

The view of Lake Louise and the glacier reflecting into it is, next to Niagara Falls, the most photographed scene in Canada.

When life throws up too many hurdles, American correspondent Lawrence Grobel has the perfect antidote.

Can dropping everything on the spur of the moment be the best solution to life's dirty problems? When, fuelled by anger, frustration, and depression, one realises it's either that or explode? I wasn't sure, but I was counting on it.

Let me back up.

I'd been putting the finishing touches to a book I'd been writing over the previous 18 months when the subject of the book suddenly decided she wanted me to sign a document that would, in essence, give her final approval. I refused, and the next thing I knew I was dealing with lawyers, a very frustrating (and costly) ordeal.

My daughter, who has been living with her boyfriend for nearly five years, decided to ask for a commitment, which took her boyfriend by surprise and he balked. He needed more time, he said. She moved out of their apartment and back into our lives.

My long-time friend and confidante decided that he could no longer live in a country that had such unscrupulous leaders as Bush and Cheney, so he brought over all his treasured

The people are friendly and unpretentious.

The food is diverse and of a high quality.

They produce some excellent wine and beer.

The golf courses are challenging and spectacular.

There's a healthy devotion to the outdoors: kayaking, canoeing, bicycling, rollerblading, hang gliding, snorkelling, scuba-diving, mountain and rock-climbing, salt and freshwater fishing, bear-watching, and all those winter sports for the snow-minded.

There's a heady sense of adventure – running the gamut from helicoptering onto glaciers to cave exploration.

They've become spa-conscious.

They've got wonderful museums.

Their First Nation exhibits and artefacts provide an exciting introduction to the country's history.

There's a comfortable hotel, lodge or B&B to fit any budget.

They've often got good sales of quality products.

It's the home of Tilley's hats (they float, they're durable, they're resistant to UV light, they're water-resistant, they have

FORGET YOUR TROUBLES, SAY HELLO TO CANADA!

belongings, told me to do with them whatever I wanted, and left the country promising never to return.

When our other daughter came to visit for the weekend and we had to be somewhere on one of those days, we arranged with another couple to drive with them, so we could leave our car with our daughter; but when it came to their coming to pick us up, they asked if we would take a taxi down to their house, about five kilometres away, and in the opposite direction to where we were all going. I told them we'd meet them there and rented a car.

That last was the most trivial, but it was the icing on what had become a bitter week. When life gets so trivial and so exasperating at the same time, there is only one thing to do: Run. Get away physically. Get away mentally. Put your problems on the back burner and open yourself to something new and adventurous. For my wife and me, it only took about two minutes to remember where we always found joy and new experiences.

"We're going to Canada."

Why Canada? Let me count the ways.

It's convenient.

It's reasonable.

There's no language problem.

The air is clean and fresh.

It's incredibly scenic: lakes, rivers, forests, mountains, glaciers, national parks, wildlife.

a secret compartment in the crown, they allow for friendly conversation with fellow wearers).

A few years ago we took a two-day first-class train ride through the Rocky Mountains, from Banff to Vancouver and really enjoyed it. A year ago the Rocky Mountaineer inaugurated a new two-day route through the Rockies, from Whistler to Jasper. I've always wanted to go to Jasper and to Lake Louise.

So, we started making plans, and within days we flew to Vancouver to put all our troubles and woes behind us. We figured if we packed in enough activities and good dinners, it would be like hitting the refresh button on the computer. And there was no better place to start than dining at our favourite restaurant.

We first discovered Tojo's three years ago, recommended by someone who knew how much we liked Japanese food. "He invented the California roll," was how our friend tried to pique our interest. That didn't exactly push my wife Hiromi's buttons, she being Japanese and a bit of a purist when it comes to such things. But we tried it and came away believers. We returned to Tojo's the following year and got to know Tojo. This time around, I called ahead and asked if Tojo would be willing to allow us to spend the day with him as he selected his fish. Suffice it to say, it was the perfect way to get out of our heads and into the head of a true sushi master. It would take more than a paragraph to detail our day

with Tojo, so look for the separate article in the last issue of *World* to read about that experience.

