



ALBERTA WILDERNESS

and a link to home



Traveller surprised by ‘small world’ encounter in remote tea house

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LYNN HADRALL

The turquoise waters of Lake Louise sparkled below us as we hiked over steep terrain, following a sign for a tea house.

We spotted waterfalls and rock climbers as we added about six kilometres to our day’s outing. We chatted with other travellers making their way up and down the Alberta mountain. We saw a cowboy and his packhorse.

And then the world suddenly got very small when we met a local woman working in her dream job.

Danielle Palumbo grew up in Cambridge with her brother, Chris, and their parents, John and Bev Palumbo. The Eastwood Collegiate graduate completed a master’s degree in planning and development at Ryerson University in 2016. She was living in downtown Toronto but felt something was missing. A Cambridge friend told her about working for a summer at a tea house in Canada’s oldest national park. Palumbo was hooked.

“I was craving a real adventure, a journey really full of new experiences and challenges. (Plain of Six Glaciers Tea House) was a way to experience the mountain life in the best, most authentic way possible, travel, and make great money at the same time,” Palumbo says.

To embrace the job, you have to have an open mind, work hard and not mind getting dirty, she says. Staff at the tea house not only prepare meals and wait tables, but they also clean outhouses, sweep up porcupine droppings and make sure the critters don’t gnaw on everything.

At an elevation of 2,100 metres, the tea house is without electricity and warm running water.

Swiss guides working for the Canadian



Pacific Railway built it out of stone and wood in 1924, to provide a rest stop for hikers going higher up the trail to the Abbot Pass. Martha Feuz was the first operator, wife of guide Edward Feuz. Joy and Peter Kimball bought the tea house in 1959 and it remains in the same family.

My husband and I reached it in late May when it had just opened for the season.

It’s a moderate hike to the tea house from Chateau Lake Louise, with steep stretches. Crowds swarm the chateau grounds but thin out as you climb the trail. Part of the narrow rock face is embedded with steel cables to guide you. We hiked through ankle-deep snow and wet parts. The last section has steep switchbacks.

You can pack your own lunch and eat it on benches at a lookout. You can hike higher for an even better view of the glaciers.

We arrived at the tea house thirsty and hungry and found lots of tables available so early in the season. The menu changes as supplies ebb and flow. Hot corn muffins and chocolate cake had just emerged from



DANIELLE PALUMBO

the kitchen. We enjoyed tea and a cup of soup. The wooden veranda offers a vantage point with stunning views. The rumble of a far-off avalanche startled us, but apparently it happens regularly.

We overheard Palumbo mention Cambridge while serving another guest and so I asked her: is that Cambridge in Ontario? Yes, it sure is a small world.

On her first shift at the tea house, Palumbo carted a backpack weighing more than 50 pounds. A helicopter drops off supplies during the season, but staff must transport any personal food or items they

want. Palumbo was thrilled to participate in “helicopter day.”

The helicopter loads in Lake Louise with bags of supplies weighing 800 to 1,000 pounds. This includes chocolate and wine and large propane tanks for the stoves.

“It was absolutely incredible seeing the mountains, my new neighbours, from that vantage point,” Palumbo says.

Staff live in a cabin beside the tea house. Cosy sleeping conditions include bunk beds and a wood stove. You can hang a hammock and sleep outdoors when weather permits.

“I’ll never forget what it felt like to see the smoke come out of the cabin, and then smell that fire on the way down from my evening hikes after work – just glorious,” Palumbo says.

On days off, the staff split rent in a Lake Louise apartment.

The job includes carrying down all of the garbage that isn’t safe to burn. Employees call the treks the “garbage party” and are thrilled when tourists offer to help.

TITLE PAGE: Moraine Lake is a photographer’s paradise, from the spectacular hue of the water to the view of the Rockies.

LEFT: Lake Louise and the chateau are viewed from the trail leading to the Six Glaciers Tea House.

ABOVE: The Plain of Six Glaciers Tea House was built in 1924 by Swiss guides working for the Canadian Pacific Railway.



Porcupines named Leonard, Scully and Mulder chew on everything from boxes and piping to furniture left outside. Other critters steal shiny things such as aluminum foil or watches.

Job perks include savouring nature's beauty found in a bird song, meadow flowers, the Northern Lights and a vibrant night sky. A secret meadow reminded Palumbo of something out of the Lord of the Rings.

