

National Parks Northern Style

Canada has some of North America's most spectacular landscapes and thousands of square miles of protected vistas

*Text And Photography
By James Kay*

Even before Yellowstone and Grand Canyon were established as national parks, their marvelous landscapes attracted photographers with an undiminished magnetism. When I began my photography career back in 1980, I soon realized that my home in the mountains of northern Utah provided me with an ideal location. I could grab my camera gear, jump in my car and within seven hours, I could be setting up a tripod in Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Arches,

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Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, Zion, Bryce or Grand Canyon National Parks. With all these varied landscapes to choose from, I had a seemingly lifetime supply of photography locations right at my doorstep. For me, however, as with many other photographers, much of my motivation comes from seeking out and exploring new places.

My quest for new territory soon led me north to Montana's Glacier National Park. With some of the most stunning mountain scenery in the Lower 48, Glacier

soon became a favorite destination. After a couple of trips though, I soon realized that the magnificent peaks of Glacier were, in effect, just a small southern extension of the even more awe-inspiring Canadian Rockies, which extend for nearly 1,000 miles north to the Yukon Territory.

Since the establishment of Banff National Park in 1885, the Canadian government has designated a vast network of provincial and national parks that sweep north along the jagged crest of the Continental Divide in one continuous arc.

Beginning less than 100 miles northwest of Glacier, you could fly along the Continental Divide for nearly 350 miles and be looking down at parklands the entire time. As you gaze out the window, you'll see 12 parks encompassing more than 11,000 contiguous square miles.

While our national parks in the U.S. now suffer from chronic underfunding and crumbling infrastructure, the Canadians offer a much higher level of efficiency and services. If you've long since given up on trying to shoot Delicate Arch

at sunset or Mesa Arch at sunrise because of the swarm of other photographers, take heart; in Canada's parks, you won't find yourself tripping over tripods and camera packs as you jockey for position with throngs of other photographers. You won't be hassled by park rangers trying to determine if you have all the appropriate photography permits and, although you'll encounter smoky skies from time to time, you won't be plagued by endless summer wildfires that now seem to be the norm in and around our western

national parks. Instead of having to deal with these issues, you simply have to contend with brilliant turquoise lakes, soaring peaks draped with enormous tumbling glaciers and millions upon millions of acres of wild country. Compared to our parks, it's like traveling 30 years back in time.

In order to narrow things down a bit, I'll focus on the core Rocky Mountain Parks of Banff, Yoho and Jasper located along the crest of the Continental Divide.



Jasper National Park

The town of Jasper lies near the center of Jasper National Park and can be reached by driving 179 miles north from the town of Banff. The stretch of road beyond Lake Louise, dubbed the Icefields Parkway, has been described as one of the most beautiful drives in the world. The high point along this drive at Sunwapta Pass serves as the common border between the two parks. The town of Jasper with its campgrounds and lodges provides an ideal staging area for accessing both Amethyst Lake and Maligne Lake.

LEFT: Maligne Lake Kayaker. While Maligne Lake takes its name from the French word for malignant or wicked, don't be dissuaded. It's a jewel. Tinted turquoise by glacial meltwater, this 13-mile lake fills a large valley beneath the towering Queen Elizabeth Range southeast of Jasper. The parking lot at the northern end of the lake can be reached by driving 25 miles along a paved road from town. While the photo potential from this parking lot isn't bad, the most dramatic scenery lies at the far southern end of the lake. No trail from the parking lot will take you there, and a park service tour boat turns around halfway down the lake, so the only means of access is by canoe or kayak. My wife and I launched our kayaks in mid-August specifically to reach these inaccessible southern reaches of the lake, where the impressive bulk of Mount Brazeau towers above the aquamarine water. This particular image was made in early afternoon as we paddled south of Samson Narrows at the location where the tour boat turns around. Once I decided to get this shot, I paddled my boat to shore and climbed up a low ridge so I could look out over the trees to the peaks beyond. Being able to paddle my own boat down the lake with camera in hand provides me with opportunities to capture images that otherwise would be out of reach.