I've never had a problem choosing a place to stay in Vancouver, simply because experience has taught me you can't make a bad choice, no matter where you stay! I've stayed at the Fairmonts in mid-town, by the cruise ships, and at the airport; at the Four Seasons and the Pan Pacific; at the boutique hotels like the Listel, the Opus, and the Wedgewood. In fact, I make a point to stay at a different hotel every time I visit the city. This time around I chose the Metropolitan, which is slightly larger than a boutique hotel, with 180 rooms, but not quite on the scale of the nearby Hotel Vancouver or Four Seasons. The Met is a block away from the Art Gallery on Robson, which is always my first stop because it's a four-story museum that can satisfy your soul in less than two hours (previous exhibits brought me Rodin and the Haida First Nation art; the current show had works from Monet to Dali and the innovative avant-garde Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping). Halle Berry recently stayed in one of the luxury suites at the Metropolitan, as has Jessica Alba, Mel Gibson and Tina Turner. The staff is so accommodating that if you're going to stay for any length of time in their US\$3,500-a-day two-storey suite, they'll refurbish it to your liking: changing couches, bed posts, kitchen appliances, even adding extra big-screen TVs and a television in the bathroom. But if Mel or Jessica or Halle want to go swimming, they'll have to use the same indoor pool the rest of us use on the third floor.

Besides eating at Tojo's, we lunched at Zin, part of the Pan Pacific Hotel on Robson, and had dinner at Cin Cin's. Since we put our taste buds in Tojo's hands, I suggested to Hiromi that we do the same at some of the better restaurants we'd be eating at. So we asked if there was a tasting menu, and then let them bring us the best of what the chef had to offer. This took the onus off our trying to decide between salmon and halibut, between ribs and steak, and between red or white wine. The tasting menu would give us a little of everything, including wines that would go best with each dish. At Cin Cin we wound up drinking five glasses of wine, tasting five dishes (tuna crudo, ravioli of artichoke and goat cheese, fillet of halibut, grilled lamb sirloin, and vanilla crême brulee), for the reasonable price of \$89 for the food and \$65 for the wine pairings. By the third glass I had forgotten about my celebrity book and by the fourth about all the other frustrations back home. It was only our second day and first city in Canada and already our reason for going was working.

On our third day we took a taxi to the train station and boarded the train for the three-hour trip to Whistler, site of the 2010 winter Olympics. Why drive when you can be served breakfast and drinks, listen to a guide tell you tales of the areas you pass through, and enjoy the scenery along the way? There is definitely something to be said about train travel and we were not alone in our thinking: the train was crowded with tourists from all over the world on package deals. Most of them went off to stay at some of the larger hotels like the Chateau Whistler and the Four Seasons – miniature cities filled with high-end shops, quality art, and four-star restaurants. But we went for something smaller, the Summit Lodge, mainly because of the independent Taman Sari Indonesian spa on the ground floor. This was the only spa of its kind in British Columbia and I knew Hiromi would appreciate a little Javanese pampering. I had read about this

spa, which offers papaya enzyme body polishes, coconut cream hair and scalp treatments, volcano body wraps, deep tissue massages, and aromatherapy foot and hand treatments.

One could see why the Summit was a good choice for skiers and party-goers because the rooms come equipped with kitchens and pets are welcome. Not being a skier myself, I prefer going on vacation during the warmer months, to take advantage of nature; wearing shorts and a tee-shirt rather than thermal underwear and wool gloves.

"You should go zip trekking," the girl at the front desk suggested. "Have you ever tried it?"

"Haven't a clue what you're talking about," I said.

"It's like flying through the forest, over rivers," she said.

"And you pay for this privilege?"

"It's very popular," she said. "It really focuses your attention."

Being in need of focusing – or refocusing – I didn't need to hear more. We walked into the village to find the Carleton Lodge where Ziptrek Ecotours are located and signed up for a three-hour \$100 tour. "Do you have any idea what you're getting us into?" Hiromi asked.

"We're going to fly through the forest," I said.

"You don't like heights, remember?"

"But I like trees," I said. "And since I don't know what we're about to do, it's an adventure."

"Remember that rappelling adventure in New Zealand?" she reminded me. "You weren't too happy going down that 100-metre rope."

"Let's not go there," I said. "Besides, we did that 10 years ago and you're still talking about it. So how bad could it have been?"

"You were the one who turned white."

