



# RIDING HIGH IN THE ROCKIES

In the Canadian Rockies, a cowgirl-powered ranch takes riders into the heart of Banff National Park, retracing a tangle of backcountry trails first roamed by Indigenous guides and early pioneers

WORDS: ZOEV GOTO. PHOTOGRAPHS: VICTORIA WRIGHT



## The sun climbs slow and steady over the rust-red barns, spilling a golden light across the stable yard.

In the side paddock, a team of mules jostles, their heads low, long ears twitching as they snort and stamp impatiently. The beasts — horse-donkey hybrids — are being loaded up with gear for our expedition into Banff National Park, western Canada, saddle bags of supplies ballooning at their sides. Fuel, food, grain, linen and the inevitable bottle of whisky: it's a packing list untouched by time.

As the string of mules ambles past in a tethered line, hooves kicking up lazy clouds of dust, it feels like a scene from a Wild West flick, shot in glorious Technicolor against the swaggering backdrop of the Canadian Rockies. But a sidelong glance at the stable yard spins a different yarn, as the present-day wranglers grafting away look remarkably different to Alberta's early pioneers.

Striding towards me is Erica Woolsey, mule packer and no-nonsense guide for Banff Trail Riders. A ten-gallon hat veils her eyes from the rising sun, and scuffed cowboy boots peek out from beneath dirt-stiffened jeans that look like they could stand upright on their own — the perfect uniform for someone who spends more time on the trail than off it. "Guiding in the backcountry has traditionally been a male-dominated world," Erica says as she eyes a pen of preening horses she's been tasked with prepping for the journey ahead. "When I started out, I was the only female leading the longer, tougher rides," she recalls.

Fast-forward 14 years, and that trend has bucked. "Today, women make up around 80% of the 100-strong team here," Erica explains. She gestures towards the yard, where her crew is toiling away, some crouched under horses that outweigh them fivefold, hammering metal shoes onto hooves.

It's all in a day's work for backcountry guides, who take riders on multi-day expeditions into the far-flung reaches of Banff National Park in southwestern Alberta.

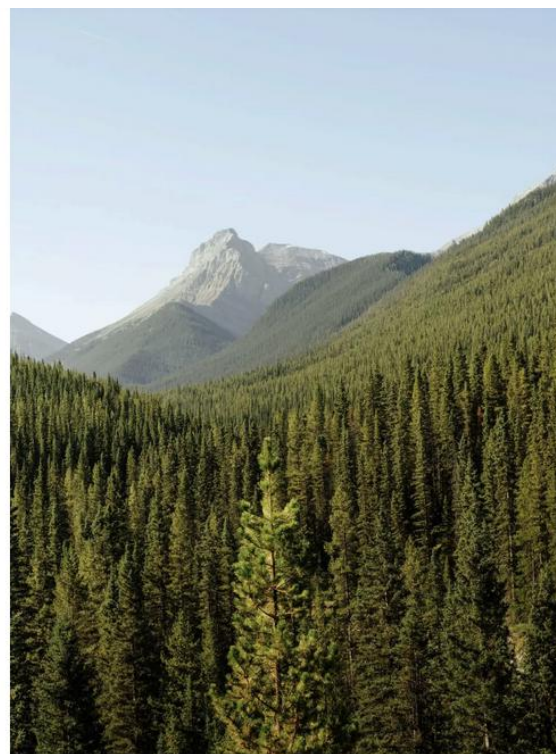
Established in 1885, Canada's oldest national park attracts over four million visitors annually, drawn here to hike, bike, canoe, camp and ride horses in the wilderness. Hungry for a taste of its frontier culture, I've travelled 110 miles west of Calgary to Banff Trail Riders, a family-owned outfitter on the outskirts of the resort town of Banff that's been giddy-up since 1962.

Its three-day trek dangles a tantalising carrot: the chance to discover soaring mountain peaks, emerald glacial lakes and pockets of alpine forest most easily accessed by steed. Adding to the spirit of adventure is the prospect of bedding down at Sundance Lodge, a rustic 10-room log cabin set within the national park. It requires a full day of riding to reach, but the payoff promises to be immense.

