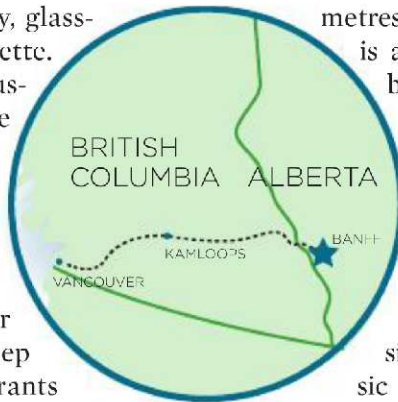


I'm standing at the back of a two-storey, glass-domed car chatting with Mike Saurette. There's no mistaking that he's a sous-chef. Dressed in his kitchen whites, he has a sharp-looking knife in a pocket on his sleeve.

We're swaying back and forth to the gentle rocking of the train as it pulls us through the mountains, past the white rapids and steep gorges of the Fraser River and the occasional eagle or bighorn sheep sighting. Saurette has cooked in restaurants for the past 20 years. He's also a jazz musician and is known to break out in song while he works. I ask him what it's like to cook in a kitchen that's always on the move. "You get used to the motion," he says. "I was working at a friend's restaurant on my days off last year and I ended up cutting my hand pretty badly. I wasn't used to being completely still." Even after five years aboard, Saurette tells me he always runs out to the open-air car when the train reaches Cisco Crossing. "The wind gets so strong, sometimes it feels like God is breathing on you—it's such an intense feeling." It has only been a few hours since we pulled out of the Rocky Mountaineer train station in Vancouver, but I've quickly become accustomed to the top-notch service provided.

▼ Left to right: a gourmet breakfast; spectacular views of the Canadian Rockies; first-class service on board the Rocky Mountaineer

It started at 6:30 a.m. when my taxi dropped me off at a red carpet outside the station. I was immediately welcomed, directed to check-in, given a boarding pass and saw my bag whisked away and told it would be waiting for me in my hotel room 355 kilo-

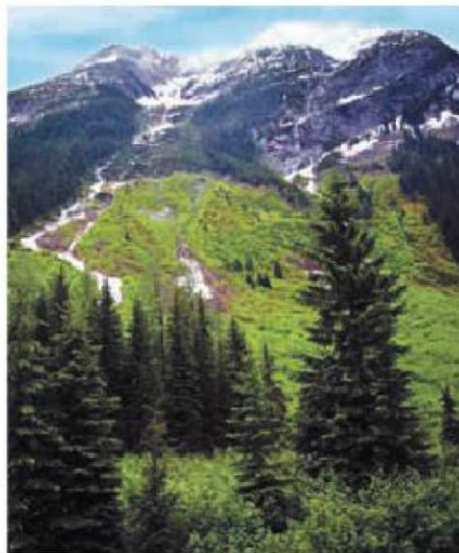


metres away in Kamloops later that day. The station is a renovated 1950s locomotive maintenance building with views of The Lions (twin peaks part of the Coastal Mountains) and Grouse Mountain. Passengers are encouraged to grab a coffee, pick up souvenirs and read about the history of the area until the "all aboard" call comes promptly at 7:30 a.m.

There are three classes of service on the train. The cars and seats in RedLeaf are similar to what you would expect in a classic train, and meals are served at your seat. SilverLeaf is the newest level of service. Guests are seated in a single-level coach with hot meals, and domed windows offer panoramic views. GoldLeaf service on the Rocky Mountaineer is simply luxurious. The custom-built, glass-domed cars float above the rest of the train and offer an unencumbered view of mountains, lakes and wildlife. Each GoldLeaf car has its own kitchen, staff and dining car that seats 72 guests in two sittings for breakfast and lunch with food and service easily comparable to a small five-star restaurant.

And, it's a foodie's paradise. All the meals are cooked on-board and there's a choice of five dishes. For breakfast that could mean scrambled eggs with smoked steelhead salmon and kelp caviar or buttermilk pancakes with Aldergrove berry preserve, served with fresh fruit and a croissant. "We feel that if we are going to showcase our views and our topography and our commentary, we should showcase the local cuisine as well," explains Duncan Pattillo, guest services manager.

