

# JASPER: THE WINTER STORY

The  
“Knob”  
where you  
feel at the  
top of the  
world



**March, 2016 by Brad Bowins**

Have you ever wondered what people find so thrilling about skiing (and snowboarding)? The answer can be captured in a sentence—Life is all uphill, while skiing is all downhill. This break from the way life normally works is a powerful draw. Marmot Basin at Jasper gives you all the downhill time you crave, because there are virtually no lift lines, even on weekends when outdoor enthusiasts

from Edmonton escape their uphill life and make the pilgrimage to Jasper. Perhaps a 5-minute wait at the bottom lifts, but rarely any line-up on the upper lifts. When the weekend skiers leave I’ve even wondered if the hill is open, but rest assured that it is. Three family ski vacations to Jasper have confirmed that Marmot Basin is one of the best and most economical ski vacation options. The best

access point is via Edmonton, and then either train or car rental. The Icefields Parkway from Lake Louis and Banff is another option, and one that we took on our last vacation, but it involves a 3-hour drive with no open gas stations or restaurants in the winter, and the possibility of the highway being closed due to weather conditions. During our drive, there was virtually no snow at

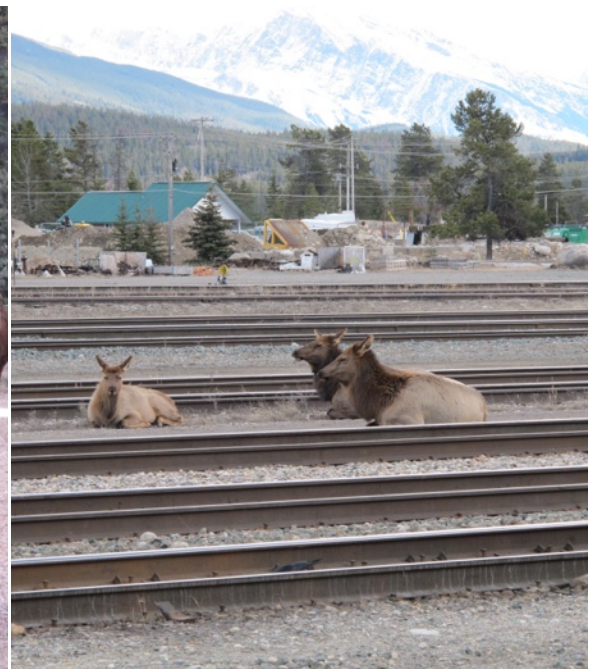
all on the road and good views of the Columbia Icefield, but conditions can be poor.

Arriving in Jasper after your journey produces a sense of relief and also anticipation of the adventure to come. Having visited many ski towns over the years, I can say with confidence that Jasper is one of the most unique. On the one hand, it offers all the touristy stuff, such as gift shops and countless restaurants, while on the other hand it seems like a really great place to live. You will appreciate this reality by taking a walk back into the residential area, just beyond the shops. My teenage daughter in seeing the modern high school with its wood trim exclaimed, "Now that's a school I want to go to." A school that teenagers really want to attend sounds pretty good to most parents. The houses are comfortable and have a warm feel to them, enhanced by people you encounter saying "Hi, how are doing?" Of course, the elk strolling on peoples' yards sampling

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the fresh green offerings, adds a natural charm not found elsewhere. These hoofed residents barely even look up when approached, nor do they respond to dogs barking in the homes they visit. The low surrounding hills on one side seem to shelter the town, while on the other side lies the less scenic railway lines. Elk ambling along the tracks seemingly waiting for the next train, compensate by adding a pleasant nature aspect. Most visitors, at least in winter, do not take the time for a walk around town, but I highly recommend it.

**Elk have the run of the town, even at the railway where they seem to be waiting for the next train.**







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**Venture through small holes into caves coated in ice from seeping water**



For a more exciting stroll, organized tours take people to narrow and deep Maligne Canyon to hike along the ice- covered river, that in spring can be a raging rush of water. The most unique time is after sunset because flashlight and moonlight (if lucky), in isolation or combination, cast eerie and surreal lighting over the frozen waterfalls and natural ice formations. Even more intriguing is venturing through small holes into caves coated in ice from seeping water, an experience that thrilled my son, and daughter, when young. This is indeed a kid, and also adventurous adult, pleaser! Your tour company

provides metal cleats that strap onto your boots, making for a slip-free experience.

Given that Jasper is a National Park, there are no accommodations at Marmot Basin, meaning that a shuttle bus or your own vehicle is required for the 20-minute drive. Accommodations in Jasper tend to be the traditional two beds to a room style, although several hotels offer suites with separate bedrooms and a kitchenette. You will not find any swank high-rise hotels, with buildings restricted to a few floors ensuring that the town blends into the surround and does not obscure it.

