

On a high in Canada

From its spectacular mountain ranges to its welcoming lodges with fine dining and luxury at your fingertips, there's nothing to grizzle about on holiday in British Columbia

Story VANESSA MARSH



As our helicopter soars over the final snow-capped peak, our first glimpse of the charming blue roof of Purcell Mountain Lodge comes into view.

Set amid alpine meadows full of blooming wildflowers and fields of melting snow feeding gurgling freshwater streams, it's like we've stumbled into a fairytale.

Perched at 2150m above sea level, the only way to reach this Canadian backcountry lodge is a lengthy hike, or – as we opted for – a short helicopter ride across the Purcell Mountains from the town of Golden.

It's our fifth day in the Kootenay region of British Columbia, Canada's westernmost province, and even after enjoying some of the most spectacular scenery and hospitality on offer, our experience is about to be elevated even further.

As soon as we're off the chopper we're greeted by the staff, including owner and retired doctor Sunny Sun who is the

epitome of his name – always smiling, quick with a joke and a helping hand.

The former surgeon purchased the property in 2009 after falling in love with the lodge, which is now managed by the generous Jackie Mah who makes every guest immediately feel right at home.

Rustic yet luxurious, Purcell Mountain Lodge – or the PLM – was built in 1989, and in the colder months it caters to skiers of all skill levels.

It's the middle of the Canadian summer when we visit and while the snow is still melting, it's the perfect opportunity for hikes with guides Jason and Nat, who are a wealth of knowledge.

We waste no time in setting off on our first day-hike, trudging through patches of snow, across streams and over meadows, taking in the spectacular views.

Amid the constant babble from our group is the intermittent call of "hey bear".

It's a reminder I'm a long way from home. We are on constant alert for wildlife,

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Bears who are often found in these meadows, munching on dandelions

most notably the bears who are often found in these meadows, munching on dandelions or digging up squirrel burrows for a snack.

We're told the furry squirrels constantly scurrying across the landscape are like popcorn for the grizzlies, and the regular calls are to ensure we don't startle them.

After a day of hiking, we make our way back to the lodge where we're greeted with a cocktail and some apres-hike (after-hike) appetisers, skilfully prepared by chef Josef.

The Austrian chef, who grew up in the

Alps, is a master in the kitchen and keeps us well fed over the coming days, serving up five-star cuisine despite the remote location and the tricky array of dietary requirements in our group.

On our second day we tackle the hike to the top of Copperstain Mountain at an elevation of 2600m.

More flowers bloom by the hour as we walk through the alpine meadows – the flame-coloured paint brush flowers, bright yellow avalanche lilies and buttercups, and the white and purple heath and heather shrubs carpeting the landscape.

At the top of the mountain we're rewarded with spectacular views of Mount Sir Donald and a visit from the resident ground squirrels, aptly dubbed Jack and Jill, who scurry between us as we eat lunch.

It's not the first time we've seen the spectacular Mount Sir Donald, which has been dubbed the Matterhorn of North America.

Just days earlier we were on the western

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Stays start from \$340/night in winter and \$520/night in summer

Heather Mountain Lodge

Stays start from \$360/night in summer

Purcell Mountain Lodge

A three-night, four-day weekend summer package, fully catered including helicopter flights and guides, starts at \$4900 for a couple.

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track to enjoy all that British Columbia has to offer.

My journey began in the waterfront city of Vancouver, easily accessible with direct flights from Brisbane on board Air Canada.

I left the cold and wet Brisbane winter and entered a summer wonderland – complete with steamy weather, sunshine, and flower pots bursting with colour on every corner.

I enjoy a long bike ride around spectacular Stanley Park before checking in at Fairmont Waterfront, where a cocktail and a dip in the pool are the perfect jetlag antidote.

The Fairmont chain embraces a sustainable philosophy and I get a first-hand look at that with a tour of the rooftop garden and bee apiary.

The spoils of both are used in the hotel's restaurant, Arc. We're treated to a welcome dinner from the pollinator menu, courtesy of the rooftop bees – dishes include the honey-glazed duck breast, and scallops with honey roasted cashew nuts.

British Columbia offers endless opportunities for tourists.

Like an afternoon spent exploring the booming Okanagan wine region.

Guests can sip wine and enjoy a meal on the deck of Summerhill Pyramid Winery overlooking the expansive Okanagan Lake and watching for the fabled lake monster Ogopogo – a distant cousin of the equally elusive Loch Ness Monster.

Another highlight is a day spent in and around the mountain town of Golden.

Fifteen minutes from town is Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, home to 800kg grizzly bear Boo.

After a week spent desperately looking for bears in the wild, encountering Boo – who lives in the largest grizzly refuge in the world – is a special experience.

He came to live at the refuge as a cub after his mother was killed by hunters. Rangers now offer educational tours to the refuge to learn about Boo's species from a safe distance.

I'm only in beautiful British Columbia for a week but the brief taste has me ravenous for a return trip.

The writer was a guest of Destination Canada, Destination British Columbia and Kootenay Rockies Tourism



Hiking in the meadows of Purcell Mountain Lodge, main; the view from below the Illecillewaet Glacier; and, below, guests are reminded to be on the lookout for bears at Heather Mountain Lodge, while at Arc restaurant the cheesecake is hard to resist.



side of the rocky peak as we hiked through Glacier National Park.

As guests of Heather Mountain Lodge, we were treated to guided hikes with the wonderful Tim Patterson, the owner of Zucmin Guiding – an adventure tourism company offering hiking and camping with an Indigenous and educational focus.

Our 6.5km hike of the Great Glacier track takes us to a picturesque lunch spot below the retreating Illecillewaet Glacier and offers us the opposing view of Mount Sir Donald to the one we had from the Purcell Mountains.

Our hike begins amid the ruins of Glacier House, which was built in 1886 – one year after the completion of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway which connected the vast country's east and west coasts.

The Illecillewaet Glacier was one of Canada's first major tourist destinations and people would travel from all over the world to stay at Glacier House and

experience guided hikes to the glacier and its nearby peaks, Patterson explains.

More than a century on, it's easy to see what attracted those early tourists to the Selkirk Mountains.

We weave through the dense woods, making our way across a roaring river, fuelled by the melting snow, and past enormous boulders deposited by the glacier decades ago before it began its retreat – now kilometres from where it once stood in the days of those first visitors.

Eating lunch with views of surrounding mountains, our typically raucous group is reduced to silence – soaking in the powerful views.

Back at Heather Mountain Lodge, we toast our day with selections from the cocktail list while sitting on the deck admiring the view.

Set just off the Trans-Canada Highway, between the mountain ski towns of Golden and Revelstoke, and nestled between the Selkirk and Purcell mountain ranges,

Heather Mountain Lodge aims to deliver guests the "best day ever".

Whether it's guided hikes in the summer like we do, or epic heli-skiing adventures in the winter, the lodge is the perfect home away from home, complete with a wood-fired hot tub and sauna.

A highlight is the in-house restaurant Kindle – aptly named for its use of a live fire grill to highlight chef Stephan Drolet's signature of incorporating open-flame cooking techniques into his dishes. Food foraged from the 4.5ha property, including wild mint and morels, is regularly used in dishes, as well as fresh produce from the on-site vegetable garden.

Despite its convenient proximity to the highway, Heather Mountain Lodge feels like a secluded oasis.

Bunnies hop by, birds sing in the trees, and vibrant patches of wildflowers bloom in fields surrounding the main lodge and the two private luxury cabins.

But you don't have to go off the beaten