex served fresh fruit and yogurt, banana bread, bagels and cream cheese with orange juice and coffee.

As we started to climb up and passed through the first of many tunnels, we sat back to enjoy the unstructured schedule and the magnificent picture show about to unfold outside our big windows.

You might think that sitting for hours could make one restless. But the morning sped by as we crossed the Alexandra Suspension Bridge, saw eagles soaring over Lady Franklin Rock and listened to Alex spouting historical lore and tales of Canadian rogues.

After lunch – a choice of cold salmon or chicken with corn relish, crackers and cheese, Caesar salad and maple cake – I stepped out on the small viewing platform to imbibe the mountain air, watch people rafting on the turbulent Thompson River, hear the mountain streams cascading down the mountains and scout for bears.

Joining me was a train buff, who'd taken

the Alaska railway, the Orient Express across Europe and the Shongololo Train Safari through South Africa. Yet this was his second trip on the Rocky Mountaineer. What lured him back? "For scenery, you can't beat this," he said waving at a lovely evergreen forest tinged with frost. "You'll go crazy tomorrow when we're travelling



through the big mountains," he predicted.

But that was tomorrow. Today, the sun was already sliding low and as we disembarked at Kamloops for an overnight, I was glad that I wouldn't be missing a speck of peak scenery.

During supper, we were regaled with the rollicking Two River Junction Dinner & Music Revue. The show was full of cornball humour, but fun to watch as

our waiters and waitresses acted and sang their way through the story of bandit Billy Miner and his cronies. He and pal ‘Shorty’ Dunn executed the first train hold-up in Canada, stealing a huge haul of gold dust, money and U.S. bonds.

Our own bounty – dinner – consisted of Canadian salmon, Alberta beef with horseradish and homemade fresh apple and peach pies topped with whipped cream. An evening walk after dinner was a necessity ...

The next day, we pushed out of the station near the site of Billy Miner’s last train robbery, and rolled by the pillar-like hoodoos, strange rock formations created after the end of the last ice age. We passed life-size replicas of a family of grizzly bears at Revelstoke. Passengers snapped pictures but so far no real ones. Lunch seemed almost like an interruption.

Then an announcement. “Welcome to the Rocky Mountains,” said our attendant as we wove through Glacier National Park between high peaks and up through what was an even better highlight for me: an amazing series of spiral tunnels. Through the heart of the mountain, the train moved upward like a corkscrew, loop after loop. It was so exciting as we hurtled each time into the dark and travelled the curves, pretzel-like, through the peaks.



Finally, approaching the shore of Lake Louise, we heard a shout: “Bear, over there, on the right!” Sure enough, a black bear was lumbering alongside the tracks, close enough for us to admire its shiny coat. Ignoring the shouting and pointing, it scampered up the bank and disappeared into the trees. We saw two more, then a scattering of elk – and just before Banff, our final destination, eagles soaring in the patchy blue sky.

“We’ll get to our destination not a second before we get into the station,” Alex had joked to the passengers. Well, we’d arrived. Time to fasten our watches and keep time again. The travelling postcard had come to an end. ❁

ONCE I THOUGHT I WAS WRONG, BUT I WAS MISTAKEN.

Grapevine’s John & Robyn Cooney have been asked to lead a 25-day cruise in Sept 08

MIDLIFE MADNESS IN Alaska & Canada

Vancouver • Inside Passage • Glacier Bay
Rocky Mountaineer Train • Quebec
Saguenay Fjord • Nova Scotia • Boston
– all in blazing autumn colours –

phone 0800 277 477

or email roger.glynan@lionworld.co.nz

estimated price \$14,865 – includes airfares, double-cruise, scenic train, hotels, meals, sightseeing, tips, etc

