

Close encounter

Where WILD things ROAM

A visit to the Canadian Rocky Mountain parks promises trysts with local wildlife and a chance to witness, at first hand, examples of human and animal camaraderie.

Text Supriya Sehgal

Eyes and ears affixed on Dieter, our guide to Jasper and Banff National Parks in Alberta, Canada, each one of us was transported to our own visions of him lying down in the thick forest, face to the ground and holding his breath, pretending to be dead. The moment was pregnant with tension—so much so, that we stood, mouths agape, unheeding of the cold drift rising from the valley.

Bear necessities

It was the summer of 2003 and Dieter had been on a solo hike through Jasper National Park when he found himself in the midst of an altercation with a grizzly bear. Grizzlies are known to be lethal if provoked or angered, and this situation was exacerbated by the fact that it involved two young cubs and a 'mama' bear. Quick thinking urged Dieter to slowly lie down on the muddy trail and feign death. Suspicious of the intruder, the grizzly came

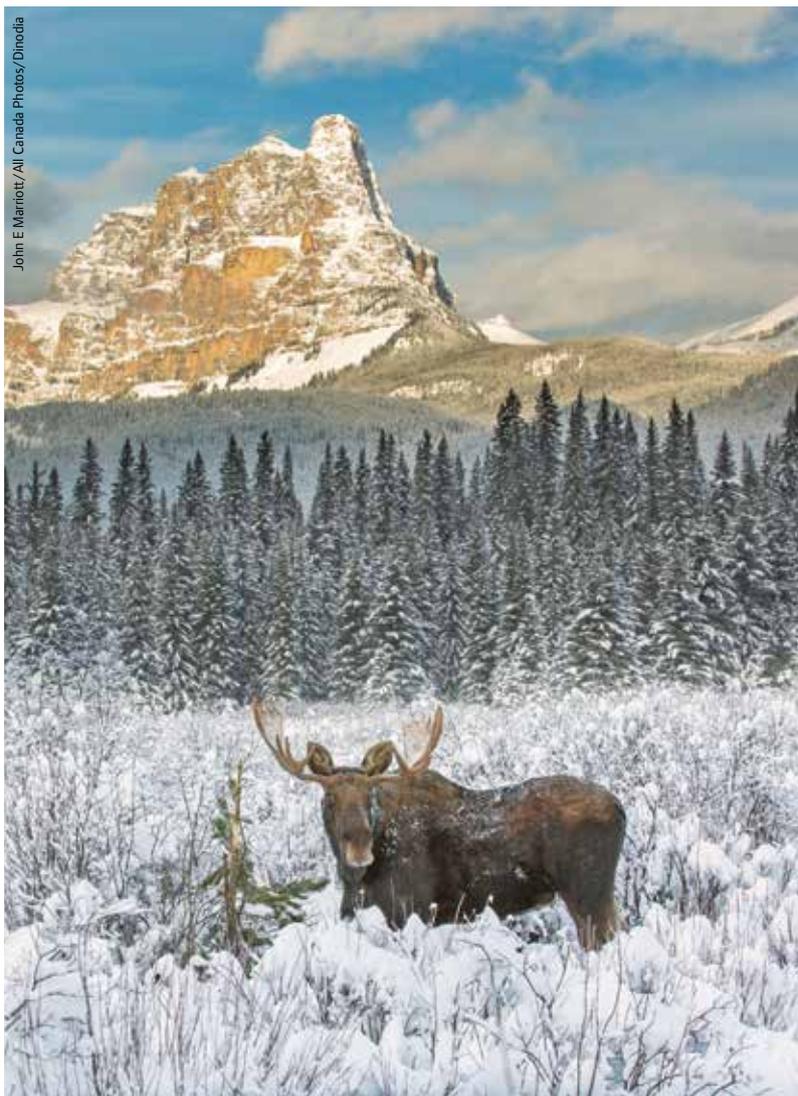
▲ Comprising primarily of boreal forest, prairie land and Aspen parkland, the Canadian state of Alberta, set amidst the Rocky Mountains, is a nature-lover's treat.



Supriya Seligal



John E. Marriott/All Canada Photos/Dinodia



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near, stuck her rancid mouth close to Dieter and nudged him. He remained his floppiest best. Presuming that he was dead, and hence not a threat, she plodded on, thumping her heavy paws. He held his position till she was out of earshot.

