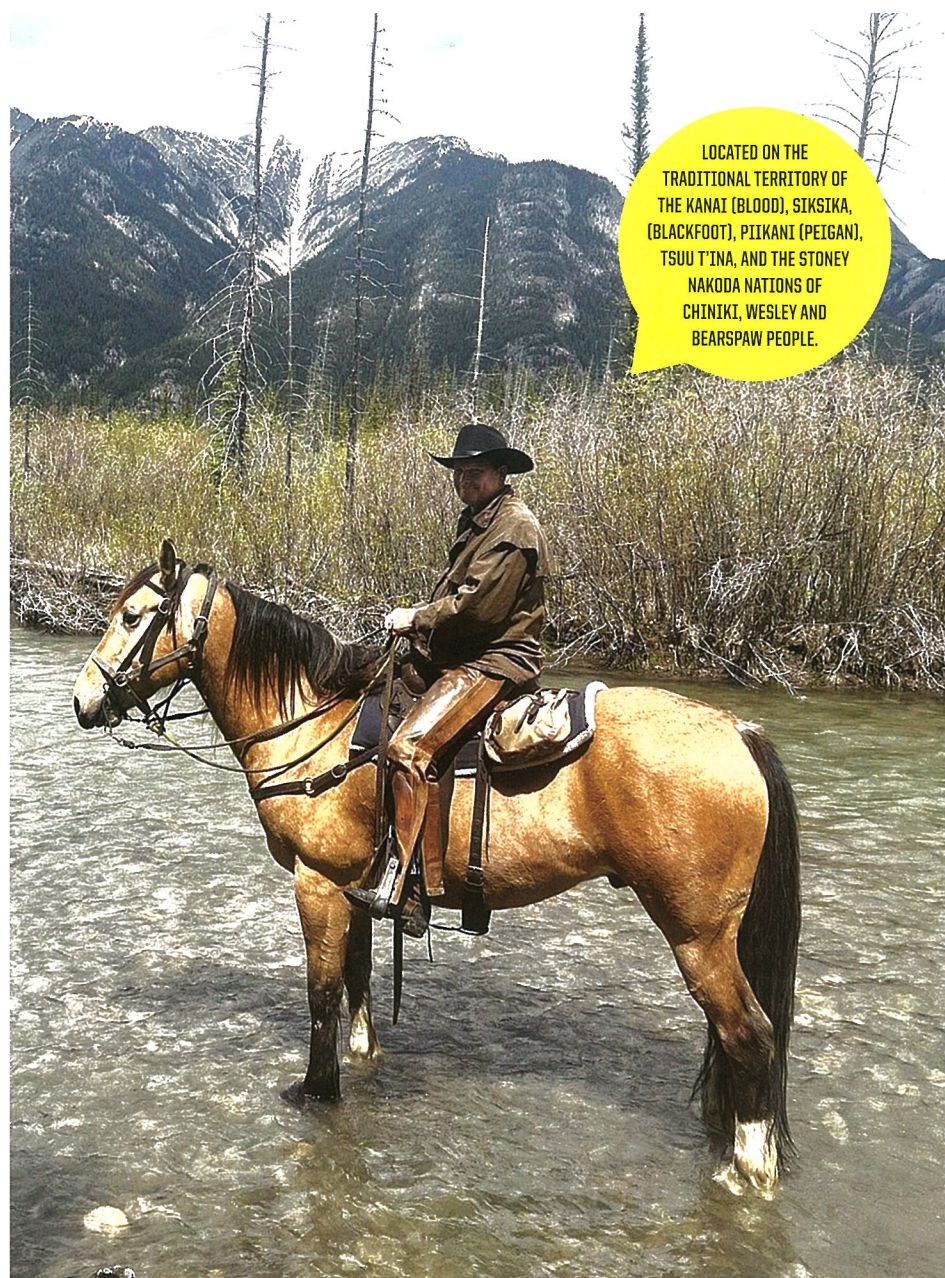


## DUSTING OFF MY MEMORIES

*A father and daughter reconnect on a Banff backcountry horse trip*

Apparently, time travel is possible. A cowboy sits on a hewn log chair with a guitar cradled in his arms. He strums and sings. His yodelling and sad country ballads are offered out to a starry mountain night. A few guests sitting around the bonfire join in—as do several of the pack mules, hanging their huge heads over the corral rails and braying comically like backup chorus singers.

