

See all Travel



By Sarah Marshall

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How do you experience the best this country has to offer in a two-week trip?



By following the ultimate itinerary created by our expert

Vastly diverse and staggeringly beautiful, Canada is almost too overwhelming to comprehend. Stretching 7,560km from east to west and spanning six different time zones, the world's second largest country ranges from steep peaks and glistening icefields to dense fairytale forests and sprawling prairies with gaping skies.

It would be impossible to see it all in one trip – although contestants in the new series of BBC One reality game show Race Across the World are attempting the (almost) unthinkable, navigating from Pacific Ocean west coast city Vancouver to St John's Newfoundland in the Atlantic-carved east.

Their gripping journeys are set against equally dramatic backdrops, reminding us why this magical wilderness – still 80 per cent uninhabited – can stir emotion and spark imagination like nothing else.

Our own two-week itinerary focuses on the west of the country in the provinces of British Columbia and Alberta, lauded for their wildlife, mountain scenery and superb national parks. Find bears fishing for salmon in streams gushing beneath towering cedars as thick as Corinthian columns, listen to waterfalls thunder into deep gorges and hike the shores of glacial lakes so sparkly they could be laced with gems.



The trip can be done in either direction; [Vancouver](#) and Calgary are both well connected with international flights. And there's always the option to pick and choose activities or extend by a few days.

Although distances can be long, travelling by road is one of the best ways to appreciate the ever-changing views. Routes like the Sea-to-Sky Highway (between Vancouver and Lillooet) and the Icefields Parkway (linking Jasper with Lake Louise) are world class.

Rather than connecting A to B, drives are part of the experience – watching marmots scamper along rock faces as sunlight twinkles on glaciers and peaks tear through silky blue skies. But even if your trip is taken at a slower pace, you'll be racing – like those TV contestants – to come back for more.

THE PERFECT HOLIDAY IN CANADA



Vancouver



DAYS 1 & 2



The glorious cityscape of Vancouver | CREDIT: Getty

Seaside strolls and city luxury

Surrounded by mountains, forest and ocean, Vancouver is a gentle introduction to Canadian outdoor life. Several direct flights (under 10 hours) operate from London ([British Airways](#), [Air Canada](#), [Finnair](#), [Lufthansa](#)). To beat jet lag, resist falling asleep early by taking a stroll along the Seawall, the world's longest uninterrupted waterfront path extending 28km. Stick to the section in front of Stanley Park for the best sights; find a 100-year-old lighthouse and several totem poles at the Brockton Point headland and admire the engineering beauty of the Lions Gate suspension bridge, originally built by the Guinness brewing family. Stay in the centrally located [Rosewood Hotel Georgia](#), a luxurious reimagining of an historic building where Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and British royalty have all slept.



Totem poles at Brockton Point | CREDIT: Getty

Victorian neighbourhoods and local markets

Wake up early to explore Gastown, Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood, where Victorian buildings rise from cobblestone streets and an antique steam clock whistles on the hour. Browse First Nations art galleries, souvenir shops and trendy boutiques. Climb the 167-metre Vancouver Lookout for a view of the skyline. Take note of restaurants to revisit later – Mexican [La Mezcaleria](#) and Italian [Di Beppe](#) are good options – and continue to Granville Island Public Market.



The Vancouver Seawall extends for 28km | CREDIT: Getty

A 30-minute walk will raise an appetite for creamy sea urchins or gooseneck barnacles hand-harvested by First Nations fishermen on Clayoquot Sound. Save space for dinner that evening at [Salmon n' Bannock](#), celebrating indigenous cuisine, or one of eight one-star restaurants featured in the inaugural [Michelin guide](#).



