

Calgary calling

By Briar Jensen

Gateway to the Canadian Rockies, Calgary combines cosmopolitan culture with western heritage.

Amidst the marble grandeur of the Hawthorn Dining Room in Calgary's Fairmont Palliser, built in 1914 for travellers on the Canadian Pacific Railway, General Manager Chas Jones presents showstoppers from the cocktail menu.

My gin-based Whispering Fog is a berry blush amidst a swirl of dry ice, while my husband's whiskey-based Spiced Solstice materialises inside a smoke-infused glass cloche.

Cheers to one of Canada's fastest-growing cities.

Calgary, gateway to the Canadian Rockies, is Alberta's largest city, but it proves easy to navigate, both on foot and in our hire car from our base downtown at the Residence

Inn by Marriott, which has one of Canada's top restaurants, the eclectic and cosy Orchard, right next door.

As first-timers to the city, with only a couple of days to explore, we join a few tours.

The Iconic Eats of Calgary tour, which starts at the Fairmont Palliser, proves the perfect introduction to the city's cool culinary scene.

Owner of Alberta Food Tours Karen Anderson, a food journalist, is passionate about the province's agrarian abundance.

Nearly one third of Alberta is devoted to agriculture: cattle outnumber people by a million.

Beef, wheat and canola seed top the exports, but root vegetables, chickpeas, mustard seeds and honey are up there. We sample the latter two on a

green salad tossed tableside, with mustard dressing made with honey from the hotel's own hives. Over a salumi board at Charcut, Karen shares the story of bison.

Considered a keystone species that roamed North America for thousands of years, they were decimated by settlers and colonising governments, in part to subjugate the First Nations Peoples who relied on them as a nose-to-tail resource.

Bison numbers plummeted from an estimated 40 million to a mere 400 or so.

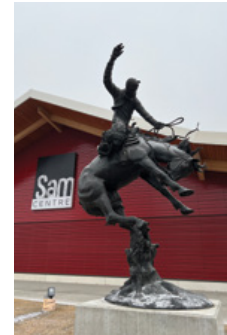
Thankfully, conservation efforts have seen numbers rebound. Wood bison are now protected and have been re-introduced to national parks while plains bison are farmed as livestock and appear on many menus.

Alberta's rich agricultural industry is celebrated every July at the Calgary Stampede, a 10-day extravaganza billed as the 'Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth'.

Like an Aussie agricultural show on steroids, it's a celebration of country and western heritage – rodeo, chuckwagon races, carnival rides and concerts.

It attracted nearly 1.4 million people this year and visitors can get a feel for the action year-round at the newly opened SAM Centre.

Resembling an enormous ranch house, it showcases the Stampede's 100-plus year history through interactive and immersive exhibits that invoke the fun, fear, drama and excitement of the Stampede.



Displays of saddlery, statuary, posters and pins fill the walls and we listen to personal stories including from the 'cow milking lady' and a proud First Nations representative.

Since its inception in 1912 the Stampede has included Indigenous culture, thanks to the insistence of founder Guy Weadick.

Back then First Nations Peoples were confined to reserves but Weadick sought exemptions for them to attend and display their tribal traditions.

A 270-degree multimedia projection on reclaimed barn wood plunges us into Stampede action.

"I kinda have butterflies in my stomach," says a rodeo rider before his bronco bucks across the screen to the roaring crowd.

"That electricity, you can just feel it," says a horsewoman as hoofbeats thunder around us.

I swear I can taste dust in the air and smell the famous pancakes.

Mechanical horsepower is the star of Gasoline Alley, a motor museum located at Heritage Park.

Meticulously restored vehicles from a 1905 Cadillac through to 1950s station wagons show automobile evolution, and motoring memorabilia includes gasoline pumps and garage signage.

Bow-tied guide Brian knows the story behind every vehicle, but most incredible is the fact almost everything was donated from the private collection of local businessman Ron Carey.

Studio Bell, home of the National Music Centre, celebrates Canadian music in all its forms from singers, songwriters and musicians.

There's a tribute to the Beatles' Canadian tour, outfits worn by K. D. Lang and Shania Twain, instruments to play and info on music therapy.

I love the Kimball theatre organ's array of sounds used to accompany silent films, but hubby is intrigued by TONTO, the aircraft cockpit-like analogue synthesizer, used by Stevie Wonder on *Superstition*.

Guide Tom describes it as a 'Frankenstein of instruments' requiring aircraft cables from Boeing to manage the electrical currents.

Later, we squeeze in a stroll with Judy from Calgary Walks starting at the Central Library, an architectural homage to blonde timber, curvaceous lines and natural light.

She shows us the Plus 15 climate-controlled enclosed walkways connecting city buildings, so called as they're built 15 feet above the ground, before taking in artworks in the Municipal Building and outdoor sculptures.

Heading out of town we stop at Calgary Farmer's Market West to stock up from the array of fresh and prepared produce, boutique brews and handmade sweets.

At Yamnuska WolfDog Sanctuary we learn the canines were bred as exotic pets after the end of the fur trade, mixing wolf with domestic breeds like huskies, German shepherds, or malamutes.

The dogs are classified by their percentage of wolf, but any amount makes them challenging pets, and the animals here have been rescued or surrendered.

Along with caring for them, the sanctuary provides public education promoting responsible breeding and ownership.

Following our guide, we crunch over snow and take a seat in an enclosure as she offers treats to the pack of four dogs.

Beguiling with fluffy coats and piercing eyes, they are timid and wary.

Wolfdogs are hard to train although these ones sit on command, but there's no toy they can't destroy.

Only two of them approach us cautiously for the treats we share in an open palm.

It's a sad story of domestication for profit – one the sanctuary is trying to right, while also advocating for wolves in the wild. [@](#)

KEY INFORMATION

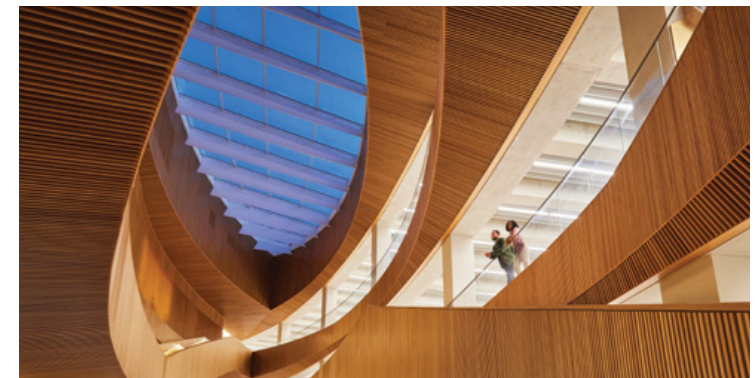
- Air Canada flies from Brisbane direct to Vancouver with onward flights to Calgary.
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Winter view of the Calgary skyline with the SaddleDome arena in the foreground. Photo Roth and Ramberg.



TOP The SAM Centre tells the story of the Calgary Stampede. Photo Briar Jensen.

RIGHT Curvaceous lines and natural light are a feature of the Central Library's architecture. Photo Colin Way, Tourism Calgary.