"I've always wanted to fly, honey. Let's see what they've rigged up here."

Our guides were from New Zealand and Australia, which, I would come to realise during our time in Canada, is the case with most guides in Canada. The reason is that it's easy to obtain a work permit, and Canada reminds those from Downunder of home.

"Canada is New Zealand on steroids," our New Zealand guide Alex said.

"What's he saying?" Hiromi kept asking every time Alex tried to explain how to wear the harness that would allow us to zip safely 340m from one observation platform to another, 60m above the ground.

"It's just his accent," I said, straining to understand his instructions. "He must be from a very small town."

"You're talking too fast," Hiromi told him. "I'm scared enough, I'd like to at least know what we're supposed to be doing."

"Just hold on to the rope," Alex said, "and you'll be fine."

"And try to keep your eyes opened," I added, knowing that she would have them closed.

"I hate having to do these things so you can write about them," Hiromi hissed.

"Hey, if I didn't have your fear to write about, this article would be dull."

"Oh, like you're not afraid?"

"Sure I am, but I'm not going to show it."

There were five "zips" and, just as I suspected, Hiromi kept her eyes closed and both hands tight around the rope. It



Vancouver Art Gallery is always worth visiting.
Right: Zin, at the Pacific Hotel on Robson.



wasn't at all scary after the first crossing, and it did give the sensation of flying through the air. By the third zip some of us were letting the rope go, secure in the harness. And for the last one I even attempted to zip high above the river below upside down. Hiromi hated me for that. "You're such a showoff," she said. "I remember how you were in New Zealand."

"And you'll never let me forget," I laughed. "But this is nothing like that. This is fast and easy."

What wasn't fast or easy was the 16km mountain-biking and four-hour kayaking trips we did the next day. If Hiromi wasn't having much fun harnessed to a zip line, she was downright miserable in a kayak. The bike ride was pleasant enough, except for one gruelling uphill stretch, but once we got to Alta Lake, Hiromi only wanted to go in a double kayak or in a canoe. Reese, our young Australian guide, convinced her that it was safer if everyone had their own kayak because once we made it across the lake we would be entering the narrow River of Golden Dreams. A canoe would be hard to manoeuvre and in a double kayak, if one person paddled against the other's direction there was a good possibility both would end up swimming.

"You'll do fine," Reese encouraged her.

"Oh yes," I said. "And you'll earn your wages today."

After some instruction on how to hold and handle the double paddle, we put on life jackets and got into our kayaks. Within minutes Hiromi was facing the shore asking where the rest of us were. I tried to call out advice but Reese correctly sensed that Hiromi would not comfortably listen to anything I might say. "Don't listen to Larry, listen to me," Reese told her, instructing me to "go ahead towards the river; I'll work with your wife."

"Good luck with that," I said.

Hiromi, sweet gentle woman that she is, cursed me as I paddled off, while Reese patiently coaxed her to turn around.

It took a while – a long while actually – for Hiromi to get the knack of it as she zigged and zagged her way across the lake. Every time I turned around to see her progress I had to look in a different direction from the time before. But eventually she made it, only to discover that the lake was the easy part of this exercise. The river was the real challenge.