She learned to enjoy showering in waterfalls, just a fun hike away from the tea house, and soaking her sore feet in a hidden natural hot tub.

There's no electricity, which doesn't stop visitors from asking if they can borrow phone chargers or use a microwave. Palumbo's cellphone died on her second day at work.

"At first it felt strange. Then I loved the disconnection. I had time and space to think, disconnect from the tech cloud and reconnect with myself and others with my head literally in the clouds," she says.

Our visit to the tea house was just one highlight on our trip to Banff National Park. We also visited nearby Lake Moraine. It too has incredible views and water of a spectacular hue I have never seen in nature. As glacial ice moves over

the mountain, tiny shreds of rock flow to mountain lakes in spring and summer. Light reflects off this "rock flour" to make the water shimmer in an unusually bright blue or emerald colour.

You can easily visit Lake Moraine and Lake Louise in the same day. There are several trail options at Lake Moraine, including a pile of rocks you can climb for a better vantage point to take photographs. It is virtually impossible to take a bad photograph from that location.

We visited outside ski season, but you can still ride the lifts at Lake Louise Sightseeing Gondola (part of the ski resort) to experience Rocky Mountain highs. You can choose an open chair or fully enclosed gondola. It takes 15 minutes to reach an interpretive centre and more trails to explore.

We enjoyed the buffet breakfast (an extra \$4) to fuel up before riding the gondola. We opted for a \$9 initiation session on top of the mountain. This turned out to be a very good decision.

Our guide took us on a 45-minute walk, partly to gird us for unexpected wildlife encounters and help keep us safe. A basic rule is to talk loudly to ward off bears and to keep yelling this out loud while you

The Lake Louise Sightseeing Gondola offers bird's-eye views even when it isn't ski season.

hike: "Hey bear!"

We set off on our own after the session and almost immediately came upon fresh bear droppings on the trail. We spoke loudly, moved cautiously, and sure enough spied two bears in the meadow below. We snapped photos but kept our distance. We saw the same bears from above on our gondola ride back down the mountain.

Visitors who don't want to spend all their time on trails can head to the town of Banff for food, shopping and history.

You can be forgiven if you feel like you are in Australia, hearing the accents while wandering Banff's charming streets and inside the stores and restaurants. We met many Australians working there on summer jobs.

Take a stroll around the Banff Springs hotel grounds as well as Chateau Lake Louise. Both castle-like properties were built by the Canadian Pacific Railway and have shops and historic sights.

A statue of railway executive William Cornelius Van Horne in Banff pays tribute to his vision in luring tourists to see the

Rockies. "Since we can't export the scenery, we'll have to import the tourists," he famously said.

A walk over the Banff pedestrian bridge provides yet another stunning view of the mountains, Bow River and surrounding scenery.

The area was settled in the late 1800s and its history is well curated at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff. Guided tours of the exhibits and historic cabins help explain the early life of the area and the pioneers who lived there.

Banff shopping ranges from high-end fashions at the Banff Springs hotel to main-street tourist stores with typical trinkets. Food choices are eclectic. We sampled everything from sushi and steak to vegan fare. One of our best meals was at Flourish Restaurant on Bear Street.

We left Banff to experience more western adventures in Calgary and Edmonton, but our time in the mountains was the highlight of our trip. It's always said that Canada has many natural wonders. Visiting Banff National Park let us marvel at one of the best.

And now we have a new understanding of what it means to take high tea. ☺

IF YOU GO:

- Dress in layers for your hike. The temperatures can change quickly as you gain altitude.
- Bring cash if you plan to buy something at the tea house. Our receipt also gave us a discount for tea at the Banff Tea Co. in Banff, a business started by the Plains of Six Glaciers tea house owner.
- Read the trail markers carefully. Another trail at Lake Louise takes you to the Lake Agnes Tea House, named after Lady Agnes Macdonald, wife of Canada's first prime minister.
- Canoe rentals are available at Lake Louise if you want to spend time on the water.
- If you are driving, watch for the wildlife overpasses, bridges designed to allow wildlife to safely cross the highway, reducing deaths and crashes.

Useful websites:

banfflakelouise.com
banffadventures.com
pc.gc.ca (Parks Canada website)
whyte.org

www.kwglass.com

(519) 725-9305



KW Glass
SYSTEMS INC.



Custom Design All Glass Shower Surrounds
445 Dutton Drive, Waterloo, Ontario