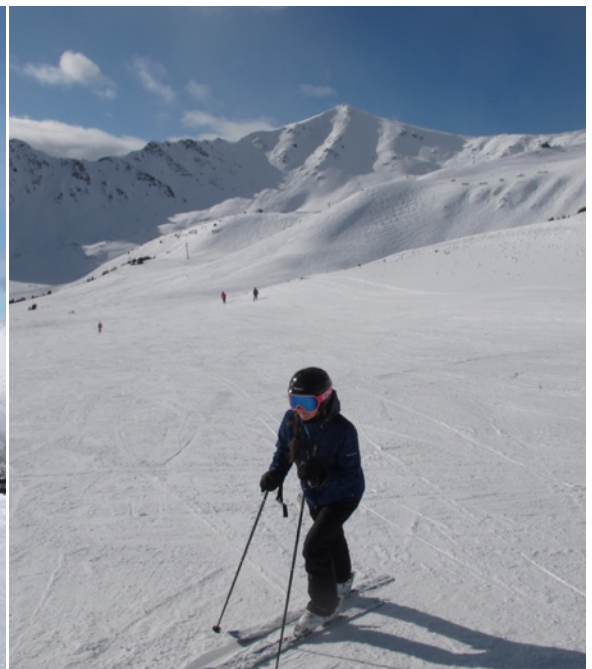
This is good news, as is the very reasonable cost, with a room capable of sleeping 4-5 people pricing out at just over a \$1,000 Canadian for 5 nights. Some of the restaurants can be pricey, particularly for a family, but there are many options at a range of prices.

Now for the skiing and snowboarding you've come for. Consistent with Jasper being a great family winter vacation destination, Marmot Basin has something for everyone. Eagle Express Quad Chair from the base provides groomed runs sheltered by trees, great for novice skiers or if the light is flat; trees restore definition absent with flat light. When young my daughter liked the "toilet" run carved out between trees that flushed her onto a groomer hill. The New Canadian Rockies Express Quad Chair is one of the longest and fastest in North America, whisking people to the top where gradual groomer runs intermingle with black diamond mogul runs. For the more experienced skiers and

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snowboarders is the Knob Chair, simply referred to as the "Knob." You feel at the top of the world here, or at least top of the mountain, with bowl runs on either side of the lift, although there is an easy escape option for those who ignored the sign, "This lift is for experts only." You might be surprised how many people do not read this sign, and then utter something to the effect of "Oh, (fill in the profanity)" while travelling up on the lift. On very snowy windy days this lift can be closed, but when it opens the fresh powder snow is amazing. On our first trip to Jasper, it started snowing on the second day, providing powder skiing normally only to be found with heli-skiing or cat-skiing, and with barely any

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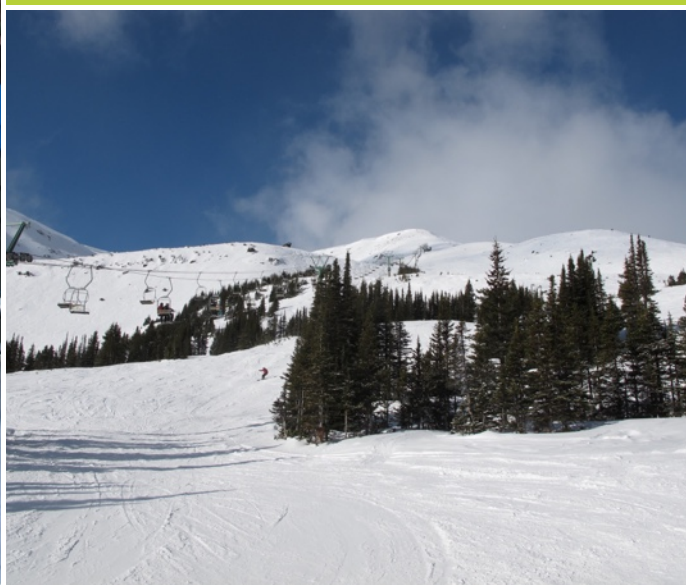






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**The author at Paradise Chalet.**



other skiers. For the most adventurous, a short traverse across the top of Knob bowl accesses a challenging double-diamond mogul pitch. This is where all that exercise prior to a trip comes in handy.

If this was not enough terrain, Eagle Ridge accessed by a separate quad chair, offers some of the best glade runs there are, and also moderate mogul runs. Eagle East on the other side of Eagle Ridge is a steep bowl area with natural obstacles that as we discovered can include crevasses under large rocks. Skiers who venture into this

area best go when snow conditions are very good, and keep their eyes open. We felt that the ski-patrol could have done a better job at marking off some of the worst obstacles, but it is natural terrain. With all these options comes thirst and hunger, and Paradise Chalet by Eagle Ridge is the ideal refueling station, with ample outdoor and indoor seating, both providing great mountain views. There is also a chalet at the base, with a ski/snowboard school, and rental equipment. So amazing was the skiing on the upper slopes, that we did not even stop at this chalet.



**At Marmot Basin and Jasper, people and wildlife have found a way of living together, to be expected of Jasper National Park, and a refreshing experience for visitors.**



With the mountain scenery and lack of crowds the drive back-and-forth between Marmot Basin and Jasper is a breeze. With some ski resorts, it appears that the condos are more the focus of the operation than the hill itself, but with Marmot Basin the slopes are what it's all about. This helps to preserve the natural beauty, and we witnessed no shortage of animal tracks around the resort while skiing, and birds such as ptarmigan overhead. At Marmot Basin and Jasper, people and wildlife have found a way of living together, to be expected of Jasper National Park, and a refreshing experience for visitors.

For information about the author Dr. Brad Bowins and additional travel articles see: [www.docbowins.com](http://www.docbowins.com)