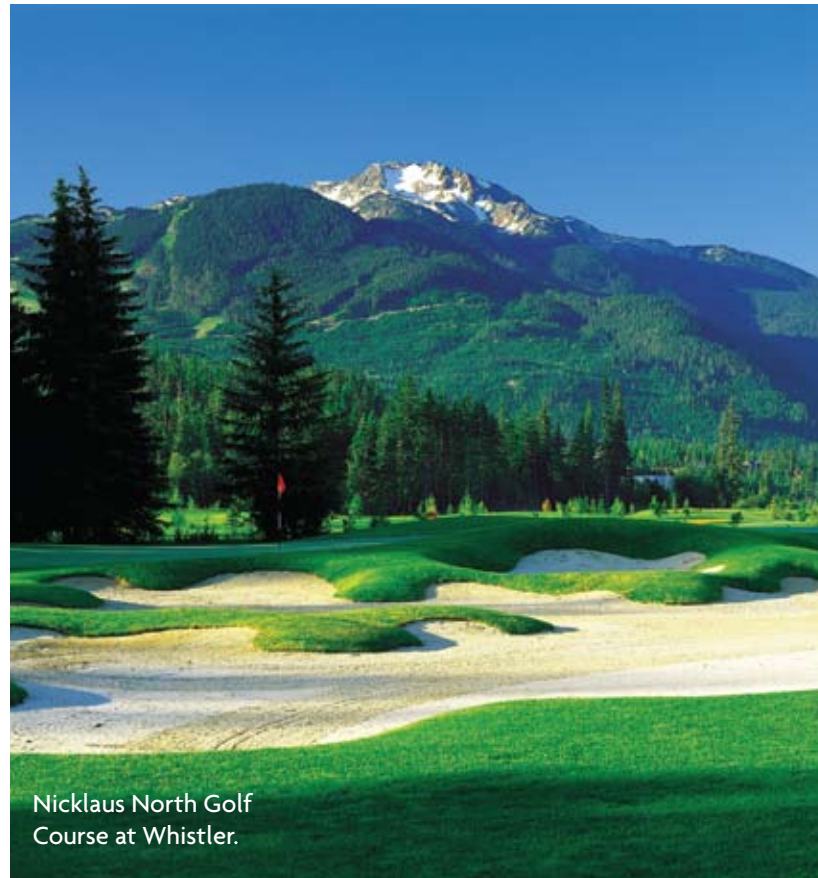
It was narrow; there were a lot of overhanging branches to duck under, two beaver dams to get around, and a current that made sharp turns and protruding rocks true obstacles. I nearly overturned twice and got stuck on an embankment once where it took me five minutes to shake and shimmy my kayak back into the river, but my travails were minor compared to my poor wife's. Reese had to attach a rope from his kayak to hers just to get her to the river, and twice more when she got stuck and couldn't manoeuvre her way clear. Watching her making her way down-river was like watching a live game of ping-pong as she crashed into one side and then the other. I knew to keep my mouth shut after my first, "How are you doing honey?" was answered with, "Shut up, you bastard!" But, I admit it, I did laugh. After all, it's these kind of moments that keep a marriage fresh. You feel sorry for your spouse, you admire that she's game enough to do something like this, and you can't help yourself, knowing how you'll be able to tease and mimic her for years. (This, of course, only works when she gets to laugh at your buffoonery as well.)

The bike and kayak tour was supposed to take five hours. It took seven. And by the time we got back to the Summit, the only thing that saved me from being told to sleep on the couch that night was the incredible couples massage at the Taman Sari.

They were waiting for us when we arrived, flushed and filthy from the day's outing. Our two young Indonesian masseurs suggested we go to our rooms to shower first and then return for the 90-minute treatment that would soothe



The most spectacular train trip in the world? Could be: this is the Rocky Mountaineer.



Nicklaus North Golf Course at Whistler.

our aching muscles. When we entered the low-lit couples room we found a tiny thong on each massage table.

"What's this?" I wondered.

"We're supposed to put it on, to cover our private parts," Hiromi said.

"It's too small," I said. "I'd rather be naked."

"Just do it their way."

So I put on this ridiculous piece of lace that wasn't tight enough to really hold anything in and Hiromi started laughing. I knew we were back on track. The whole idea of travelling together all these years is to not only experience new things but to amuse each other. I knew that Hiromi now had a new image of me that she could invoke any time she needed a laugh.

The massages, on the other hand, were no laughing matter. They were both spiritual and cleansing. They used different herbs to scrub our bodies, knead our muscles, and enrich our skin. Then they covered our hair in coconut cream and went to work there. We were tingling from head to toe. And when it was over they led us to a two-person bathtub where we sank into a warm, Jacuzzi bubble bath. They even had some fruit and hot tea to enjoy while we soaked. I wasn't sure if we walked or floated back to our room.

Hiromi didn't think she was good enough to play golf at one of the courses in Whistler, but I convinced her otherwise. "We'll just play nine holes," I said. "Nicklaus North is not as hard or hilly as the Chateau Whistler, so let's see if the golf pro there is free to give you a few tips. If you aren't comfortable, you can just sit in the golf cart and watch me play."

"I'm not going to waste my time watching you," she said.

"Didn't think so," I said.

So off we went to meet Gavin Eckford, the club pro at Nicklaus North, who agreed to join us on our half round.