Vancouver Island



DAYS 3, 4 & 5

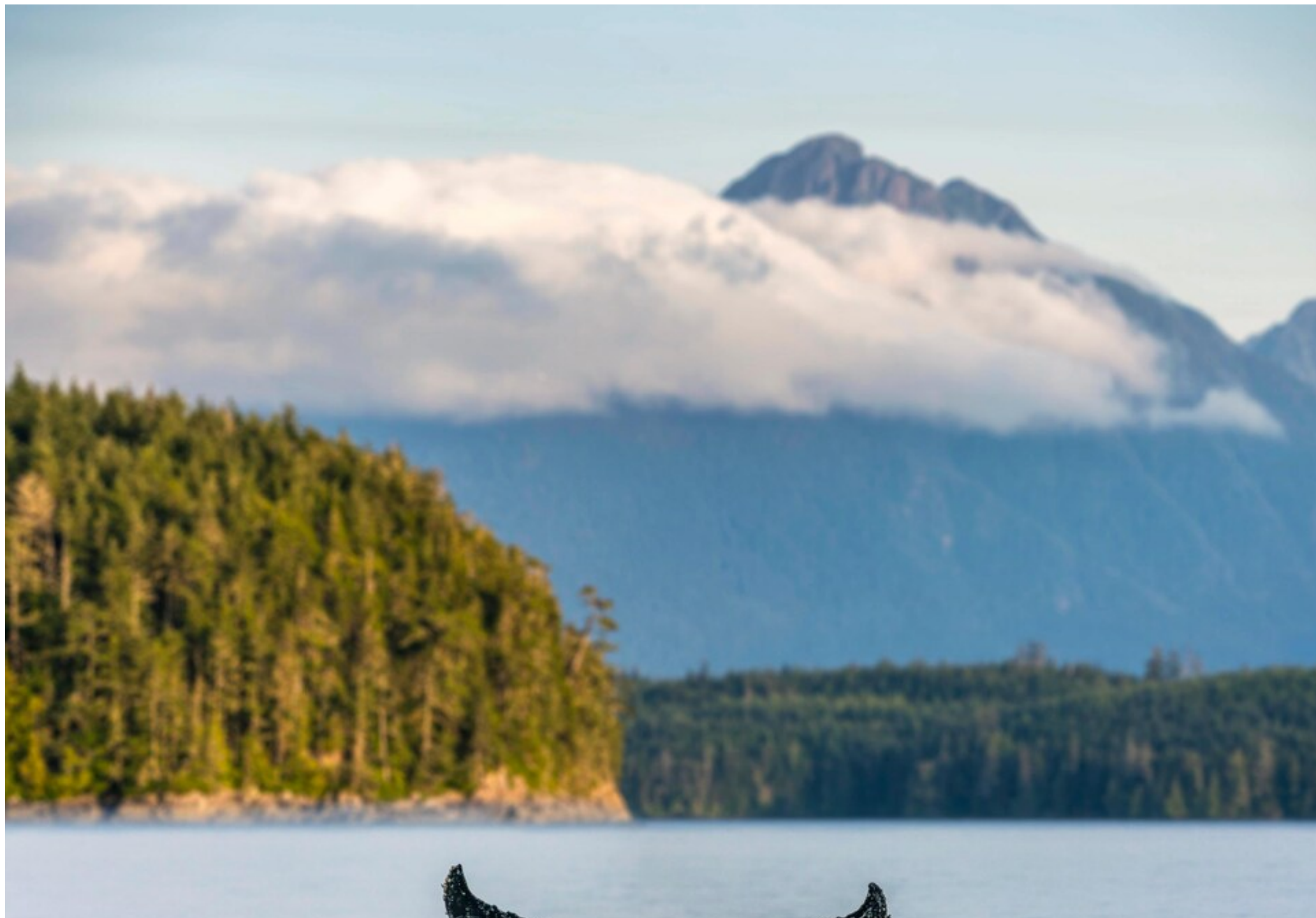


The surf paradise of Tofino | CREDIT: Getty

Ocean views and fine dining

Now it's time to hit the road. Collect a hire car, to be used until your final day in Calgary. (Some firms charge zero drop-off fees). British Columbia's best wildlife can be observed on Vancouver Island; grizzlies fish salmon in the streams of temperate rainforests, orcas skirt deserted shores and bald eagles swoop in the shadows of snow-capped mountains.

Take the [BC Ferries](#) car ferry from Horseshoe Bay on the mainland to Nanaimo (1 hour 40 mins). Enjoy a scenic drive across the island to wild, wave-crashed surf town Tofino (3 hours – although factor in multiple photo stops, including [Coombs Old Country Market](#) where goats graze on the roof). Stay slightly outside town at the rock-edge [Wickaninnish Inn](#), for bedside ocean views and fine dining.