It is a fitting way to spend our evening after a long day in the saddle. Brion Holland is a horse wrangler and guitar-picker working for Banff Trail Riders. He, along with fellow guide Courtney Gardiner, has led our group of 12 riders down the dusty trail to our backcountry sanctuary, Sun-



LOCATED ON THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORY OF THE KANAI (BLOOD), SIKSIKA, (BLACKFOOT), PIKANI (PEIGAN), TSUU T'INA, AND THE STONEY NAKODA NATIONS OF CHINIKI, WESLEY AND BEARSPAW PEOPLE.

dance Lodge in Alberta's Banff National Park. For me, it is like a journey back in time.

It was in the spring of 1983 when, with a fresh journalism degree in my back pocket, I hopped on a passenger train heading westward from Ontario to the Rockies and Banff. I felt I had earned a summer break before buckling down. Apparently "getting serious" was not in my immediate future though, as I found comfort and a quirky niche in this mountain town and put down roots for a time, wiling away a decade playing cowboy.

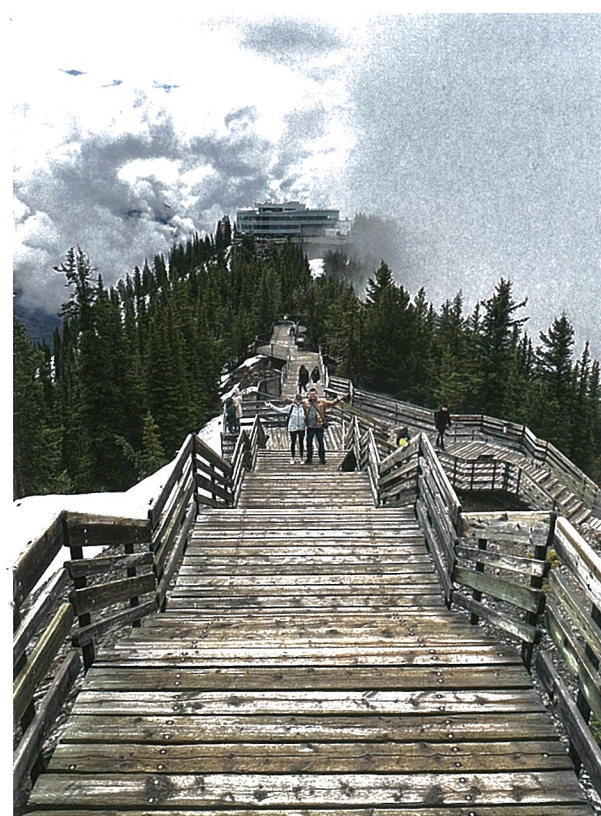
Now, I have decided to test the adage—can you go back? I have read recently of a new travel trend coming out of our prolonged shutdown. Not only is travel being concentrated closer to home, but also focused on trips where memories and nostalgia might drive us to return to familiar destinations, perhaps to a place where we travelled as kids with family. For me, Banff was the embodiment of my most

idyllic young adult memories, all bundled into one place, a place where I transformed myself from boy to man.

**MY OLDEST DAUGHTER** Kayla, who I have brought with me on this return to Banff adventure, was born 29 years ago while I was in the backcountry guiding a six-day pack trip. It was always to be my final ride, but she entered the world three weeks early and I had a busy day; finding out by camp radio that my wife was in labour, and then riding (in a hurry) 24 kilometres to town, arriving just a bit too late to be by my wife's side. Suddenly, "getting serious" had found me.

