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# BANFF THEN & NOW

Three decades on, park and town retain irresistible mountain magic

JAMES ROSS

It is mid-May, 1983. I step off a train in Banff after a three-day, cross-country journey. Dragging along a duffel filled with horse gear and clothes, I set off into town in search of work. I plan to reward myself for my recently earned university degree with a summer of adventure in this beautiful mountain town — not knowing then that summer would stretch to summer, and I would while away a whole decade working here as a cowboy.

In September 1993, my affections for a town, a national park and a lifestyle were suddenly focused on family. I was guiding a six-day pack trip when I received a message on the camp radio that my wife had gone into labour. This was always meant to be my final ride, but a daughter was on her way, three weeks early, and I faced a busy day — riding (in a hurry) 24 kilometres to town, arriving just a bit too late to be by my wife's side.

Now, three decades since family obligations had taken me away, I decided to test the adage — can you go back? And I had not come back alone — accompanying me is that daughter, for her first Banff experience, so to speak.

**THE RIDE**

Our group of riders gathered in the morning at Warner Stables for a trip with Banff Trail Riders to Sundance Lodge, 16 km southwest of town. After the gear was packed on mules, we met our two guides, Calgarian Brion Holland and Courtney Gardiner of Sarnia,



Sundance Lodge on Healey Creek offers a comfortable retreat for weary riders. PHOTOS: JAMES ROSS

Ont., and our horses. Mine was a stout dun named Trooper. “Are you looking forward to this as much as I am?” I whispered in his ear. The question was meant to be rhetorical, but Trooper answered with a sharp expulsion of air, from both ends of his body.

We set off westward alongside the tranquil Bow River, stopping on its banks to unpack Tanya the

lunch mule, boil some cowboy coffee, and grill steaks over the fire. After lunch, the trail took us high along the valley wall for splendid views, before dropping back down to Healey Creek. Our sure-footed horses criss-crossed the turbulent, boulder-strewn river, before clamouring up the bank to our destination.

Sundance Lodge was built in

1991 with 10 guest rooms, two bathrooms, a living room with a fireplace, a kitchen with a communal dining table, and a large inviting porch. As a guide, I remember unrolling my bedroll in the saddle shed we shared with mice, squirrels and the occasional brave marmot. Conversely, the lodge is luxurious, with handmade furniture, log beds, solar panels and thus, for weary riders, plenty of hot water in the showers. I love the family-like energy as the guests gathered around the dinner table enjoying salmon served by cook Zachary Blease. Though I missed the camaraderie of the rustic Bunky, I decided to suffer in my comfortable lodgings without complaint — I am older now! We returned to town the following day, and in a nice gesture (or was it a test?) the guides let me pack the lunch mule.

**YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

Back then it was Wild Bills, the Silver City Saloon, King Eddy, the Maggie and Stump, Grizzly House and the Mount Royal Express (where I met my wife).

Now innovative and unique new dining options include Chuck's Steakhouse (for the best steak I have had and Caesar salad made at your table), Una Pizza and Wine, the Park Restaurant and Distillery, and Three Bears Brewing. We stayed at the Moose Hotel with its rooftop hot tubs, a great place to comfort our saddle-wear backsides.

**To plan a visit:** Contact Banff and Lake Louise Tourism at [www.banfflakelouise.com](http://www.banfflakelouise.com)

**BIKING THE PARKWAY**

In a pilot project from 2022 to 2024, Parks Canada is closing the Bow Valley Parkway to vehicles in spring and fall. So, my daughter and I exchanged horses for e-bikes and set off from Banff to Lake Louise. Without automobiles, the parkway is very wildlife friendly, the parkway is very elk and deer.

A black bear and cubs played among the sun-bleached stumps, sheep gathered where vegetation meets rock, and a young bull moose plodded through a marshy section below us. Before departing Banff with our rentals, the clerk had clipped a can of bear spray onto my bike for the journey.

I assumed he meant us to share, or perhaps he knew that if we had a grizzly encounter, I would be both the one lagging and the better food source. Without incident, at Lake Louise, we loaded our bikes on public transport for our return journey.

*James Ross is an award-winning travel writer and a bestselling author — and he was also once a Banff cowboy and guide.* [www.thejamesross.ca](http://www.thejamesross.ca)

**AROUND THE TOWN**

I must admit, I had returned to Banff convinced that the town would not have the same adventurous vibe as the place of my youth. It would have grown too big, too commercial, and would not be as wild or carefree. I was wrong. The townscape might have matured, but Banff still has its magic and allure on full display.

There are improvements, too. Banff's downtown blocks are closed to vehicle traffic. An efficient fleet of environmentally-friendly buses shuttle visitors. We took advantage of the transit to enjoy some touristy things. On a drizzly morning, we took the Sulphur Mountain gondola through low clouds, taking a chance that we would see anything from the summit.

The inclement weather meant we almost had the mountain to ourselves — and when the wispy mist dispersed, we were left with dramatic vistas. We also toured the Banff Springs Hotel, the Cave and Basin National Historic Site (birthplace of Canada's national parks), and the wonderful Whyte Museum.



James Ross returns to Banff nearly 30 years after he left the town working as a horseback guide.



Kayla Ross joins her father on a trip back to Banff 30 years after he left town once she was born. They cycled the Bow Valley Parkway.



Banff Trail Riders wrangler Brion Holland cooks steaks on grill for overnight guests.



Kayla Ross enjoys the expansive view of Banff from atop the Sulphur Mountain Gondola.