Our route will follow storied pathways, Erica tells me, ducking under a wooden fence and leading me into the sun-baked corral. "Over the years, these trails have been used by fur trappers led by Indigenous guides, to scout a route for the Canadian Pacific Railway, and by tourists after the discovery of thermal hot springs here in 1883."

In the Canadian Rockies, names such as "Wild" Bill Peyto and Tom Wilson — rugged, macho types who helped city slickers navigate the hills and hollers of Banff National Park towards the end of the 19th century — are still spoken about with a reverence more commonly reserved for Hollywood stars. No one's shouted about it but women have always played a crucial role in backcountry life, too, although their contribution was traditionally confined to the kitchen and often went unseen.

But the winds of change are blowing. Recent years have seen The West two-stepping into the mainstream, thanks to the popularity of onscreen dramas such as *Yellowstone*, fashion houses including Louis Vuitton and



Clockwise from top left: A typical view on a horseback excursion through Banff backcountry; mules bring food and supplies to the lodge, which is inaccessible by road; old photographs at the Buffalo Nations Luxton Museum in Banff, which showcases First Nations history and culture; a s'mores pie cooked up at Sundance Lodge. Previous pages: A farrier shoeing a horse at Banff Trail Riders; guide Lola Jung crossing Brewster Creek



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Left: Lola Jung is a self-taught rider and leads backcountry excursions in Banff National Park

Prada tapping into rodeo-ready looks, and Beyoncé's country-inspired Cowboy Carter album making cowgirling cool. "This lifestyle has definitely gained widespread appeal and things have swung the other way in terms of gender," Erica explains. It's an Old West plotline where the once bit-player cowgirls have suddenly stepped into the starring roles.

I hoist myself into the creaking saddle of a chestnut horse, given the satisfyingly Americana name of Montana. Following a quick lesson on riding posture from ranch owner Julie Canning — "shoulders back like a beauty queen, hips thrust forward like a whore" is a nugget of advice I won't forget anytime soon — I leave Erica to her work and head out into the foothills.

#### INTO THE WILD

A couple of hours into the trek, the low moan of trucks blowing past on the highway is replaced by the cheerful drum roll of a woodpecker hiding up a skinny pine tree. Shortly after that, my phone signal evaporates. It feels like we're riding back through time. I call out to Lola Jung, a fresh-faced cowgirl leading our group of riders. She swings around in her saddle to chat. "These are ancient trails and we're trying to keep some of those old-time traditions alive," she says as the tasselled fringe of her tan leather chaps, embossed with spiked maple leaves, ripples in the breeze.

While Lola looks every inch the cowgirl — a white Stetson hat perched upon her head, silky kerchief knotted just-so at her neck, and hair braided into a sleek plait worthy of a show pony — her buckaretté journey hasn't been a typical one. "Just a couple of years ago, I was a nerdy university student sat in a classroom," she says with some disbelief.

Since trading academia for blazing saddles, the self-taught rider has earned her spurs as a backcountry guide, she reveals, as we clip-clop through a dense mess of woodland ferns. There was the time when a towering grizzly bear, ominously nicknamed The Boss, stalked her group of horse riders through Banff National Park for a nail-biting two-and-a-half hours, before Lola steered them to safety. She's also mastered the art of saddle and bridle repair. "When you're out here in the middle of nowhere and something breaks, you just fix it," she says with a shrug, sounding as tough as the age-worn leather she mends with a needle and thread.

Having tethered the horses beside a creek, Lola unpacks lunch ingredients from weathered handmade wooden boxes, attached to her trusty sidekick mule via an intricate system of knotted ropes. "Looking at black-and-white photos from a century ago, this was also how folks back then moved goods around," she explains, before starting a fire. Our group, including a catalogue-handsome European couple on their honeymoon and some affable US retirees on a big-ticket holiday, tuck into hulking slabs of flame-licked steak, washed down with metallic mugs of cowboy coffee that's as gritty as the nearby riverbed.

