

Top 10 Canadian adventures

No matter your ability, no matter your taste, Canada has an adventure tailored to you, in accessible locations. From rank beginner to seasoned veteran you can find your thrills on the edge of, and sometimes within, city limits.

1 Banff

If you were to sit down and try to design an area of the world that would be the most spectacular, the most awe inspiring and the most scenically overwhelming, odds are it might look a lot like Banff and Jasper National Parks. It's almost as if the postcard was dreamed up after seeing this place; everywhere you look there is something else that will take your breath away. Mountains, big mountains, are all over the place – standing tall, rising above the tree line, summer grey and winter white monoliths of stone. The wild pines curve up their flanks like a cloak of green. Fast-flowing rivers chart their own course through the hills, curving in among the peaks. Enormous glaciers flow down the peaks and nearly touch the road. Lakes are the color of turquoise, so blue that you have to wonder if there is something unnatural behind their hue.

2 Killer whale watching

When salmon spawns in full swim along Canada's west coast during August, a host of creatures follow hungrily behind, including pods of orcas. Whale-watching boats tail along viewing these beautiful animals, but the most intimate way to watch the so-called killer whales is from a kayak. The 250 resident killer whales cruise about picking off salmon as they head for the Fraser River near Vancouver. Orca downtime is spent rubbing bellies against the pebbly beach in Robson Bight, the only spot in the world where they are known to do this. Along the way you might also see Steller sea lions, Dall's porpoises, bald eagles and perhaps even a minke whale, before you bed down to the sound of orcas swimming and surfacing past your tent. And, fear not, resident killer whales eat only fish.

3 Storm watch on Vancouver Island

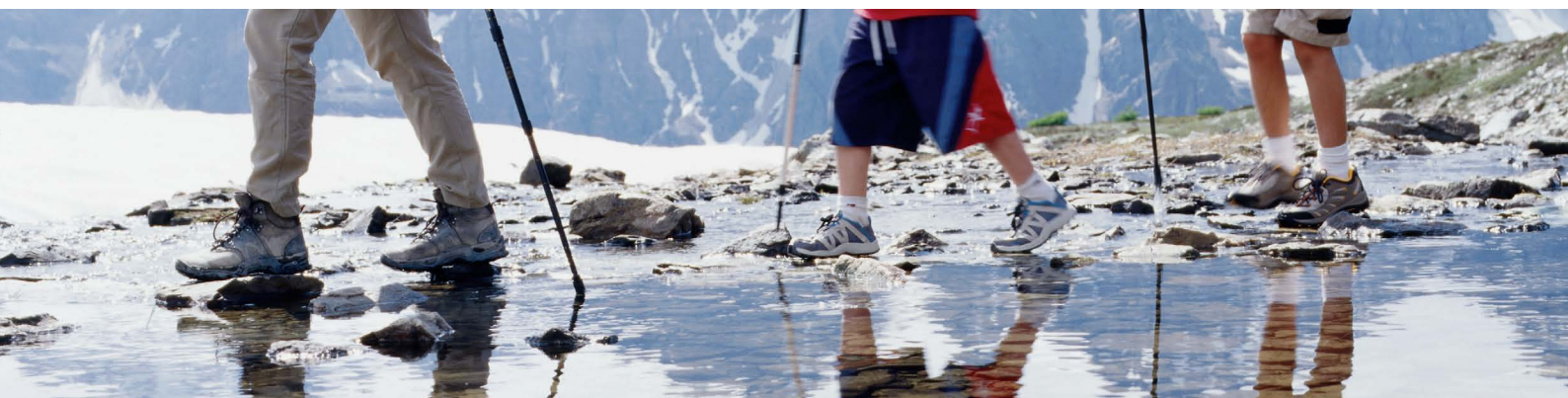
Each winter, Vancouver Island's west coast becomes a front-row seat to the most spectacular storms on the North American west coast. With nothing but the Pacific Ocean between the island and Japan, these well-travelled storms – driven here by a persistent low-pressure system in the Gulf of Alaska – roar ashore, bringing high winds and waves that pack a punch. Wander the beaches to experience the storms' full fury, follow the aptly named Wild Pacific Trail for a cliff-top view, take a storm-watching tour from the town of Tofino or simply observe the action from the windows of your hotel room.

