

The Big Chill

BRITISH COLUMBIA'S Radium Hot Springs is at the heart of the Kootenay region's winter revelry — and if it gets too cold, just take a dip in the warm mineral pools. ❄️ BY CRAI S. BOWER

No matter where — or how — you choose to get outdoors in the Kootenay Rockies, you'll almost certainly feel on top of the world.

The sign is easy to miss. “Kootenay National Park” it reads, about halfway between Banff and Lake Louise on Highway 1 in Banff National Park. I wonder, as I slow to turn west, how many people traveling in Canada’s oldest national park don’t give this Kootenay business a second thought. (Their first thought, if they have one, is a given: “How do you pronounce that name?”) But Kootenay (coot-knee) deserves some respect.

Just one-fifth the size of Banff, the 543-square-mile park features several canyons and valleys, innumerable spectacular vistas, and some of the West’s finest European-style mineral pools. Located on the southwestern corner of the park, the little town of Radium Hot Springs serves as an ideal base from which to explore the entire Kootenay Rockies playground, with downhill and Nordic ski areas, hundreds of miles of trails, and numerous snowy alcoves just calling for a family or romantic escape.

My trip begins in Calgary, home to the closest major airport. I’m excited to dip my toes in the steamy thermal baths, but there’s plenty of shutter-worthy scenery long before I arrive at Radium Hot Springs. In the summer, ease of access clogs parking lots and bloats the trails that surround landmarks. Not so during the cold-weather months, when often I stand alone observing nature that I’ll argue is even more beautiful in subfreezing temperatures and limited sunlight.

For example, winter remains my favorite time to contemplate waterfalls. Their song carries the melody of a Verdi opera, the high frigid tenor harmonizing against the booming bass that emanates from behind the ice-walled enclosures. And the 58-mile Highway 93 connector that runs right into Radium features two excellent examples, beginning with Marble Canyon.

This spot exhibits spectacular interplay between water and limestone, crafting sharp, protractor-precise walls and gouging several collection pools that appear chillingly inviting — even in the dead of winter. Tokumm Creek wills itself through this slot canyon, darting beneath ice floes, then abruptly dashing back into view, as if it knows full well the picture you’re about to take is destined to be your next screensaver.

Numa Falls is also right off Highway 93, channeling the Vermilion River through a narrow passage of its own carving. More spillway than cascade, sheets of ice, two feet thick in places, bracket the river as it narrows to 15 feet in width. Icicles hang below angled

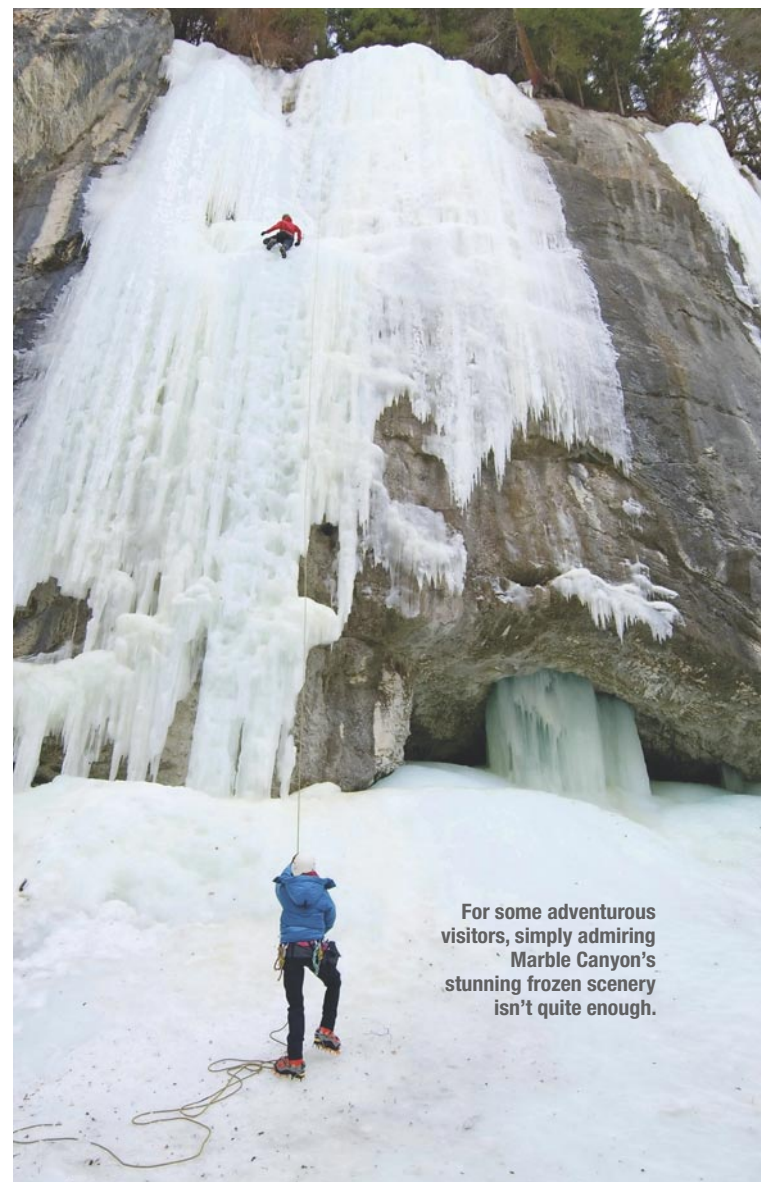
slabs of the sedimentary rock — until the river’s constant forward motion knocks them loose from their moorings.