Sign up for a whale-watching tour | CREDIT: Getty

Whales and kayaks

Rise early for a cruise along the rocky shorelines of Clayoquot Sound to find black bears foraging for crabs and clams. [Jamie's Whaling Station](#) operate trips from April to October, timed to the tides, or try one of their whale watching tours (both around 3 hours). Continue driving to Ucluelet (45 minutes), where — if time allows — a hike on the Wild Pacific Trail is recommended. The 2.6km Lighthouse Loop passes through thick forest to trace a swell-smashed headland and an ancient First Nations' canoe beach. Look out for the blows of 20,000 migrating Pacific Grey whales in March. For the afternoon, book a customised half-day kayak tour with [Majestic Ocean Kayaking](#) through Barkley Sound and the Broken Group Islands.



Craft beer and forest walks

It's a five-hour drive packed with show-stopping scenery to reach provincial capital Victoria. Passengers can enjoy a cold beer at [Mount Arrowsmith Brewing Co](#) in Parksville along the way. A quick detour off the highway lies Duncan, the City of Totems on ancestral land belonging to the Cowichan Tribes.

About 45km outside Victoria is the new [Malahat SkyWalk](#), a suspended boardwalk through the forest spiralling up to a lookout point with views of Mount Baker and the glittering Salish Sea. Pop into the on-site café for local produce from farms and wineries in the Cowichan Valley. Or wait until you reach your final destination, a laidback city with independent restaurants and a lively craft beer scene. Sleep at the grand [Fairmont Empress Hotel](#), overlooking the Inner Harbour.

Canadian wildlife checklist

Follow our expert's route and tick off sightings of Canada's wildlife.

[Expand to read more](#) +



Whistler



DAYS 6 & 7



The mountains of Whistler are just as impressive in warmer months | CREDIT: Getty

Soaring views and bohemian towns

Blooming for more than 100 years, the elegant floral displays of [Butchart Gardens](#) beat most British stately homes. Equally grand are the ornate Parliament Buildings, worth a look before heading to Swartz Bay for a 1.5-hour ferry ride back to Vancouver. Leave town and join the Sea-to-Sky Highway to [Whistler](#).



The British Columbia Parliament Buildings in Victoria | CREDIT: Getty

Although it takes 1.5 hours to do the journey straight, a day can be spent ambling along a route lined with interpretation kiosks (in the shape of cedar bark hats) containing information on indigenous cultures. North of Britannia Beach, just before bohemian town Squamish, the [Sea-to-Sky Gondola](#) soars above the Howe Sound and the cliff-tumbling Shannon Falls. Once in Whistler, relax at the [Nita Lake Lodge](#) and its spa with rooftop hot tubs.



This is an adventure playground of ziplines and biking trails | CREDIT: Getty

Ziplines and ice caves

Even without winter snow, Whistler's mountains are impressive. Hike, cycle, rollerblade or run along routes. Hire a bike from [Gateway Bikes](#) for a gentle ride through paved roads on the 40km Valley Trail. Or for a more exhilarating way to soak in the scenery, strap into zip lines – including the 2km Sasquatch, the longest in the USA and Canada – running through the old growth forest, connected by suspension bridges and boardwalks with [Ziptrek Ecotours](#). Escape crowds on a guided heli-hiking tour with [Mountain Skills Academy and Adventures](#), accessing glacial ice caves. In the village, galleries, and theatres play host to a lively arts scene. On display at the [Audain Art Museum](#) is The Dance Screen, carved from red cedar by Haida Chief 7idansuu.