Nikon N90s, NIKKOR 105mm, handheld, Fujichrome Velvia



Yoho National Park

British Columbia's Yoho National Park shares a common border along the Continental Divide with Alberta's Banff National Park. From Lake Louise Village, it's only a five-mile drive north and west on the Trans-Canada Highway to the boundary of Yoho and another couple of miles to the parking lot for the shuttle bus to Lake O'Hara. Lake O'Hara is a popular destination and private vehicular access is prohibited. To reserve a room in the intimate Lake O'Hara Lodge, book at least a year in advance. Tent pads at the 30-site campground near the lake must be reserved by calling three months prior to your arrival. If the campground and lodge are full, a limited number of seats on the bus are reserved for day hikers and may be acquired by calling the day before. The entire Lake O'Hara basin is restricted to several hundred people per day so once you get in, the experience is sublime.

LEFT: Snowcapped Mount Hungabee & Yellow Larches. Subalpine larch trees fringe the upper edge of tree line throughout the Canadian Rockies. While they may have the appearance of a typical evergreen tree in the summer months, the needles take on a vibrant yellow hue in mid- to late September, just as the first snows of winter dust the peaks along the Continental Divide. I set out specifically to capture this change in seasons several years ago when I made this image of snow-frosted, 11,457-foot Hungabee Mountain from Opabin Valley above Lake O'Hara. A series of trails that begins near the Lake O'Hara Lodge and campground provides access to several large, high glacial valleys adorned with larch forests and sprinkled with glistening lakes. Here on the west side of the divide, most photographic opportunities present themselves in the afternoon and evening. Located at 6,600 feet, mid-September nights at Lake O'Hara get well below freezing. Fingerless gloves for shooting and plenty of warm clothes are a necessity. The Lake O'Hara region serves as a major wildlife corridor favored by grizzly bears, so be prepared to take all the necessary precautions in order to reduce human-bear conflicts. If you plan to solo-hike the trails leading to McArthur Lake, a canister of pepper spray is advisable.

Pentax 67, Pentax 75mm, Gitzo 1228 tripod, Acratech Ultra ballhead, Fujichrome Velvia

BELOW: Climber On Huber Ledges. My wife Susie and I began this day by climbing out of the Lake O'Hara basin with our headlamps at 4:30 a.m. in an attempt to climb 11,362-foot Mount Victoria out of view to the left in this image. We were blown off the southeast ridge by high winds and a veneer of ice coating the rocks. Disappointed, we retreated down from Abbott Pass to Lake Oesa, seen here below the twin pyramids of Ringrose Peak and Hungabee Mountain. As it turned out, this was one of my most productive photography days that summer. You could spend several hours shooting as we did that day around Nymph Pools, Lefroy Lake and Lake Oesa.

The surrounding mountains are so enormous that it helps to include a person in the frame to provide scale to the scene. After exhausting the possibilities around Lake Oesa, climb west along the Huber Ledges route where this image was captured. Lake Oesa Valley is arguably the most spectacular of the three high valleys above Lake O'Hara and is easily accessed by an excellent network of trails that begins near the lodge. The Yukness Ledges route begins at Lake Oesa and continues out of the frame at right center. This route provides an excellent vantage point for Lake O'Hara itself, which is out of frame at lower right. While the Lake O'Hara region is a popular winter destination for skiers, the months of July and August offer the best hiking conditions.

Nikon N90s, NIKKOR 50mm, Fujichrome Velvia



OPENING SPREAD RIGHT: Sunrise At Amethyst Lake. The trailhead to Amethyst Lake in the Tonquin Valley can be reached by driving approximately five miles south from the town of Jasper along the Icefields Parkway to the Highway 93A turnoff, then another 3.5 miles to the Mount Edith Cavell Road. From this junction, it's another eight miles to the trailhead parking lot for the Mount Edith Cavell Trail, which ascends up the Astoria River Valley to Amethyst Lake. The trail climbs 1,450 feet over 10.5 miles to Clitheroe Campground near the lake. You also could stay at the Tonquin-Amethyst Lake Lodge another 1.3 miles up the trail. Both locations provide easy access to the edge of the water for a front-row seat each morning, as first light illuminates the jagged crest of The Ramparts surging 3,000 feet straight up

from the lake's western shore. While the ridgeline glows in the first light of dawn, the lower reaches are blocked by an intervening mountain, so a graduated neutral-density filter works well to reduce the contrast between the lake and the sunlit crest. The Ramparts trend in a south-east/northwest line so by late in the summer, sunrise will have moved south enough to provide more appealing sidelight, as opposed to the frontlit scene you'll encounter near the solstice. Mosquitoes hold their annual conventions here during July and early August, so you may want to delay until later in the season anyway just to avoid the clouds of insects.

Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm, Bogen 3021 tripod, Acratech Ultra ballhead, Fujichrome Velvia

Extra Tips

The days of Canada as an inexpensive travel destination are over. Don't forget to bring credit cards with high limits, especially if you're planning to stay in any of the great lodges. U.S. passports now are required to cross the border.



Banff National Park

The quickest way to get to Banff National Park is to fly into Calgary International Airport and drive two hours west on the Trans-Canada Highway to the town of Banff. Lake Louise Village is another 45 minutes beyond Banff. If you're already on a road trip near Glacier National Park in Montana, it's a beautiful six-hour drive up the western flank of the Rockies from Kalispell, Mont.

In addition to the town of Banff itself, the Lake Louise area is one of the few busy spots you'll encounter in the Canadian Rockies. Of course, "busy" is a relative term. It's a far cry from Coney Island.

ABOVE: Moraine Lake. Assuming you've successfully fought your way back through the crowds to your car after shooting sunrise at Lake Louise, it's a quick 15-minute drive south to Moraine Lake in the Valley of the Ten Peaks. No less spectacular, you could also choose to capture first light here as the sunlit Wenkchemna Peaks reflect in Moraine Lake, in the company of a tiny fraction of humanity compared to Louise. The lake was named after the 80-foot-tall pile of rocks at its east end, surmised to be a glacial moraine deposited here by the retreating glaciers.

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The Rockpile Trail provides easy access to a viewpoint on top of this moraine where I captured this image in late August. I arrived here right after shooting sunrise at Lake Louise as the morning fog in the upper valley was still burning off. The combination of the lake's surface being in shadow and the calm winds allowed for a good reflection in the water, which is typical during the calm summer weather. If you want to capture the brilliant turquoise hue of the lake, you can sleep in and begin shooting here around 10 a.m. as the higher sun angle

begins to accentuate the water color. With its NE/SW axis, the lake quickly becomes backlit viewed from the moraine after 1 p.m.

Pentax 67, Pentax 105mm, Bogen 3021 tripod, Acratech Ultra ballhead, Fujichrome Velvia

ABOVE RIGHT: Sunrise At Lake Louise. Sunrise on Mount Victoria over Lake Louise is one of the iconic Canadian Rockies images. Thanks to the monolithic Chateau Lake Louise Hotel towering into the sky at the edge of the water, don't expect to have the place to yourself. Sunrise here is such a powerful experience, however, that the crowd becomes irrelevant as everyone gapes in hushed silence as the scene begins to unfold. As soon as the sunrise show ends, the mayhem begins. Arrive early, before the first rays of daylight illuminate Victoria Glacier high on the east face of 11,362-foot Mount Victoria. One of the best vantage points is right at the lake's outlet on the paved walkway. A graduated neutral-density filter helps reduce the contrast between the sunlit glacier and the dark waters of Lake Louise. Clouds often form around



Mount Victoria's summit at sunrise, adding drama to the scene. Due to the silty meltwaters of Victoria Glacier that flow into the lake, Louise takes on a glorious turquoise hue during the high months of summer. Not evident in this early-morning image, this wonderful aquamarine tint is best captured when the sun is high in the sky. A polarizing filter can help enhance the color by reducing reflections from the water's surface. Be warned, however—if you arrive at the parking lot any time after 9 a.m., chances are it will be full.

Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm, Lee .6 split ND filter, Bogen 3021 tripod, Acratech Ultra ballhead, Fujichrome Velvia

The *Canadian Rockies Trail Guide* by Brian Patton and Bart Robinson provides extensive information for trails throughout these parks.

For more of James Kay's landscape photography, visit www.jameskay.com.

resources

Banff National Park

www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/banff/index_E.asp

Jasper National Park

www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/jasper/index_e.asp

Yoho National Park

www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/bc/yoho/index_E.asp

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