"Why don't you ride with Hiromi," I suggested. "She won't listen to my advice; maybe she'll listen to you."

"I'd listen if you knew what you were talking about," Hiromi said. "But you're not such a good golfer."

"Hey, I shoot in double digits," I said. High double digits, true, but who's counting?

Inviting Gavin along proved to be a smart move. He helped Hiromi with her swing, taught her to hit the tee without the ball for her practice swing, and try to duplicate that once the ball was on the tee. He teed up balls for her in the middle of the fairway, got her to keep her head down when she putted, and made the nine holes enjoyable for her. I, on the other hand, was on my own, as I played my usual game of one good shot/one bad, two good shots/two bad. But I had fun because I got to take my wife with me and didn't have to play with her. This is a good lesson to learn when travelling: find a willing club pro to play with your spouse and you'll both be happy at the end of the round.

We ate at two highly-rated restaurants in Whistler: the Fifty Two 80 Bistro and Bar at the Four Seasons Resort and Araxi in the Village Square. The Chilean sea bass and smoked duck were worth sharing at the Fifty Two 80, and the gazpacho, matane shrimp, roasted garlic halibut, Berkshire pork, and molten chocolate cake, complete with five champagne and wine pairings at the award-winning Araxi, matched what we had at Cin Cin's, Araxi's sister restaurant.

We even found some time to wander over to Longhorn's Bar opposite the gondola lift in the town square, where the Australian and New Zealand guides get together to party in the evenings. Alex and Reese had told us about it and we figured after putting up with us as we zipped, pedalled and paddled our way through Whistler, we'd down a pint in their honour.

With Vancouver and Whistler behind us, it was time to

board the Rocky Mountaineer for the two-day Gold Leaf service train to Jasper. This trip covered the Fraser Discovery Route. It was named after the gold rush days from the late 1850s, when prospectors came from all over the world after gold flakes and nuggets were discovered in the Fraser River north of Jasper, between the Cariboo and Rocky Mountains. As with the two other train routes covered by the Rocky Mountaineer (from Calgary/Banff to Vancouver and from Vancouver to Jasper), this train ride, inaugurated in 2006, lived up to its promise of being "The Most Spectacular Train Trip in the World."

Well, in all fairness to the world, I haven't been on some of the famous trains that go through Russia or South America, but I would imagine it would be hard to top the scenery in British Columbia and Alberta. The train takes you through forests (where you can see first hand how the pine beetle has infected and killed tens of thousands of pine trees), into mountains (those glaciers are diminishing), over bridges, across rivers, and next to lakes. Eagles and hawks can be spotted overhead, bears and elk in the distance. And all along the way as you're being served sumptuous breakfasts and lunches, poured Champagne, wine, beer, whiskey or liquors throughout the day, and told when an interesting photo opportunity is approaching, you're also being served up a history of the area. So not only do you pass by lakes named Anderson, Seton, Kelly, Green, La Hache, Williams and Moose, and through towns called Lillooet, Soda Creek, Woodpecker, Red Rock and Tete Jaune Cache, but you get to learn how the Chinese, Scots, Kiwis, Russians and English fought for their rights, built and lost townships, and created routes out of backwoods and wilderness.

Here are the differences between driving and taking the train: on the train, you can sleep when tired; you can drink without worrying about altering your perception; you can go to the bathroom any time you like; you don't have to look for a place to eat or a petrol station to fill your tank; you can read, listen to your iPod, play cards, work on crossword puzzles and Sudoku or snap photographs from your comfortable seat; and you can see things you can't see any other way, since the tracks have been laid through mountains and by rivers where no highway exists. And when you get to your overnight stop, your luggage is taken directly to the hotel that is part of your ticket and taken on to your final destination the next morning, so you don't have to deal with it. In other words, the Rocky Mountaineer has made its train trips as hassle-free as possible. All you have to do is show up.

