



Jasper Park Lodge

# The great Canadian cure for jet lag

A cross-Canada train odyssey

I have a thing for those faded black and white photos of glamorous people in beautiful banquet halls. And I love watching those movies set on trains, where shadowy dinner partners allude to dangerous secrets. I think of porters, trunks and smoking jackets. I've always wanted to live that life—even if only for two weeks.

My husband Kevin and I tossed aside our usual 'travel light' philosophy, stuffing bags and cases full of suits, shiny shoes, dresses, and our best bling to embark on the ultimate Canadian trip of yesteryear. Our goal? To train travel first-class from Vancouver to Montreal with stops at the grand old railway hotels that were such an essential part of Canada's creation.

Remember those stories of people being sent to sanatoriums to recover with plenty of rest? I can picture them all tucked under woolly blankets on chaise lounges breathing in that Alpine air. This too, was my goal. That is, to slow it all down, recover from the year, and set myself a luxurious and slow tone for the next, with plenty of rest and magnums of champagne.

Appropriately, our new storybook lives start New Years Eve at the 900 West lounge in the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver. The champagne flutes are tall, the food divine and the jazz trio grooving. Sleeping in the next morning is an indulgent treat. The bell captain barely blinks as they pile our ridiculous number of bags on the brass cart. It's a fast taxi ride to VIA's full waiting room.

"We're from Florida actually," Cyndi laughs and looks over at Todd. "We just got married in Victoria, took a float plane here and

now we're on the way to Jasper for our honeymoon." They board the train, Cyndi in a bead-encrusted wedding gown, and Todd, with the requisite tux. Late that night, Kevin sees Todd leaving the kitchen behind the dining car with a can of whipping cream.

Tracking through blasted rock passages we pass eye-level mountain sheep balancing on cliffs. As the Canadian Rockies fade into indigo we arrive at the village of Jasper. A quick shuttle and we're in the grand lobby of the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge.

There is a hint of wood smoke from the massive fireplace in the Great Hall where guests are playing Scrabble, cards or reading and relaxing. The lights glint gold from the outdoor skating rink on Lac Beauvert. Skaters do the day's last spins in the deepening darkness.

Having started as a few tents in 1915, Jasper Park Lodge grew with additions, renovations and replacements to evolve into a four-season retreat. For winter, the lodge maintains the rink, skating oval and cross-country trails, and leaves the elk to wander freely as unknowing props in every tourist's uber-Canadian photos.

It is a short afternoon train trip to Edmonton for our stay at the very regal Fairmont Hotel MacDonald. The MacDonald opened in 1915 and was fully restored back to its original opulence in 1991.

Did I mention I could live in a hotel quite easily? I love the cocoon of poufy duvets, feather pillows and room service. The Confederation Lounge has fan palms, thick fabrics, deep carpets and a to-die-for-view overlooking the North Saskatchewan River. The sepia-tinted mood creates an atmosphere that suggests Humphrey Bogart might be just around the corner.





Hotel MacDonald—Edmonton



Royal York—Ottawa

Back on the train, we get ready for our trip across the prairies filling our triple-cabin with champagne, chocolates, comfy clothes and piles of books. Lucky for us, VIA stows our extra baggage in a different car, as even a triple cabin is an exercise in compact living.

Each meal we meet someone new. We chat with the father and his son who have flown from Australia, boarded the train in Vancouver, and after ending their trip in Toronto, will be flying directly back home.

“We wanted to really see and experience the Canadian winter,” says Andrew, “it really is incredible.”

John and Elaine are from PEI. “I refuse to get on a plane,” Elaine leans over her dinner of wild mushroom ravioli, “and this is just such a pleasant way to get home.”

Two nights on the train, along with two more gradual time changes, and I feel my shoulders lowering from their usual spot beneath my ears. No phones, nowhere to go, just breathe and watch this vast country go by. There are no expectations. At all.