Kamloops



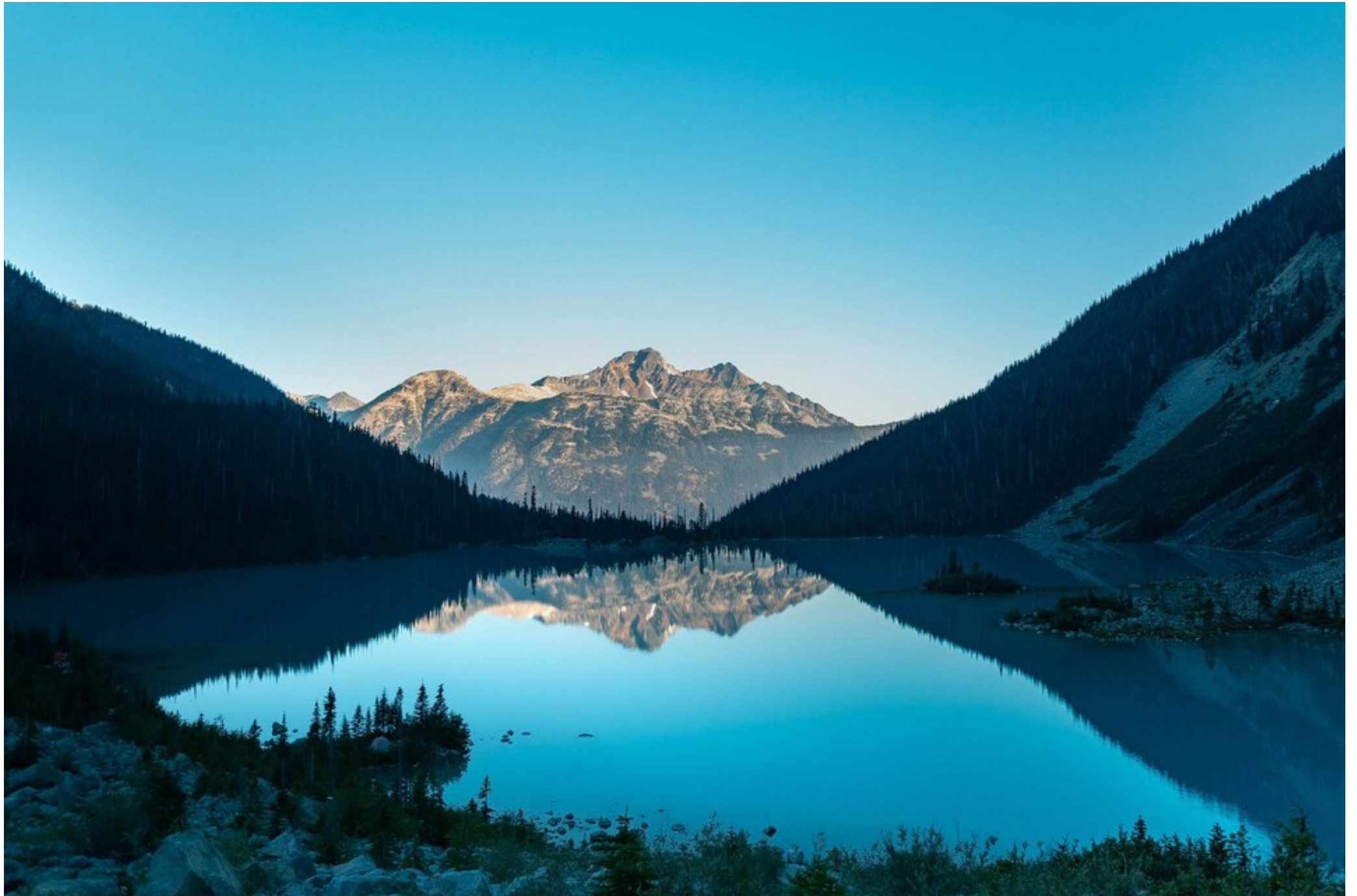
DAY 8



Forget about your worries and your strife... | CREDIT: Getty

Bears and vineyards

Fertile soils and summers filled with long sunny days allow farms and vineyards to thrive in British Columbia's interior. A 4.5-hour drive to Kamloops passes through several wineries and scenic parks. Stretch your legs at Joffre Lakes, where glaciers hang above three pools of water as blue as the sky. (Parking requires a permit, which should be purchased in advance before setting off.) The first lake is close to the car park if you're short on time.



Joffre Lakes | CREDIT: Getty

The section of road leading to wine region Lillooet, known as Duffey Lake Road, corkscrews through forest-cloaked mountain slopes and no-filter-needed teal lakes – including Seton Lake, great for a swim. Mountain goats, marmots and black bears can be seen along the route. Have lunch (and a few tastings) at the award-winning [Forts Berens Estate Winery](#), before completing the final section of your drive to Kamloops and checking into the [Delta Hotels by Marriott](#).



Jasper



DAYS 9 & 10



The Jasper Skytram | CREDIT: Getty

The Rockies and ancient remains

Another long five-hour drive today – although it's easily broken up with scenic stops. Before making your way into the Canadian Rockies, visit the clay hoodoos (or spires) above Kamloops Lake. Another interesting spot is the riverside [Secwepemc Museum & Heritage Park](#), featuring the remains of a 2,000-year-old village. A 90-minute drive away, a short detour from the highway leads to Wells Gray Provincial Park and the Spahats Creek Falls; it's a five-minute walk from the car park to reach the narrow cascade pouring through a canyon. A further hour along the road, stop for a bite to eat at Grizzly Food Shack or the Rocky Mountain Deli – both in Blue River.