Warm Up

While gazing down upon the frozen Kootenay River Valley, I decide I’m more than ready for a soak in the famous hot springs. Encompassed by snow-blanketed rock walls, the expansive pools provide a perfect antidote to the three-hour drive from Calgary that was punctuated with short, chilly hikes and the occasional frigid cascade spray.

Radium Hot Springs’ two pools, naturally mineral rich and typically maintained at about 84 and 103 degrees, have soothed the bones and, I assume, calmed the thoughts of no less a world figure than Winston Churchill, who relaxed here for a week in 1929. Although he was rumored to prefer his baths in a champagne-filled tub, I’m confident he enjoyed these percolating steam bubbles, too.

Once warmed up, not to mention fully unwound, I turned my



For some adventurous visitors, simply admiring Marble Canyon’s stunning frozen scenery isn’t quite enough.



Fernie Alpine Resort has epic bowls and glades aplenty, not to mention a happening après scene.

attention to why I love winter in this region: the myriad outdoor recreation. Fittingly, Radium Hot Springs is a convenient waypoint along British Columbia’s mythical Powder Highway, a route that connects eight distinct ski resorts known for diverse terrain and some of North America’s best snow conditions. While I’ve tackled — some would argue insanely — all eight in a single feast, biting off half proves a much more palatable trip, so the next morning I turned south and headed toward Panorama, one of the Highway’s diamonds in the snow bank.

For some reason, Panorama remains in the shadows of B.C.’s alpine culture even though the 4,019-foot vertical drop and 2,847 skiable acres are far from bunny hill-type statistics. Perhaps it’s because steep and deep is what establishes big mountain bragging rights, and Panorama is a self-proclaimed intermediate hill, happily catering to anybody and everybody who wants to buckle in to a pair of skis or strap on a snowboard — including advanced riders who can enjoy the 25 percent of runs that do require expertise.

To me, Panorama’s inclusion is the perfect reason to come, especially when traveling with multigenerational or mixed-ability groups. Panorama understands not everyone wants to catch first chair and ski through lunch, as evidenced by the panoply of snow-play options at the resort. Snowshoeing and cruising around on a fat-tired mountain bike are low-key possibilities, and Nordic skiers will find more than 12 miles of groomed trails here.

Panorama’s aptly named Summit Hut adds even more luster to the winter snow globe. It’s perched nearly 9,000 feet high and offers fondue dinners followed by a headlamp-illuminated group ski back down to the village. My partner wasn’t crazy about the thought of carving post-dinner night turns all the way from the top, so we agreed to après at Elkhorn Cabin, a traditional log structure

located mid-mountain. Make reservations and order the raclette, an authentic Swiss meat, cheese, and veggie dinner you prepare to your exact specifications on a personal grill.

Peak to Peak

Some of the Powder Highway’s ski areas are located a few hours from Radium Hot Springs, but it takes barely 30 minutes to get to the Fairmont Hot Springs ski resort, certainly the area’s quaintest. Bring a beginner to this petite hill for a few days and he or she will build the confidence necessary to swoosh down the region’s bigger

fastFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY:

IntervalWorld.com

CLIMATE: Average high temperatures from December through February range from the low 20s to 30°F in Radium Hot Springs. It can be much cooler up on the ski mountains, though, so be sure to pack plenty of warm gear.

DON’T MISS: The Olde Tyme Candy Shoppe, where you can stock up on your favorite vacation sweets —

pack some away for when you get back home!

CURRENCY: Canadian dollar

SALES TAX: 12%

TIPPING: 15% to 20% is standard at restaurants and bars.

INTERVAL TRAVEL:

IntervalWorld.com

RENTAL CAR:

Recommended

VISITOR INFORMATION:

Tourism Radium Hot Springs Association

250.347.9331

radiumhotsprings.com

Ski Sojourn

Make an exchange or buy a Getaway at IntervalWorld.com. Getaways start at **\$489** for a one-bedroom unit.

The Getaway price is valid December 1, 2015, through February 29, 2016.

slopes. The alpine ambiance permeates Fairmont, whether guests choose to spa the day away in the natural hot pools, explore the local scenery (namely the magical hoodoo rock formations), or take a guided snowshoe tour.