So, three decades since family obligations had taken me away from this place, I was back. For my horse-crazy daughter, this was her first Banff experience. Our group of 12 riders had met in the morning at Warner's Stables and set off westward alongside the tranquil Bow River. Often people will comment that Banff is just too

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**LEFT:** Nearly 40 years has passed since the author guided horsepacking trips in Banff National Park; now he returns to be guided himself, along with his daughter, for a memorable re-creation. **ABOVE:** On this trip, the author (top) and his daughter (bottom) re-create a snapshot from the author's horseback-guiding days (middle).

busy nowadays. Well, as always, when you venture a short distance from the townsite on a hike, bike or horse, the people disappear and you are left with only quiet and sheer awe-inspiring beauty.

We stop on the bank of the Bow River, unpack Tanya the lunch mule, boil up some cowboy coffee and grill some steaks over the fire. After lunch, the trail takes us high along the valley wall for splendid views, before dropping back down to Healey Creek. Our sure-footed horses criss-cross the turbulent, boulder-strewn river, before clamouring up the bank to our destination.

**SUNDANCE LODGE WAS** built during my watch, a beautiful log lodge constructed in 1991, a 16-kilometre ride southwest of Banff. With 10 guest rooms, two bathrooms, living room with fireplace, kitchen with communal dining table and a large inviting porch—this is backcountry luxury, with handmade furniture, log beds, solar panels and thus, for weary riders, plenty

of hot water in the showers. I loved the family-like energy as we sat around a long dinner table enjoying salmon served by camp cook Zachary Blease.

For me it feels different being a guest rather than a guide. Previously, I would have unrolled my bedroll in the bunk/saddle shed across the creek, to be lulled to sleep listening to the horses and scurrying mice. I wonder if the guides would mind me knocking on their door tonight, but decide instead to enjoy the lodge's comfortable bed—I am getting older.

Although it is the equine adventure that has called us back to Banff National Park, my daughter and I plan to stay awhile after the ride to enjoy some different mountain experiences. In a pilot project implemented from 2022 to 2024, Parks Canada has closed the Bow Valley Parkway in spring and fall to vehicle traffic. So, we exchange horses for e-bikes and set off on a 60-kilometre cycle from Banff to Lake Louise. Without the rabble of automobiles, the

parkway is very wildlife friendly. We stop to view elk, mule deer and even a black bear and cubs who play amongst the sun-bleached stumps and logs on an open grassy slope. Sheep gather along the line where vegetation meets rock. A young bull moose with velvet covering his new antlers plods through a marshy section below us. At Lake Louise, we load our bikes on public transport for our return journey.

Banff itself has grown slightly, matured in luxurious ways and invited in a few more visitors. The reasons the people come, however, have not changed. Its spectacular setting remains the same. There are also some thoughtful innovations meant to alleviate congestion in the townsite's bustling core. The downtown blocks are now closed to vehicle traffic, so cafés and patios have spread out into the street. Hybrid busses shuttle guests efficiently to anywhere they want to go, thus encouraging visitors to park their vehicles.

We take advantage of the transit to enjoy some touristy things. On a drizzly morning we take the Sulphur Mountain gondola on an eight-minute ascent through swirling mist and low-hanging clouds, taking a chance that we will see anything from the summit. The inclement weather means we almost have the mountain to ourselves—and when the wispy clouds disperse, we are left with dramatic vistas down to the townsite. We tour the Banff Springs Hotel, Bow Falls, the Cave and Basin where this National Park (Canada's first) was born and the wonderful Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, which tells the stories of the early guides and outfitters who essentially opened the park.

**I MUST ADMIT,** I had returned to Banff a bit smug—convincing myself that the town and park would not be the same, not as "cool" or with the same adventurous vibe as the Banff of my youth. It would have grown too big, become too commercial, would not be as wild or carefree. I was wrong. I saw my mistake in the eyes of my daughter, awe-struck seeing Banff for the first time. I realized if she wasn't married, I might be heading home alone. I know how that works. I saw it in Brion, our horse guide—he was a young me.

He asked me, contemplatively, how I knew when it was time to leave and move on with life. "You will know," I told him. "Don't be in a hurry."

The townsite might have matured, but it is that evolution that makes it worth revisiting. Banff still has its magic and allure on full display. I was happy to be back—with my daughter—in the place where it all began. ✕