The remaining journey passes through glaciers and mountains covered in old growth cedar and hemlock forests. Marvel at the gleaming white pyramid of Mount Robson, the highest peak in the Rockies, before reaching the [Glacier View Lodge](#) in Jasper, tucked into the Columbia icefield.



Mount Robson | CREDIT: Getty

Sky-high views and the wilderness

Low-key Jasper is a comfortable gateway into the wilderness. A highlight of the largest park in the Rockies is Spirit Island, a patch of land with a huddle of tall trees in the glacier fed Maligne Lake. An image used for countless computer screensavers, it's best photographed around 4pm when spotlighted by sunrays beaming through the surrounding mountains. [Pursuit](#) operates cruises from June, or hire a kayak.

For a bird's eye look at the park, take the [Jasper SkyTram](#) – Canada's highest and longest aerial tramway – up to Whistlers Mountain; on a clear day, views stretch up to 80km. Closer to town is the Old Fort Point lookout, rising above the town and surrounding peaks. Evenings are the best time to spot resident elks, bears and moose; join a guided conservation minibus tour with [Maligne Adventures](#).



Lake Louise



DAY 11



Icefields and mountain peaks

Regarded as one of the world's best drives, the Icefields Parkway is a 232km stretch to Lake Louise, winding through icefields, valleys and mountain peaks. Stop at the Athabasca Glacier (an hour and 40minutes away), an easy, signposted 30-minute hike from the car park. Admire the tongue of the sprawling mass from a safe distance or book a half-day guided hike with [Ice Walks](#) to get up close to crevasses.

Your next stop is the turquoise Lake Louise, backed by Mount Victoria, for a flat 40-minute stroll around the shores. If time allows, hire a canoe from one of the docks, available on a first come first served basis. Otherwise continue to mountain town Field, the

gateway to Yoho National Park.



Field



DAY 12



Yoho National Park | CREDIT: Getty

Fossils and waterfalls

After a night at the cosy waterside [Emerald Lake Lodge](#), with a must-see 1890s themed bar, spend a morning exploring the steep rock walls and tumbling waterfalls of a park often overshadowed by its more famous neighbours. Found in the high mountains pressed into rock bed, the Burgess Shale fossils share clues of a 500-million-year-old marine system – far older than the dinosaurs. Some are so well preserved that details of eyes and brains can even be identified. Join a guided [three-hour tour](#) to see them at Mount Stephen; the challenging, steep 7.5-hour hike departs at 8.45am. Or take a more leisurely trip to Takakkaw Falls, the second highest in Canada, plummeting 373 metres.



Banff



DAY 13



Fairmont Banff Springs | CREDIT: Getty

Hot springs and history

Driving back past Lake Louise, head to [Banff](#). Only 90-minutes away, you'll have a full day to enjoy Canada's first national park. Take the gondola to the top of Sulphur Mountain to gaze across the Rockies, before descending to sample the geothermally heated [Banff Upper Hot Springs](#). Tickets can't be booked in advance, so arrive at 10am in high season.

A short drive away, the Cave and Basin historic site has been celebrated by indigenous communities for more than 10,000 years. Walk along a series of boardwalks, learning about the cultural history of the mountains. Looking more like a castle than a hotel, the [Fairmont Banff Springs](#) is a grand place to rest.

Rocky Mountaineer : How to see Canada by rail

Why take the train?

It's a fast, efficient and highly comfortable way to explore the region.

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Calgary



DAY 14



Calgary | CREDIT: Getty

Museums and farmer's markets

More than an international departure and arrival point, Calgary ideally deserves a couple of days. If you only have 24 hours before heading home, ease back into city life with a few museum stops: try the [Tsuu T'ina Culture Museum](#) and its excellent gift shop for an insight into First Nations heritage, or wander through five floors of music memorabilia at the [Studio Bell Music Centre](#).

Dozens of farmer's markets can be found throughout the city. [Alberta Food Finder](#) offer self-guided tours through an app, requiring users to crack codes and puzzles on a mission taking them through the Kensington neighbourhood stopping at insider spots and accessing free tastings. Featuring an outdoor pool and bar with retractable roof, [Hotel Arts](#) is a fun option for a final night. Return your hire car to the airport the following day for an afternoon or evening flight home.