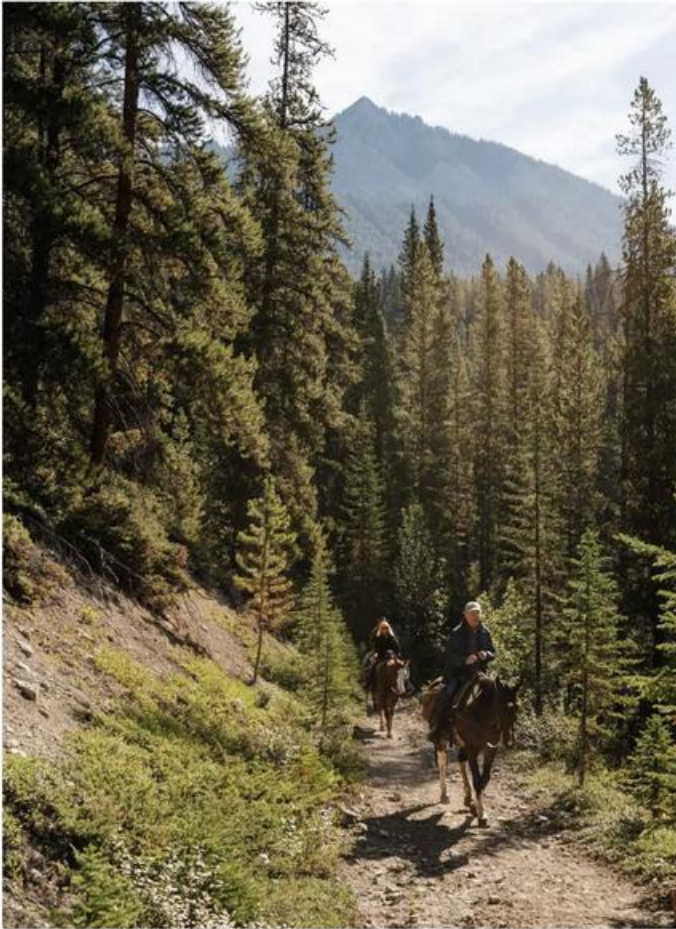
We're soon back in the saddle and forging onwards towards Sundance Lodge. "Technically, you could walk these trails on foot, but the beauty of riding them is that the horse has such stamina," Lola says, patting the neck of hers approvingly. "Humans stop for blisters, but these guys just keep on going."

Even astride a five-foot-high horse, this is the kind of scenery to make you feel as miniscule as an ant: gargantuan mountains, formed between 80 and 55 million years ago, rear up on either side. "What I love about riding out here in the backcountry is that the landscape is forever changing," Lola enthuses as we sink through a wildflower meadow, the mid-afternoon humidity now at lens-fogging levels. "We have all seasons in a single day, so things are constantly evolving. I've had snow, hail, rain and sunshine all within the span of a couple of hours."

#### MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

Before dusk, we arrive at Sundance Lodge, a homely timber property set against a thick spruce forest that seems lifted from a vintage Christmas card. It was originally built in 1991 in the shadow of Ten-Mile Cabin, a rest shelter dating back to 1923 that was once a popular stop for riders heading to Mount Assiniboine, a pyramidal peak straddling the border between the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia.

Our home for the next few days is a modern take on the early pioneer homesteads that once dotted this region — although rather more luxurious than its predecessors. Inside, a herd of taxidermy stags with crowning antlers peers down from the walls, while woollen Aztec blankets are slung across beds in the guest rooms. The only neighbours for miles



## Weary-limbed from a day in the saddle, we return to the lodge with the gait of John Wayne staggering through the swinging doors of a saloon

From left: Guests riding through backcountry in Banff; Lola Jung's custom-made chaps include maple leaves, Canada's national symbol

around, it would seem, are furry marmots. From the lodge's wraparound porch, the giant rodents are easy enough to spot on the grassy lawn, standing upright on their hind legs and sniffing the air like fat meerkats.

