



Sun sparkles on snow as guests at Fairmont's Chateau Lake Louise take a ride in a horse-drawn sleigh

# Sleigh bells in the SNOW

Canada is a brilliant destination for an old-fashioned white Christmas

MARY-ELLEN HEPWORTH



# Sleigh bells in the snow

WE have always been wary of going anywhere too exotic for Christmas (wouldn't want to let Santa Claus think we had lost interest in him). As the big people in our family see it, you can't expect Santa to shimmy down the spires of wats or follow a boat down the Amazon when really he should be collecting beer and cake by the barbie. And the little people aren't prepared to risk putting him to the test.

So for our first family Christmas holiday, we go to his natural habitat, complete with Christmas trees, lights, carols, consumerism, good cheer and, overwhelmingly, snow. In search of the guaranteed white Christmas fantasy, we go to the Canadian Rockies.

We set out via Calgary, finding a city already blessed with the first solid snowfalls of the season. Locals sorrowfully tell of the occasional "brown" Christmas, where the snow comes late and the

big day becomes a mud fest, but nobody can remember exactly when the last one occurred.

Instead, we are greeted by halls decked with boughs of holly and a city up in lights, and even the most curmudgeonly of us (the one driving) is moved to allow the humming of Christmas carols as we hit

**We settle for a family card game, as lights twinkle on the icicles outside**

the cutely named Deerfoot Trail for our trek to the mountains.

Planning to visit the nearby dinosaur park, we go via Brooks, near Lake Newell, usually a popular summer resort offering boating, hikes and swimming.

In the mid-afternoon gloom, after some nerve-wracking snowploughing, we settle into A Lake

Shore B & B; most of our stays will be at big hotels, but here we find the Christmas spirit at domestic level, and the trees and Santas and nativity scenes are almost as impressive. The beautiful rooms are cosy as only a double-glazed, old-world suite can be at -35C.

Host Richard Gette offers (seriously) to fire up the outdoor spa (hardy people these Canadians) and Kathy Gette suggests a wellness massage, but we settle for a family card game by the imitation fire, as lights twinkle on the icicles outside. The Gettes tell us the B & B market is growing steadily, particularly with Brits and Europeans who are more comfortable with the concept. Next morning in their cosy kitchen, over fruit cocktails, French toast, bacon and endless coffee and juice (the best breakfast of the trip) I can see why.

Suitably fortified, we head into the deep freeze bound for Edmonton, home of the world's biggest

shopping mall housing possibly the world's biggest Christmas-shopping crowd. After some fraught attempts at stocking-filling, we retreat to the adjoining Fantasyland Hotel with its 120 themed rooms including (ho, ho, ho) our Christmas room. It sparkles with small-paned windows, fairy lights, holly swags, an imitation log fire and presents under the tree. And all of this viewable from the luxury of a bubbling hot tub, champagne at hand.

Away from the mall, the rest of Edmonton is living up to its name as the province's year-round festival city. Each year it salutes the season with Christmas Reflections in Fort Edmonton Park, featuring sleigh rides, Santa, and themed entertainment. Unfortunately, white Christmas comes with serious cold and on the night we are to go, with the temperature at

*Continued from Page 1*

-25C, even the locals deem it too cold to be out and the evening is cancelled. They go ahead every other night, however, with temperatures about -20C.

A jolly substitute is Bright Lights, a commercially funded drive-through lighting display to rival any of the neighbourhood drives we traditionally do at Christmas in Australia. The entry fee supports the Edmonton charity, the Food Bank, and from the warmth of the car the children compete to spot the most exotic or the most animated displays.

Another Edmonton tradition is an annual production of the Dickens classic, *A Christmas Carol*, now in its 10th year. The spirit of the story triumphs with a faithful retelling in the small Citadel Theatre. As we leave, we are greeted in the snow by the play's urchins holding out begging bowls, also for the Food Bank. It's an effective charity drive and everybody gives willingly.

Our last night in Edmonton is spent in a pioneer home-turned-museum enjoying a McDade family Christmas concert. Home-grown band Shannon, Solomon and Jeremiah McDade, with father Terry, are nationally recognised folk musicians. Their annual concerts at the John Walter Museum, partly a benefit for the building's upkeep, are intimate, candle-lit affairs that sell out fast; there are carols and folk songs, with hot chocolate and home-baked biscuits at interval.

Afterwards we crunch away, uplifted, through the snow, radiating goodwill and seasonal cheer and feeling so lucky to have shared this local custom.