How to do it



Vancouver Island | CREDIT: Getty

When to go

Although Canada is a year-round destination with excellent ski resorts, road trips are best done in the milder months. Some car hire companies prohibit rental between December and April due to road conditions. If bears are your focus, visit after this time when

they emerge from hibernation; see cubs in spring, while the salmon run hits its peak in September and October. Migrating whales also pass the coastline between April and October. The summer season can be extremely busy and some of the smaller wildlife lodges get booked up a year in advance. Choose spring for less crowds.

What to book

Cost effective

[Trailfinders](#) can arrange a 15-night Best of Canada's West fly-drive itinerary covering region highlights such as Vancouver, Victoria, Whistler and national parks of Banff and Jasper in the Canadian Rockies. A 15-night trip costs from £1,925 per person including three to four-star accommodation, some activities and car hire with a free tank of fuel and 24-hour Roadside Assistance. International flights are extra.



The Rocky Mountaineer train | CREDIT: Getty

Blow the budget

[Black Tomato's](#) 12-night Ultimate Canada: Chic Cities and Wild Frontiers trip covers similar destinations but includes a ride on the Rocky Mountaineer train and stays in boutique properties such as the Rosewood Georgia Hotel in Vancouver and the Clayoquot Wilderness Resort in Tofino. For ease and comfort, a guide organises transfers between destinations. A number of excursions are also covered in the price but flights are extra.

What to pack

Be prepared for all weather on a trip spanning different ecosystems and altitudes. Shorts and T-shirts are suitable for most hikes, but pack layers for excursions into the mountains or icefields where temperatures can be around 6-10 degrees cooler. Comfortable hiking boots or shoes are essential, so break these in before travelling. Although mostly dry in summer, Vancouver generally receives a lot of rain so pack a waterproof jacket. It can also be damp and drizzly in the temperate rainforests. A wide brimmed hat or cap is suitable for days when the sun can be intense.



The Athabasca Glacier | CREDIT: Getty

Holiday reading

When visiting Canada, it's important to understand the history of First Nations communities and the challenges they've faced. Michelle Good's award-winning novel *Five Little Indians* focuses on five individuals caught up in the residential school scandals and charts their journey into adult life in Vancouver. A lighter-read – with just as weighty messaging – is *The Place: 150 Years Retold*, an anthology of comics by indigenous artists retelling the history of Canada. For a good, up-to-date, comprehensive guide book of the region, try Lonely Planet's *British Columbia & the Canadian Rockies 2022 edition*.



Stunning landscapes near Jasper | CREDIT: Getty

Expert tips

Free Wi-Fi is available across Vancouver at more than 590 locations, making it easy and cost-effective to use apps and maps to navigate the city. Look for the network name (#VanWiFi, COV-Public, or VPL) from your device's WiFi settings menu to connect.

Wild animals can be found across Western Canada. If you do bump into a bear, back off slowly and never run. Although it should only be used as a last resort, carrying bear spray is a good idea. These portable canisters contain non-lethal capsaicin, a chemical found in chilli peppers which irritates bears when sprayed at close range. But be careful to get none on your clothes; studies have shown the residual smell can actually attract animals.

A pass is essential to enter every Canadian national park, purchased in advance or at visitor kiosks, and must be displayed in the dashboard of your car. A Day Pass (\$10.50) lasts until 4pm the following day no matter what time you arrive. For visits longer than six days, annual Discovery Pass (\$72.50) is more economical.

Have you ever visited Western Canada? Please share the highlights from your itinerary in the comments.

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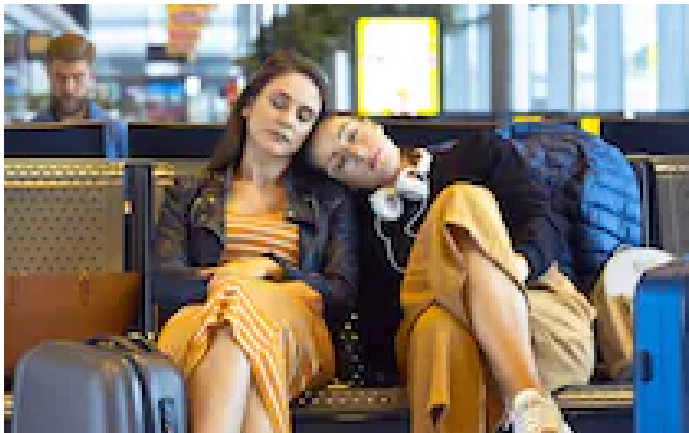
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