The following dawn, after a deep slumber, cocooned in our off-grid outpost, we swing back into the saddle, heading out for a full day of trekking. Our lasso-shaped route snakes along the Brewster Creek Trail, named after the Brewster brothers, a couple of pioneering explorers who helped kick-start tourism in the Canadian Rockies at the end of the 19th century by guiding visitors through the area. Just shy of 14 miles out-and-back, the ride is more marathon than sprint, but rewards with blockbuster views of the jagged Sundance Range of mountains.

Although the pace is restrained to a gentle walk, the terrain gets rough-and-tumble at points — we slosh through boulder-strewn streams and oozing mud paths one minute, teeter on the edge of a sheer cliff edge the next. But the horses know their steps better than a troupe of veteran ballroom dancers, I reason, and slacken the reins, trusting Montana to take the lead.

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of a saloon, to find a hearty hotpot simmering on the stove. A s'mores dessert, baked to a calorific goo in a heavy cast-iron skillet dangling from the kitchen's hooks, cools on the sideboard. Having turned the horses loose, we take our seats around a long communal table for the well-deserved feast. With our hair still faintly smelling of barn animals, conversation swiftly turns to our horses' idiosyncrasies; we sound like proud parents at a school PTA meeting.

After dinner, I join Lola beside the campfire, the fiery light coppering her hair and throwing fleeting shadows across her face. Women explorers have been out here for years, she's quick to highlight, as we cradle mugs of cocoa in our hands. Over a century prior to *#womenwhohike* trending online, US-Canadian naturalist and photographer Mary Schäffer Warren was exploring this park and turning her camera's lens to its rugged mountains.

By 1931, New York mountaineer Georgia Engelhard had conquered Mount Victoria — on the border of Alberta and British Columbia — an impressive nine times; a particularly challenging climb, it can present steep snow and ice conditions. During this period, Lola tells me, an artist and extreme peak-seeker called Catharine Robb Whyte



From left: Heather Black, a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy and founder of hiking outfitters Buffalo Stone Woman; Heather points out rosehip along the trail in the Bow Valley

could also be found “hiking out here while wearing her husband’s trousers”. An owl concealed in the inky woodland responds to the revelation with an echoing hoot. Having traded the confines of a skirt for the freedom of a pair of slacks, Catharine ruffled a few feathers. “It was taboo, as people thought that the dangers of mountain climbing were just for men,” Lola says. “But she had the last laugh, becoming quite wealthy, and there’s now a museum named after Catharine and her husband in Banff.”

With no connection to the outside world, life at Sundance has found its own deliciously languid rhythm (ride, relax, repeat) but it’s soon time to head back. Towards the end of the 10-mile return trek, with the lodge a hazy memory behind us and the town of Banff appearing on the horizon, Lola suddenly breaks into song. “I don’t wanna ride side saddle, I just wanna ride bow-legged, bow-legged like the boys.” We ride back into the stables, a posse of cowgirls awaiting our return.