Only when Dieter's expression relaxed, did our own chests collapse in a sigh. This was just one of the many stories of animal encounters that he related over our week spent at Canada's Jasper and Banff National Parks. It was a wildlife-packed trip with four friends—one that had been on our bucket list for a long time. As we piled into the car after the pit stop, I couldn't stop thinking of our guide's near-death encounter. More than the chilling undertone of the tale, I was struck by Dieter's choice of words—it was he who had walked into the territory of the grizzly and not the other way round. Even when recalling this moment of fear, he implied

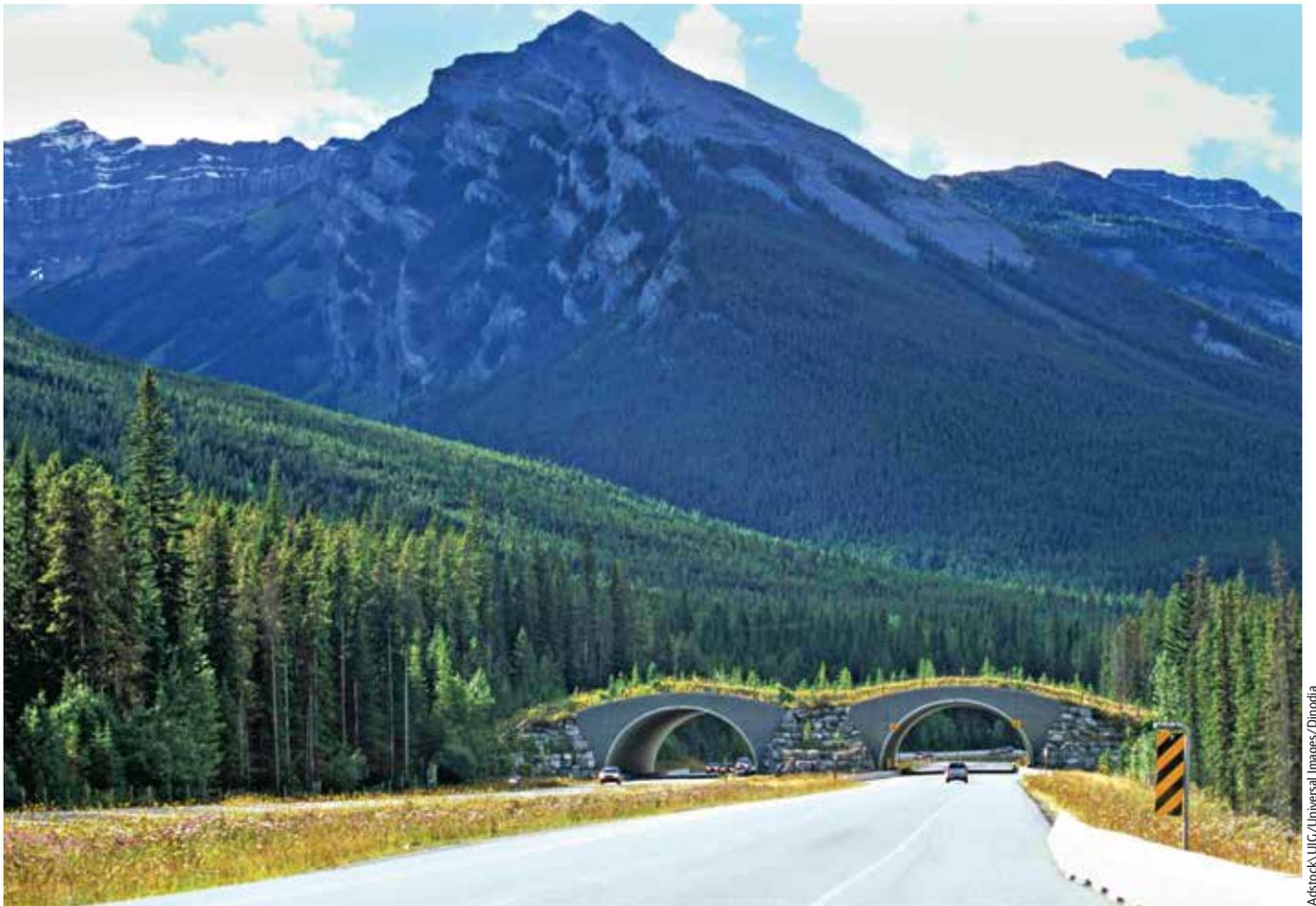
that he was the one who had intruded. In this narrative, lay a powerful lesson of human-animal camaraderie—a common concern in these small towns situated at the edge of a labyrinth of forests.

Safety first

Located on the eastern side of the Canadian Rockies, the Jasper and Banff National Parks form a part of the group of Canadian Rocky Mountain parks that have been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1984. Known for their diversity of landscapes and a robust population of animals, the parks are a top destination for wildlife enthusiasts. Here one can spot several animals iconic to the region, such as elk, deer, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, foxes, coyotes, wolves and moose. The delicate balance maintained between creating a tourist-savvy atmosphere and preserving a safe, protected environment for the animals is admirable.

