

All Aboard the Rocky Mountaineer!

For the fourth year in November 2009, **Rocky Mountaineer** (Rockymountaineer.com) was honoured with a World Travel Award in the category of "World's Leading Travel Experience by Train". The winners in 919 different categories were determined by thousands of travel professionals from 183,000 travel agencies, tour and transport companies and tourism organizations in over 160 countries.



Rocky Mountaineer's formula for such repeated honours from savvy travel professionals (as well as similar readers' choice honours over many years) seems to be a perfect mix of spectacular scenery and wildlife up close, impeccable service, first class dining and colourful frontier history, all delivered right on schedule! The railway operates a fleet of over 90 rail coaches, including nine locomotives, on its routes in Alberta and British Columbia. Until 2001, the nine locomotives were used by Canadian National Railway (CNR), then refitted and put back into service by Rocky Mountaineer.

Of the passenger coaches, 33 are RedLeaf Service single-storey coaches originally built in the 1950s. These classically-styled railcars crossed the continent countless times on CNR's transcontinental passenger rail route. There are also 16 GoldLeaf Service dome coaches custom-built for Rocky Mountaineer in the U.S. The first dome coach was introduced in 1995, with the newest one added in 2007. Each dome coach takes more than a year to build, constructed with shatter-proof glass overhead, and fully-equipped stainless steel kitchen galleys and dining facilities. GoldLeaf Service includes comfortable dome car seating above and a fine dining restaurant directly below, exclusively for clients in that car. With RedLeaf Service in the single-storey rail cars, guests receive meal trays in their seats.



Departing Jasper, Alberta in the northern Canadian Rockies and heading for Vancouver, I, along with other GoldLeaf clients, was whisked downstairs for our first hot breakfast complete with white cloth napkins and traditional silver service. I had barely managed the fresh fruit plate, warm croissants and half my ham omelette before we entered the historic Yellowhead Pass, indicating we were already leaving Alberta and entering British Columbia. By the time I had finished my second cup of tea, we had also glimpsed two black bears, several mountain sheep and an elk with her new calf, all at eye level.

Our two dome car attendants were invaluable guides keeping us informed of upcoming points of interest so we could have eyes and cameras strategically focused. Tales of aboriginal and settler history as well as nuggets of information about the wildlife, botany, ever-changing geology and geography along the route were both entertaining and educational.

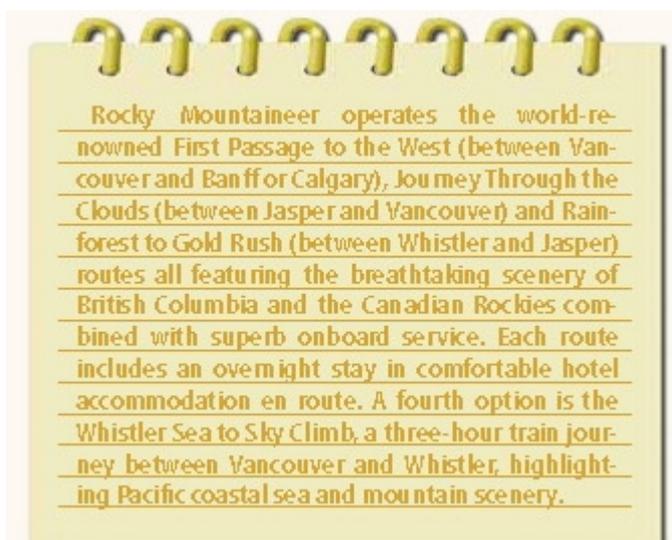
An invaluable silent partner on the journey proved to be the train engineers spotting wildlife well ahead of us, alerting attendants in each car via headsets, so they could announce on which side of the train we should keep a sharp look out. By the time our dome car reached the right spot, sometimes the animal had already slipped away, but more often, there it was, unperturbed by the frequently-seen train passing through its piece of wilderness.

Six black bears, including three cubs, were among many wildlife sightings before our summons to lunch. As though conscious of showing its best profile, one mature cinnamon-colored bear posed sideways, balancing all four paws on a small rock no more than 20 feet from our coach. On another occasion, a jet-black adult bear a similar distance away rose to full height on its hind legs and calmly watched the train slide by.



After a half-way-point overnight sleep at a Rocky Mountaineer hotel in Kamloops, we all returned to our assigned train coaches and found ourselves seamlessly rolling along the rails again by the time we could consult the breakfast menu. Before lunch, the train slowed to pay homage to the deep-canyon marriage of the Thompson and Fraser rivers each of which had been our companions off and on for the past two days.

Entering Vancouver, our farewell gift was oatmeal-raisin cookies still fragrant from the kitchen oven, heralding the imminent disembarkation of guests from the train. In just two days, bonds had been created, highlights shared and travel stories exchanged. Still, it is always best to end a journey with a sense of regret that it is over, surely the sign of a successful adventure.



By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her Travel with a Challenge web magazine is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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