Next day we head west to the Rockies, where we will spend the week in three world-class Fair-

*Continued on Page 2*



mont resorts, destinations in themselves and the perfect setting for the ultimate white Christmas. (Of course we tell the children all their Christmases have come at once.)

After driving higher most of the day, we pull into Jasper Park Lodge amid picture-perfect views and rustic heated cabins. At its hub is a huge country lodge with log fires, hot chocolate on tap, board games and even a ghost. Here the festival of Christmas is running hot with amazing decorations, carols in the great hall, kids' craft classes and stocking decorating, a visit from Santa and, for adults, a cocktail-mixing class. Outsiders are made to feel so welcome, I pray that we might get snowed in.

At the other end of the Icefield Parkway lies Banff National Park, home to the majestic Fairmont Banff Springs, a castle dating from 1887 and rebuilt after a 1926 fire, which rises majestically above the township. A big step up in grandeur for us, it houses a labyrinthine array of 786 rooms.

There are shopping arcades, a health spa and even a minibus service from the lobby to the farthest restaurant. Throughout this baronial fantasy, however, are intimate spaces, chairs pulled up to fires, places for a quiet drink or board game, a jigsaw in progress.

A huge gingerbread house becomes our navigational aid as

That night, elves steal along the corridors hanging stockings on the doors of all the good guests

we learn our way around the castle hotel, and its giant halls house the tallest Christmas trees we see on our trip.

Despite the lure of nearby skiing, we are reluctant to leave this castle, packed as it is with activities and plain good cheer.

A third Fairmont property, the world-renowned Chateau Lake Louise, claims the crown of most glamorous. Built in 1890 and upgraded to grand Victorian style, it attracts busloads of tourists just to gawk at the foyer and the view.

It is Christmas Eve and we assemble around the grand piano and tree in the foyer for eggnog, cider and staff-led carols as excited children, cool skiers and confused Asian package tourists mingle, all in good spirits. That night, elves steal along the corridors hanging stockings on the doors of all the good guests.

Next day, the children sleep in until, oh, almost dawn, getting on for 9am in Canadian mid-winter. We attend a non-denominational service at the hotel, hosted by a local evangelical family who have come out to minister to a bunch of strangers. Maybe it's not the picturesque church of my dreams, but the joy and goodwill they radiate are typical of the hospitality we have encountered.

We enjoy the sort of Christmas feast the Victorians could only dream about, before trying out our wobbly skating legs on the cleared circuit at the edge of the famous lake, dodging squadrons of parka-puffy kids darting in and around an amazing ice castle.

Despite the blanket of snow, we see only a few lazy snowflakes on Christmas Day, but it is enough to have us ringing home excitedly, taking turns to stand in the one spot we can find in the foyer that enjoys mobile phone reception. The Christmas dream did come

true. The treetops glistened and we listened to sleigh-bells ringing in the snow.

On Christmas night, as we enjoy a festive nightcap in the splendid foyer bar, overlooking the fairy-lit ice castle on the lake, the children slip away to the spa for their own special Christmas ritual: the post-dinner swim.

The hotel is packed with guests but of course our Aussie kids are the only ones there.

---

*Mary-Ellen Hepworth was a guest of Travel Alberta, Fantasyland Hotel and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.*

---

## Checklist

December temperatures in Alberta range from 7C to -45C, excluding wind chill. Almost all indoors areas are efficiently heated, but you need to pack for extreme cold. Tip: BYO festive crackers as they are not a feature of Christmas in north America. In West Edmonton Mall,

Fantasyland Hotel's Christmas room is in high demand and needs to be booked well ahead. More: [fantasylandhotel.com.ca](http://fantasylandhotel.com.ca). The Jasper Park Lodge, Chateau Lake Louise and Fairmont Banff Springs hotels are members of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.

Prices are seasonal and vary widely; each of these hotels offers Christmas packages, including accommodation and activities.

A two-night minimum Christmas package stay at Fairmont Banff Springs, for example, with decorated tree in your room, is \$C209 (\$216) an adult a night; children, \$C25 a night.

A minimum three-night stay at the Jasper Park Lodge, with more inclusions, starts at \$399 a room a night. More: [fairmont.com](http://fairmont.com).

- [alakeshorebb.com](http://alakeshorebb.com)
- [travelalberta.com](http://travelalberta.com)
- [edmonton.com](http://edmonton.com)