When we got to our overnight destination, a town called Quesnel, I wasn't disappointed, mainly because I had very low expectations, just as I had two years earlier when we overnights in Kamloops. These towns aren't exactly what they once might have been during the Gold Rush days, when honkytonks vied with brothels and gambling halls for one's attention. But there is one interesting place worth investigating in Quesnel and that is the District Museum and Archives, located across from the train station and next to the tourist information. The museum was built in 1963 and houses a history of the area. They have displays of what it was like to visit a dentist, a bank, a newspaper office and a barber shop in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They have an Industrial Section that shows exhibits of logging, farming, mining and carpentry. They've got old quilts, pieces from the Titanic, First Nation relics, and furs and clothing from

the Hudson Bay Company. There are moose, deer and elk heads mounted on a wall, uncommon Chinese sprinkling cans, vintage dresses and automobiles, a giant waterwheel, collections of old bottles, decorated moccasins, and rare musical bells. And then there's the haunted doll, Mandy, kept behind a glass case, with the warning that anyone who dares to photograph it might run into a streak of bad luck. There's a complete story about Mandy, dressed in a small child's clothing, her face cracked below the nose and above one eye. It's said that if you stare at her, she will stare back at you. And if you look from different angles, her gaze will follow yours. Naturally, when no one was looking, I snapped a picture of Mandy. My wife shudders and turns away when she sees it, but a bit of creepiness is good for tourism, and I applaud the museum for giving Mandy a place of honour and a history worthy of Stephen King.

We arrived in Jasper at dusk and were dropped off at the Jasper Park Lodge (or JPL to the locals). This is a Fairmont property that is really the place you want to stay if you're only going to visit Jasper once. The golf course is considered one of the best in Canada (and after playing it, I must say it has a few truly spectacular signature holes and one heck of a lot of wild geese that won't budge even when you hit a three wood between them on the fairway). The rooms and cabins are comfortable and rustic. The elk provide a sense of daring when you're trying to get to your cabin and eight of them are munching on grass in front of your door (as they were when we got to our lakeside cabin and had to wait 10 minutes for them to move on). The Edith Cavell restaurant served us lobster and fish that looked like works of art. And when you walk the hallways of the main building you're made aware that the Queen of England came for a visit (her portrait hangs along with other members of the royal family) and so you think that if this place was good enough for old Elizabeth, it's got to be the place to stay when in Jasper.

Besides the beauty of the lake itself, there are canyons and hot springs to explore in the areas surrounding Jasper. The one we went to, Maligne Canyon, was just a 20-minute drive from the lodge. The waterfall was mesmerizing; the chance to get so close to the canyon and to see how the water carved and shaped it was well worth the visit. And to be a bit pedestrian about this natural wonderland, the gift shop had the best selection of leather gloves I've seen in Canada.

The car now became essential, as we wanted to drive Route 93, the Icefields Parkway, from Jasper south to Banff. Just as the train was billed as the most spectacular blah blah blah, so too is this drive. And, lo and behold, once again, it's true. It's about 230km between the two, but it's not the kind of drive you want to do in three fast hours. You want to stop at Athabasca Falls, 30km south of Jasper, and at Sunwapta Falls, another 15 minutes down the parkway. Both of these falls allow you to get very close to them, so close in fact that at Athabasca there is a bench dedicated to the 21-year-old hiker who fell over and lost his life in 2002. What also got our attention at these falls was an Indonesian family taking their three pet ferrets for a stroll. People with dogs are hardly noticed, but ferrets on a leash – that's not a very common sight.

The big tourist attraction on this parkway is the Columbia Icefield, which is about two hours outside of Banff. Here you park your car and enter the Icefield Centre, where you can use the rest rooms, eat lunch, buy souvenirs, and buy a

ticket for a tour of the icefield, which is twice the size of Vancouver. Mammoths and sabre-tooth tigers once walked on this glacier where now Explorer all-terrain buses with 1.5m-high wheels travel. It's one of the largest accumulations of ice south of the Arctic Circle and is recognised as a World Heritage Site. The specially-equipped buses will take you down to the glacier, where you can walk on the ice, pack an ice snowball and throw it at your spouse for laughs. If she throws one back and hits you in the head, it isn't as funny.

One mountain of a glacier feeds into three oceans – the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Arctic. It's the only glacier in the world that does this, and it still boggles my mind trying to figure out how. It's just as mind-boggling to consider that while this icefield has been around since the Ice Age, scientists predict that it will disappear in 150 years. Now, think about this: 70% of our drinking water comes from glaciers (or so we're told). What's going to happen six or seven generations from now when glaciers such as these are gone?