This respect for the local fauna was all pervasive. A disapproving sway of the head accompanied the talk of statistics that indicated how often black bears and moose were killed under the trains of the Canadian Pacific Railways. Pure excitement exuded from anyone who spotted an elk or a bighorn sheep in their backyard. The personal investment that every inhabitant had in the animals that live around them was heartening. Adding to my joy were the wildlife crossings on the dark grey Trans-Canada Highway that bisects the densely forested areas of the Rockies. These animal overpasses allow creatures to travel from one side to another without having to cross the

▲ Above: The Jasper and Banff national parks offer visitors plenty of opportunities to view local wildlife. Pictured (clockwise from left) are a grizzly bear, bull moose and a member of the Pipestone wolf pack at Banff National Park.



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highway and put themselves or drivers in jeopardy. Since 1996, steps have been taken to curb wildlife–vehicle collisions and track animal movement. We whizzed under these incredible structures covered in a dense green blanket, picturing herds of animals taking a similar journey right above us. Similarly, the highway is also sprinkled with underpasses for wildlife.

Meet and greet

In a trip from Jasper to Banff nearby, that allowed us to travel on the fringes of the forest, we were lucky to see the

big five of the Rockies: a moose, grizzly bear, elk, bighorn sheep and a black bear. It was more than clear that the animals feel a sense of safety and often tread on the outskirts with ease. The few camera-wielding tourists withstanding, most people slow down for a quick look but carry on without disturbing the animals. In fact, such is the level of comfort that one often encounters animals even in the main town. I had heard some stories of such brushes and was delighted to return with my own. On my last day in Banff as I walked back from the local cemetery, a considerably large brown furry distraction strolled across my path—an elk had invited himself to walk about the town and visit gardens for a morning snack!



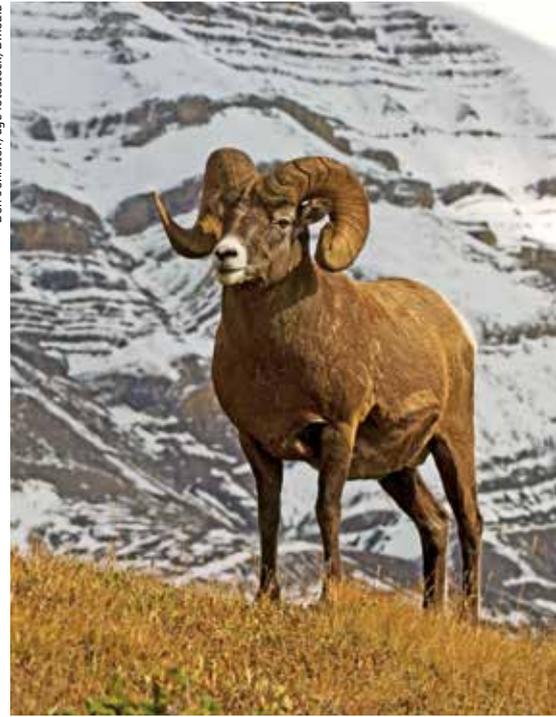
Supriya Sehgal

▲ Top: Animal crossings have been formed over highways in Canada to reduce the number of wildlife–vehicle collisions and fatalities. Right: A moose grazes serenely at Jasper National Park.

Don Johnston/age fotostock/Dinodia



Don Johnston/age fotostock/Dinodia



▲ Above and Right: The American Black Bear can be distinguished from its Asian counterpart by the lack of white markings on the chin; A Bighorn sheep at Banff National Park. Below: A view of Banff National Park. Seen here is Two Jack lake with Mount Rundle in the distance.

The fact that the Canadian national parks are able to accommodate the thousands that visit while keeping wildlife safe from the travails of tourism is something worth emulating.

Set on the western edge of Canada, Banff and Jasper are hotspots for adventure seekers in both winter and summer. Skiing, hiking, camping and cycling are common activities for locals and travellers alike. The fact that the Canadian national parks are able to accommodate the thousands that visit while keeping wildlife safe from the travails of tourism is something worth emulating. As I sat on a roadside bench, nursing my last coffee in the Rockies, I

thought about all the animal encounters over the last week: The shy moose couple along the road to Lake Maligne, the gentle grizzly bear sniffing the dandelions at the edge of the road, the reticent Bighorn sheep, the unbothered black bear nonchalantly looking at the cameras pointed at him and the elk that roamed the streets of Banff with abandon. A warm fuzzy feeling made me smile—and I know it wasn't just the hot coffee.

Tibor Bogner/age fotostock/Dinodia



Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways flies daily to London from Mumbai and Delhi. From there, one can fly to Calgary or Edmonton—the airports nearest to Banff and Jasper respectively—via our codeshare partner, Air Canada.

Accommodation

Banff Ptarmigan Inn is centrally located, allowing you easy access to the activities available around the town. At Jasper, one can stay at the charming log cabins at Alpine Village Cabin Resort.

For more information

Log on to www.pc.gc.ca