The Rocky Mountaineer offers a variety of trips through the Rockies, including four relatively short ones—Vancouver-Whistler, Whistler-Quesnel-Jasper, Vancouver-Kamloops-Jasper and Vancouver-Kamloops-Banff-Calgary, >>



PHOTOS: ANGUS FERGUSON

## TRAVEL FEATURE

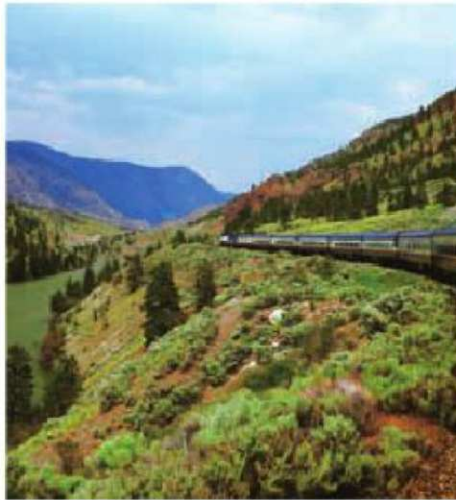
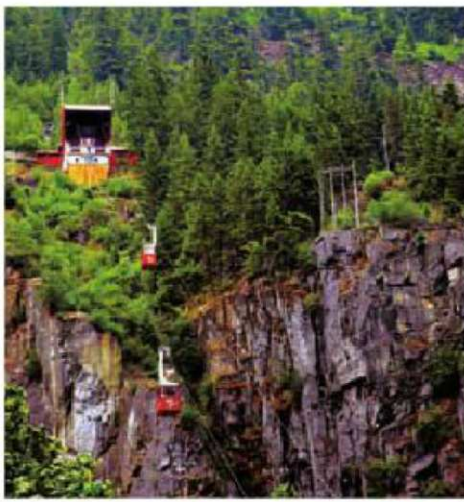
◀ Clockwise from top left: Hell's Gate, the Fraser Valley; inside a glass-domed car; cliff-hugging turns give way to breathtaking views; peeking into the on-board kitchen

ture through this area”, or the traits of salmon as we pass by the Adams River. It's these nuggets of information that make the trip so fascinating.

I chat with Jan Casey, a doctor from Brisbane, Australia. She appreciated the seamless check-in and service when we arrived and is enjoying the food. Everybody mentions the food. Brett Hart, a dog groomer from Melbourne, Australia, and his wife, Wendy, a nurse, have come to Canada for the first time and specifically for this train trip. “It just looked classy and luxurious and is something that you want to put on the bucket list,” he said.

Meals on the train are elegant, leisurely affairs. When called for our sitting, we take the spiral stairs down to the dining car, which is dressed up with fresh flowers, silverware and linen tablecloths. The idea is to savour the regional cuisine, sip the local wine and drink in the scenery that on this first morning has changed from the North Shore mountains to the fertile lands of the Fraser Valley to higher altitudes with scraggly trees and desert-like terrain.

I order the Alberta short ribs for lunch. They come with the best >>



with catchy names such as “Journey through the Clouds.” We're on the train to Calgary—“First Passage to the West”—which is also the most popular, with gorgeous spots such as Hell's Gate, where water rushes through the Fraser River canyon at 900 cubic metres per second, and the historical Craigellachie, where the Last Spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway line was driven.

It's late morning by the time both breakfast sittings have finished, and the

wine has started to flow. Unlike a plane or bus, guests can leave their seats, and many start up conversations with fellow passengers while others sit back, relax and watch the scenery unfold.

Every now and then, Evan Cameron, our attendant, will politely interrupt with a short commentary about Canada's first train robbery (pulled off by Billy Miner at Mission Junction), how Hell's Gate in the Fraser Valley honours Simon Fraser because he “felt that no man should ever have to ven-

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For more information or to book a trip on the Rocky Mountaineer, contact CAA at [www.caa.ca](http://www.caa.ca) or 1-800-992-8143

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garlic whipped potatoes I've ever tasted and an array of seasonal veggies. Train manager Barry Crawford has a food and beverage background and studied at the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont. It's his 11<sup>th</sup> year on the train, and he's responsible for making sure that everybody gets what they need. A few years ago, one of his colleagues "married" a couple in an impromptu wedding between Banff and Calgary. It wasn't legal, but no one seemed to care. And the train is known to make unscheduled stops in small towns to pick up a birthday cake or a guest's favourite green tea.


As we pass the Fraser River and head toward the Thompson, we travel through Rainbow Canyon and Avalanche Alley where the pinks, purples, yellows, oranges, reds and greens surprise even the locals. As Cameron tells us, these areas are

heavy with iron, ore and copper deposits. Because the weather is so hot and dry, when it rains, the water exposes the earth and minerals, leaving the different colours. Someone yells "Bear on the left!" and we all rush to that side of the train.


We're on the train for 10 hours the first day and 12 the second, yet I haven't seen one book, crossword or deck of cards come out. Between eating, talking and the first sighting of the majestic Rocky Mountains, time flies. And really, no one is in a hurry to get to their destination; this is all about the experience. Most of the passengers are travelling through to Calgary, but a few dozen of us disembark at Banff, clutching e-mail addresses and promising to stay in touch with new-found friends.

Would I do it again? You bet. The only challenge would be choosing which route. **CAA**

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