This is what Hiromi and I talked about as we drove to Chateau Lake Louise, our next destination. I wasn't complaining about my movie-star book and she stopped complaining about the iceball I threw at her; instead we were wondering how our children's children's children were going to survive the world we were leaving them.

The view from the Chateau of the lake and the glacier reflecting into it is, next to Niagara Falls, the most photographed scene in Canada. And from our first-floor room we had a spectacular view of Lake Louise and Mt. Victoria. In fact, I suspect it was spectacular from every room that looked out on the lake. Built at the end of the 19th century, the Chateau is huge, housing seven restaurants, an 817 sq m ballroom, colourful stained-glass windows depicting Canada's wildlife, an indoor pool, gift shops that might rival Las Vegas, where you can buy fossils like a mammoth's tusk for \$50,000, Louis Vuitton luggage, and, at the Art of Man gallery, masks, paintings and bronze sculptures of cowboys, Indians and wildlife. Among the wildlife native sculptors represented were R. Parsons and Karl Lansing, whose bronzes of moose, raven, goat, and elk ranged in price from \$12,000 to \$27,000.

But it's not what you can buy at the Chateau that's so thrilling, but what you can see and breathe when you hike around the lake and into the forests 1,700m above sea level. Sub-alpine spruce and fir account for 80% of the forest in the area and some of them are 500 years old. Bear scat steams along the trails and friendly chipmunks will take food from your hand. You can rent a canoe and paddle around the lake or just sit on a bench and watch amateur artists paint what they see with charcoal or watercolours. During our two nights there we ate one dinner at the newly refurbished Tom Wilson Steakhouse, where they had a very tasty menu that included three appetizers with your entrée for just \$50. The other dinner we ate outside the Chateau, at the Lake Louise Railway Station & Restaurant. It was much simpler food, the atmosphere was authentic railway station and the waiters were all from Australia and New Zealand. Made us Americans feel right at home.

Leaving the Chateau behind we stopped at a candy store in town called Candy Shoppe Olde Tyme and I stocked up on licorice pieces from around the world. I'd never seen so many jars of licorice ranging in taste from salty to sweet, in texture from soft to hard, and in colour from brown and red

to charcoal and black. I had to take a picture just to show my licorice-loving friends back home. And since Hiromi doesn't like licorice, I didn't have to share a single piece on our drive to Banff.

A few miles outside of Banff we saw a sign for Lake Minnewanka (Lake of the Water Spirits) and somehow I remembered that the Marilyn Monroe/Robert Mitchum film *River of No Return* was shot there, as well as *Superman*, *Legends of the Fall*, and *The Assassination of Jesse James*. How did I remember this? Well, I didn't remember the other three until I got there and was told about it. But I thought it might be worth taking a boat tour around the lake. That's what I love about having a car for short drives (long drives make me sleepy and anxious to get to wherever we're going). You see a sign, you head in that direction.

Sure enough, the lake had tour boats and Aussie and Kiwi guides (are there any Canadian guides in Canada?). So for two hours we got to hear about the history of the lake (evidence of human occupation around the lake dates back 12,000 years, where the natives hunted bison and big-horn sheep with hand-held spears), see the Devil's Gap and learn of the half fish/half human creature that supposedly hangs out in that vicinity, and look for the bald eagle perched in his nest waiting to swoop down and steal a fish off the line of an angry fisherman.

We didn't hear any strange voices or running buffalo hooves in our placid journey around the lake, but the stories of such noises are linked to the history of the place and one can see why Hollywood has used it as a backdrop for their westerns. We did see a buffalo head, however, inside the reception and dining room of the Buffalo Mountain Lodge where we stayed in Banff. It was hanging over the fireplace, a sad reminder that these trophy animals once roamed freely in western Canada. The lodge had a comfortable, rustic feel with its many cabins and mountain views. It is part of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Resorts, which also owns the Deer Lodge near Lake Louise, and the Emerald Lake Lodge. They have four restaurants – Cilantro, Divino, The Rancho, and Velvet – and the meat served at each comes from their own wild game preserve. So if you're hungry for the taste of buffalo (like beef, only more flavourful and lower in fat), elk (high in iron) or caribou reindeer (double the iron of elk or buffalo), these are the lodges and restaurants to find such game.