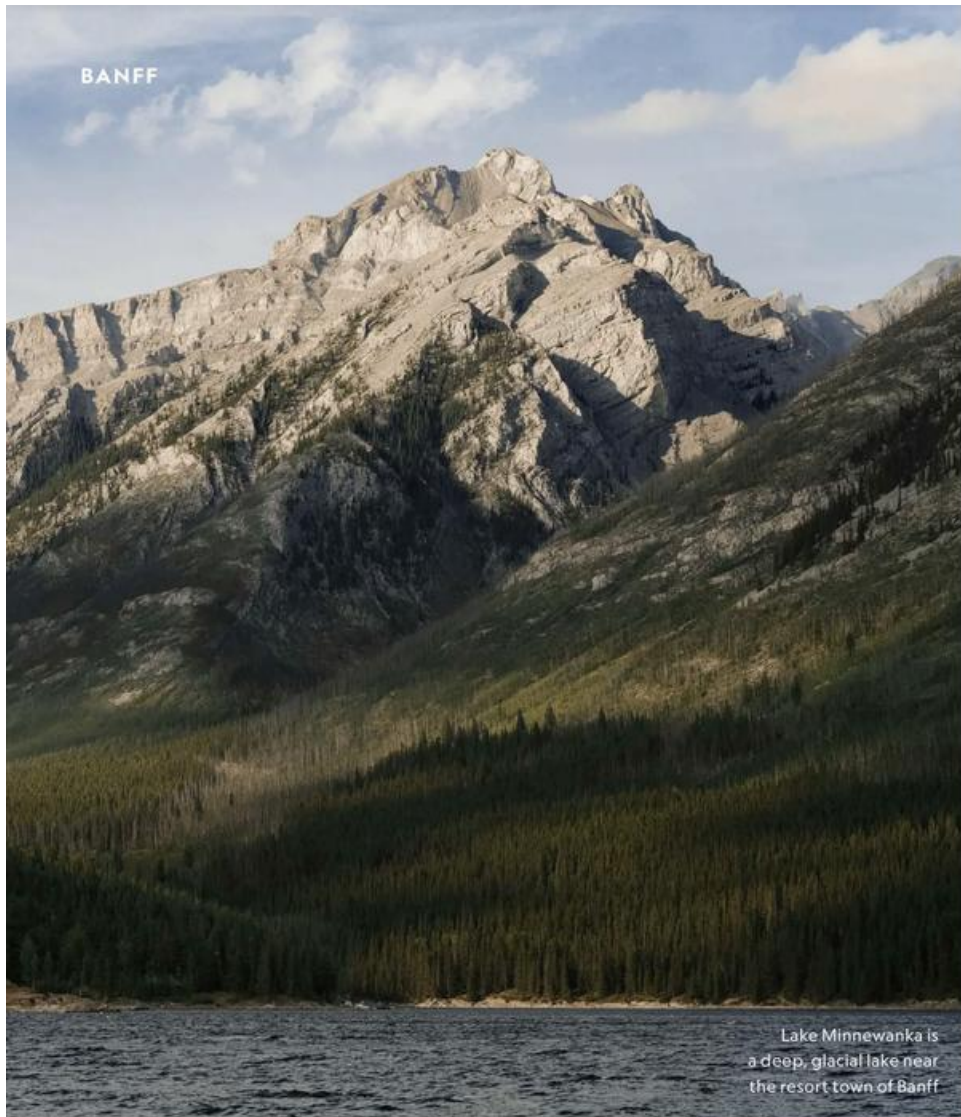
### MOVING MOUNTAINS

The following morning, back on terra firma, I make the short drive south east from Banff to Canmore. Situated in the Bow Valley, the former coal mining town rose from its sooty

ashes when it played host to the Nordic events at the 1988 Winter Olympics. These days, it appeals as a quieter alternative to popular downtown Banff, while still offering easy access to the great outdoors and cafes serving up a half-decent frothy coffee. On the outskirts of town, crunching to a standstill in the parking lot of the Grassi Lakes Trail, I find fiftysomething guide Heather Black. She leans against the boot of her car, buckling on a backpack, with a camera on a selfie stick strapped across her chest.

Early settlers poured into the Canadian West in serious numbers from the 1860s onwards, an immigration boom prompted by mining, oil and agriculture, but Alberta was by no means uninhabited territory prior to this. To learn more of its rich Indigenous history, I’m joining Heather, founder of hiking company Buffalo Stone Woman, on a trek. We’ll be hiking the popular Grassi Lakes Trail, a 2.5-mile jaunt that’s part of a network of 48 trails in the Canmore area.