Transitioning from Fairmont's gentle rollers to Kimberley Alpine Resort's intermediate runs is a natural progression, and for riders who'd like an even bigger shift, Kimberley has glades and plenty of steeps back in the Black Forest. This also is a great place for Nordic skiers, with one of the largest trail systems in the region. (Bonus: The cross-country tracks are lighted and available for night skiing.)

I even managed to save a little energy for a few turns around Kimberley's outdoor ice rink. After all, ice-skating is a requisite undertaking for any winter visit to Canada. My plan was to make a few leisurely laps and then retire for the evening. But a fun-loving group of folks caught my attention. I've skated my entire life, but I had never curled. And it didn't take long for my curiosity to get the better of me.

Curling may look a little zany, sweeping the ice to alter the direction and pace of a large granite stone. Turns out, it's a lot harder than it looks. Take it from me, though, trying to place the "rock" from hack (starting block) to house (target area) also proves a blast.

Panorama's Elkhorn Cabin holds nothing on Kimberley's Old Bauernhaus, a 350-year-old log home that was imported

stick by stick from Germany. The restaurant, located a few minutes from the ski resort, features a menu rich in schnitzel and spätzle, pilsners and schnapps. I dove right in to their Bavarian Feast, beginning with baked Brie and crowned with a pair of schnitzels among other traditional fare.

Head of the Class

The skier's crescendo reaches its perfect pitch just a bit more than two hours south of Radium Hot Springs at Fernie Alpine Resort, a 2,500-plus-acre area that holds its own among the premier ski hills in western North America. Simply put, you haven't skied in western Canada until you've notched Fernie in your belt.

And when you do, you'll most likely discover some of the finest powder pockets around. Though it hadn't snowed for three days, we found plenty of still-fresh stashes, especially when we dropped into Currie Bowl. Back at the Griz Bar, the base saloon named after the mythical local character who, according to legend, is to thank



for all that great snow, we debated glades versus bowls, both in abundant supply here, while the band picked its way through a Charlie Daniels tune.

Like listening to "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," skiing never gets old, but I curled in Kimberley, so why not try something else in Fernie? My thought was a half-day of ice fishing, but we ended up getting sidetracked (literally).

Most Rocky Mountain wildlife viewing happens during calving season and the long days of summer, but we learned that winter's an ideal time to see elk, big horn sheep, and even wolves and lynx as they travel through the valley. And really, how better to round out a trip to this habitat than to track bobcat paw prints in the snow?

Thoroughly wintered up, I packed my gear, grabbed tea and a croissant at the Loaf Bakery & Restaurant, and then steered back toward Radium. I used to think of ski trips as exactly that, *ski* trips, but now I consider a sojourn to these alpine resorts an opportunity to celebrate all of winter's charm, whether I'm slicing through the trees, strapping into a pair of snowshoes, or preparing another delightful serving of bubbling raclette cheese. ■

Travel writer and photographer **Crai S. Bower** contributes to more than 25 print and online publications. He also appears as a travel commentator for American Forces Radio and *Travel With Rick Steves*.

Wrap up a day on the slopes at Kimberley Alpine Resort with a toast to Old Man Winter. **FACING PAGE:** Winter is a great time to spot wildlife in the Canadian Rockies — maybe even an elusive lynx.



Mark Eileen Photography/Resorts of the Canadian Rockies/SKIFPCR; Theo Allais/Corbis/Glow Images

FAMILY FRIENDLY VACATION

WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA



From **\$129***

4 DAYS & 3 NIGHTS RESORT ACCOMMODATIONS

Enjoy a 4-Day/3-Night 1 bedroom Resort Vacation* in America's Historic Triangle.

- PLUS YOUR CHOICE OF ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:**
- Two 2-Day tickets to Colonial Williamsburg
 - Two 1-Day tickets to Busch Gardens
 - Two 1-Day tickets to Howl-O-Scream at Busch Gardens
 - Two 1-Day tickets to Busch Gardens Christmastown including a \$75.00 Dining Certificate to Captain George's World Famous All-You-Can-Eat Seafood Buffet.



For reservations call **888-852-9183**



*\$129 package price valid for 2 adults and up to 2 children for Sun-Wed check-in only. \$159 for Thu-Sat check-in. Holiday rates may vary. Offer includes 1 bedroom accommodations, larger accommodations are available with upgrade. Offer valid for travel between 10/01/15 through 06/08/16. Rate does not include tax, is subject to availability and expires 06/08/16. This offer is designed for married or cohabiting couples, over the age of 25 and with an income of \$50,000 or greater. Cohabiting couples must have a government issued ID with matching addresses. If married, husband and wife must tour together. If cohabiting, both parties must tour together. No purchase is required. All reservations subject to availability. King's Creek Plantation has been qualified for sale in the state of Virginia and is not for sale in those states where registration requirements have not been fulfilled. This announcement is not an offer to sell or a solicitation or an offer to buy to residents of any U.S. state where registration has not been completed. The promotional material is being used for the purpose of soliciting sales of vacation ownership plans.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG AND BUSCH GARDENS