Naturally, when I heard about this, I knew where our next stop would be on our way to Calgary: the Canadian Rocky Mountain Ranch. What better way to see buffalo, elk and reindeer! You can drive 1,600km, train through the Rockies, walk forest paths and not come upon a single buffalo, elk or reindeer. Here was a ranch that had them in herds; that fed them, nurtured them, kept them healthy and happy before they slaughtered them for your dining pleasure.

The man in charge of the 219-hectare ranch is Dr. Terry Church, an affable veterinarian, a grandfather, cowboy, and surrogate father to a four-month-old orphan buffalo the size of a Shetland pony. Terry was easy to talk to and enjoyed showing us around the ranch. The baby buffalo lived in a pen behind his house and drank milk from a plastic jug that Terry held for him. Then the buffalo licked and nibbled on Terry's fingers, following him wherever we walked. It was like a pet dog or ferret, only it was a buffalo. "I think in another month or two he'll be too big and strong to handle this way," Terry



said. "But right now, he thinks I'm his mother."
 "You're a big guy," I said, "but you don't look like a buffalo."
 "All he knows is where his food is coming from."
 "Will he one day be someone's dinner?" I asked.
 "I don't know, that's a tough one. My granddaughter would probably not like that. He's like part of the family right now. We'll just have to see what happens when he gets bigger."
 "How long do they live before they're moved to the slaughterhouse?"
 "Depends on the animal. The male buffaloes, usually 24 to 30 months. The females, three years. The elk females can go to 13 or 15 years, the males three. After that time the meat gets tougher. But all our animals are well cared for. And they don't know what's in store for them. Game animals are more prone to stress, so we do our best to treat them well. This is a fully integrated operation – we raise the game and process it for the resort properties. There are three cornerstones for farming game: They need proper conditions, low-stress handling, and proper processing."
 "What's so proper about the processing?" I wondered.
 "How they are chilled, cut, and aged. We take a lot of care in how we deal with our animals."
 "How come there are no moose?"
 "Moose are difficult to ranch," Terry said. "You require 60 hectares per moose, so it's just not practical."
 We got into Terry's pickup and drove out to take a look at the elk, which were friendly and curious about us. Then we visited the buffalo, magnificent beasts that let us get within a stone's throw of them. And finally the docile reindeer with those crazy-looking antlers branching out in all directions. They were all living the life of Reilly – that is, a pretty easy life where they were free to roam on spacious grounds, fed yummy alfalfa hay, broome grass hay and green oat hay, along with whole oats and cervid supplement pellets. They were safe from hunters, poachers, wolves, and harsh winter



foraging conditions. They just weren't going to live out their lives in such luxury.
 When Terry suggested we go for lunch at his favourite restaurant, The Rancho, I thought it a good idea, as long as he understood that I didn't have an appetite for buffalo burger, elk steak or reindeer McNuggets.
 "Not to worry," he laughed. "They make a great ahi tuna sandwich."
 Once in Calgary we checked into the Hotel Arts – for my money, the best hotel in Calgary. The room was spacious, the king-size bed nice and hard, and the flat-screen TV on the wall made the room feel like a theatre for two. We weren't that hungry, but it was our last night in Canada and we wanted to make it memorable. So we made our way to the River Café in Prince's Island Park, where one last chef's tasting menu was being prepared. Did we have room for the shitake mushroom tortilla, the Muscovy duck prosciutto, the grilled lobster, poached octopus, fresh shucked scallops, tomato gazpacho, beet salad, wild spring salmon, country bison strip loin, quail, and Okanagan watermelon and clover honey consommé with different wines for each course?
 What do you think?
 This was Canada.
 We were heading back home the next day.
 My celebrity was waiting to give me more stress.
 My daughter was either going to tell us she got engaged or she was back on the market.
 My friends would try their best to ignore their indiscretions.
 Were we hungry at the River Café?
 You bet we were.
 We ate every morsel.
 And drank each golden glass of wine.
 And enjoyed every last minute of our stay in Canada.
 The land that made us forget real time. ●

Above left: The Buffalo Mountain Lodge has a comfortable, rustic feel. Right: Spectacular glacier views include The Fairmont Hotel at Lake Louise.