Heather, a former female boxing champ, is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, a people who ranged across the Great Plains of western North America. Our tour this morning is part of broader reclamation of her culture, Heather tells me, as we stride towards the leafy



trailhead. “My ancestors were here around 10,000 years ago, using these mountains as medicine,” she explains, as we enter the sun-dappled woodland. “While the men were hunting, it was groups of women who’d be out here harvesting plants.” Heather points out a cluster of purple juniper berries sprouting nearby, traditionally dried and consumed as a tea to help ease respiratory problems.

“If you were troubled, an elder would advise you to come to the Rockies,” Heather continues, the earthy scent of moss rising up from the spongy forest floor. “Our people would fast here, sometimes for four days on end, in order to have a vision.” The mountains are still sacred, used by the Blackfoot people for ceremonial purposes to this day.

Following the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877, which ceded First Nations hunting territory to the Canadian government, the Indigenous people were forced to move onto reserves. “It was forbidden for my people to come out here, separating us from our land and culture,” Heather says. The 30-year exclusion period ended in the 1920s but it cast a long shadow, and her parents would avoid bringing her to the Rockies as a child. Heather grew up 190 miles south east of where we’re standing; her journey back to the range began 10 years

ago, following a family loss. “I came here to call upon the mountain spirits for strength,” the Calgary-based guide recalls. Noticing an absence of Indigenous people on the trails, she was inspired to start her own hiking company.

‘Go big or go home’: that was her mantra in the early days. “You see that mountain over there?” she asks. I follow her finger to a peak so mind-bogglingly high that it blocks out the sun. “That was the first mountain I summited. I was dressed in entirely the wrong kit,” she says, laughing, “but I still remember sitting up there and looking down with such a sense of achievement.”

We climb higher, until the terrain starts to plateau, revealing a mirrored lake the colour of jade. Glacial silt particles reflecting in the sunlight — the scientific explanation for the hue of Alberta’s bodies of water — have never looked so beautiful. I take a moment to drink in the scene and reflect on the people who have tended to this land, from matriarchs harvesting medicinal plants to hard-scrabble cowgirls working on the ranches. There’s nothing that new about the women of the Rockies taking the reins, I realise. It’s just that now, thanks to guides like Lola and Heather, we’re also invited along for the ride. □



#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Air Canada and Air Transat offer direct flights to Calgary from London. Air Transat also offers direct flights from Manchester and Glasgow. [aircanada.com](http://aircanada.com) [airtransat.com](http://airtransat.com)

**Average flight time:** 9h.

Car rental companies operate out of Calgary Airport. FlixBus, Banff Airporter and Discover Banff Tours run frequent daily shuttles between Calgary International Airport and Banff. [flixbus.co.uk](http://flixbus.co.uk) [banffairporter.com](http://banffairporter.com) [banfftours.com](http://banfftours.com)

#### WHEN TO GO

Summer sees long sunny days and average temperatures of 22C. June is the busiest time to visit Alberta’s Rockies so book accommodation and activities well in advance. Spring is a good time for wildlife spotting, with bears waking from hibernation. Autumn offers glorious leaf-peeping opportunities but some operators may wind down their activities as the weather turns, with an average temperature of 5C in October.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Fairmont Palliser, Calgary. From C\$328 (£176). [fairmont.com](http://fairmont.com)  
Hotel Canoe & Suites, Banff. From C\$249 (£134). [hotelcanoeandsuites.com](http://hotelcanoeandsuites.com)  
The Malcolm Hotel, Canmore. From C\$320 (£172). [malcolmhotel.ca](http://malcolmhotel.ca)

#### MORE INFO

[travelalberta.com](http://travelalberta.com)

#### HOW TO DO IT

Banff Trail Riders runs horse-trekking trips between May and October. It has two nights at Sundance Lodge, including all meals, horse-riding and trail fees from C\$1,699 (£945). [horseback.com](http://horseback.com)  
Canada As You Like It has a seven-night Alberta fly-drive from £1,455 per person, including return flights to Calgary, car hire, one night in Calgary, three nights in Banff and three nights in Jasper. [canadaasyoulikeit.com](http://canadaasyoulikeit.com)