Arriving in Toronto, I realize the beauty of this type of travel. No jet lag, no security, just tip a porter to schlep our bags and walk directly into our new home at the Fairmont Royal York. This could be my favourite grand entrance. The mosaic tiles in the lobby remind me of Pompeii.

Finished by the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1929, the Royal York was the tallest building in the British Commonwealth. Forty million

guests later, it no longer holds that title, but the travertine pillars still gleam and the crystal chandeliers continue to sparkle.

It is a short hop to Ottawa, long enough to have lunch with wine, and to take in the snowy landscape. Unfortunately, it’s not cold enough for the Rideau Canal to freeze. Our quest to skate on the world’s longest skating rink will have to wait.

Instead, we check into our suite at the Fairmont Chateau Laurier and content ourselves with dark chocolate truffles and a little wine before we wander the lobby to look at the fabulous old photos that line the walls. Charles Melville Hays, the general manager of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway of Canada, commissioned the hotel in 1907. Unfortunately, Charles never saw the completed masterpiece. He was returning from England with the dining room furniture and went down with the Titanic, only days before the Laurier’s grand opening in April 1912.

The Laurier looks across at the Parliament Buildings. This is how a capital city should look. A giant toy box filled with chateaus, turrets and statues has been tumbled and arranged around rivers and canals to make a very European scene.

That night we eat at the Metropolitan Brasserie and try to remember we’re in Canada. French fills the air. Pomme frites and seafood platters are presented, and we find ourselves reminiscing of Paris.

The next morning, we bundle up against the –5 C weather and tuck into flakey croissants and café au lait at one of the Byward Market’s restaurants before hitting the National Gallery. Like our





Chateau Laurier—Montreal

tour of the Canadian Museum of Civilization the next day, there are not enough hours to take everything in before it closes.

Our last leg of our train journey is the business commuter train from Ottawa to one of my favourite Canadian cities. We roll past houses huddled against their fences as the winter wind blasts through the fields. Getting closer to Montreal, we see more and more two story homes and apartments with the instantly identifiable outdoor spiral staircases that so typify Montreal neighbourhoods.

VIA's station is connected to our last two nights of luxury. Fairmont's Queen Elizabeth Hotel is one of the more "modern" railway hotels, having opened in 1958. It is a study in modern design. The suite is edgy yet warm, with chocolate and burgundy fabrics. I discover one of the benefits of joining the Fairmont's President's Club. I punch 55 on my phone, tell them my shoe and clothing size—and voila—gorgeous new adidas, socks, capris and shirt are wrapped in tissue, sealed with the Fairmont gold sticker and delivered to our suite. Could have left the gym bag at home.

"Quelle neige!" says the woman in the hotel's gift shop, as she tucks my new toiletry kit into a bag. It is covered with reproductions of all the old hotel posters. I've decided it will serve as my reminder to live with style. She's right; it is snowing fat flakes outside the window. We join the crowds to shuffle through the snow into old Montreal and then up to St. Catherine's for some last minute shopping. Every space is a cosmopolitan swirl of shops, cafes, bistros and restaurants.

Banging our boots off at the front doors of the Queen Elizabeth we head to the concierge. In a city of gourmands, where to eat? We try to limit the choices by suggesting something a short taxi ride away, so that my newly purchased heels don't have to touch the snow. Flipping through their file of menus, we decide on Decca 77 at 1077, rue Drummond.

Following exquisitely dry martinis, my starter of cauliflower "milk" soup is presented. A small square of Quebec Benedictine blue cheese floats in a froth of milky foam. A fine drizzle of walnut oil and candied pecans surrounds its pungent perfection. One taste and it is immediately placed on my lifetime list of favourite foods. I eat the rest of the meal as slowly as possible. I want to savour every forkful and make it last.

It is the perfect night to end a trip that has been a tribute to the art of living well. A train, a lover, good food, fine wine and going slow is indeed the ticket to a larger life. Forget the fast lane. It's highly overrated. Slow down and make time for some glamour in your life. Take the train and check into the castle-like hotels that were built as the country was created. Live the life.

—COLLEEN FRIESEN