4 Ski Whistler

One of North America's best ski resorts, perhaps best in the world, Whistler-Blackcomb – the principal venue for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games – contains nearly 200 longer-than-average marked trails and the highest vertical drop (1609m) of any ski field on the continent. Wander round the back of Blackcomb to Ruby Bowl and it gets even better. It has Whistler-Blackcomb's best powder, falling in continuous steps for more than 600m.

5 Raft the Shubenacadie tidal bore

The Bay of Fundy gets the world's highest tides, rising up to 15m daily. As a result of these extreme tides, a tidal wave or bore flows up the feeder rivers when high tide comes in. At the mouth of the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia this has led to the creation of tidalbore rafting trips, with powered Zodiacs riding the collision of water as the river's outflow meets the blasting force of the incoming Fundy tides. Wave heights are dependent on the phase of the moon, and will dictate whether your experience is mild or wild. Be prepared to get very wet.



6 Cycling the Icefields Parkway

Stretching 230km between Jasper and Lake Louise and following a lake-lined valley between two chains of the Rocky Mountains, the Icefields Parkway is considered one of the world's most scenic roads. Cyclists also know it as one of the great mountain-biking tours. The impatient can ride it in two days, but well-spaced camping grounds and hostels mean it can also be lingered over for four or five days. Expect mountains, lakes and a menagerie of mammals – goats, bighorn sheep, elk, moose and perhaps even black and grizzly bears.

7 River canoeing/kayaking

Nahanni National Park Reserve, Canada's first World Heritage-listed site, is a wild place that embraces its namesake, the epic South Nahanni River. Untamed and pure-blooded, the river tumbles more than 500km through the jagged Mackenzie Mountains, including a 125m drop over 200m-wide Virginia Falls. Paddling trips on the South Nahanni begin where planes can land, and for 188km the river meanders placidly through broad valleys, and another 252km to Blackstone Territorial Park, first through steep-sided, turbulent canyons and then along the broad Liard River. Moose, wolves, grizzly bear, Dall sheep and mountain goats patrol the landscape.

8 Polar bears in Churchill

Churchill is on the bears' migration route between winters spent hunting on the frozen bay and summers spent on land, and through October they pass by this Manitoba town. You can take day tours in purpose-built buggies, or you can stay in transportable 'tundra lodges'. Where you hope not to see a polar bear is in town itself. Local authorities maintain a 24-hour vigil from September to November, with gunshots fired at night to shoo away any town-bound bears. Nuisance makers and repeat offenders are taken to cinderblock cells of an old military base, aka 'Polar Bear Jail', until winter.

9 Swimming with Belugas,

When you first see a beluga it's hard to imagine that this animal is for real. Not only are these 5m-long whales as white as Carrara marble, but they strike such expressive poses that you'd swear they're making faces at you. In fact, belugas are charming and curious animals and it's one of the reasons they are a popular attraction at sea parks around the world. But seeing them in the wild is an altogether different experience, and seeing hundreds of thousands on their summer moulting grounds is simply breathtaking. These summer gatherings can be observed at the mouth of Canada's St Lawrence River, where about 1000 belugas can be found, or at the mouth of the Churchill River where there are about 3000

10 Sleep in an ice hotel, Quebec

Enter a magical world where snow and ice are transformed into fabulous decors. Since it opened its doors in 2001, the Hôtel de Glace has wowed over half a million visitors. With snow archways towering over 5 meters tall and crystal ice sculptures standing by the warmth of the fire, North America's only ice hotel has made a name for itself not only through its architecture and artistry, but also its warm hospitality.