

FREE GUIDE · BANFF & THE CANADIAN ROCKIES

Banff in 7 Days

The family itinerary, the real costs, and the shuttle nobody warns you about.










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Trips for real life · For a family of 4

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All numbers verified the month of publication. Prices are directional and shift with season · verify at the source before booking · updates quarterly · corrections welcome at hello@driftvistas.com.



Why Banff

THE CANADIAN ROCKIES GIVE A FAMILY THE SAME GLACIER-BLUE LAKES AND HIGH ALPINE PEAKS AS Switzerland, at roughly one third of the cost. The colour at Lake Louise, Moraine Lake, and Peyto Lake comes from glacial rock flour, the same mechanism behind the famous Swiss lakes, and the Canadian versions are larger with arguably bigger mountains behind them.

For a family of four this matters twice over. The cost gap is the next trip in cash. And the Rockies are car and stroller friendly in a way the tiny cobbled Swiss villages are not.

This guide assumes a family of 4, mid-tier hotels, and a rental SUV. Prices are in USD unless marked CAD. Canadian park and shuttle fees are set by Parks Canada and change yearly, so treat every number as a directional estimate and verify before booking.



When to go

MONTHS	WHAT YOU GET	WHAT YOU DON'T
Mid-June to early July	Lakes turned teal, long days, smaller crowds	Some high trails still have snow
Early September	Peak colour, warm days, prices drop ~20 percent, fewer people	Cooler nights, shorter days
July to August	Warmest water and weather, everything open	Biggest crowds, shuttles sell out, lots full by dawn
October to May	Snow, quiet, cheap	Lakes frozen and white, many trails closed

Best window: late June, or all of September. The lakes are only teal once the ice is out, so do not come before June expecting the postcard colour.

Getting there

- **Fly into Calgary (YYC).** Direct from most US hubs. Banff townsite is a 1.5 hour drive west.
- **Rental SUV is essential.** Pick a mid-size SUV for the Icefields Parkway. Book early, automatics are standard in Canada so no surprise there.
- **Park pass required.** Every vehicle in the park needs a Parks Canada pass. A family or group day pass is about CAD \$22 per day; the annual Discovery Pass is about CAD \$75 and pays off after roughly a week. Buy it online before you arrive to skip the gate queue.

The 7-day itinerary

Day 1: Arrive Calgary, settle in Banff

Land at Calgary, pick up the rental, drive to Banff townsite (1.5 hr). Easy first evening: walk Banff Avenue, stretch legs at Bow Falls, early dinner. Do not over-plan a travel day with kids.

Day 2: Banff townsite area

- Morning: **Johnston Canyon** lower falls walk, a flat catwalk trail that kids love (about 1 hour return).
- Afternoon: **Banff Gondola** up Sulphur Mountain for the ridge boardwalk, or the **Banff Upper Hot Springs** if the weather turns. The gondola runs roughly CAD \$60 to \$75 per adult, so check current family pricing before you commit.
- Optional: a **Lake Minnewanka** cruise if you have energy left.

Day 3: Lake Louise and the Lake Agnes Tea House

- Drive to **Lake Louise** early. The lot fills by 7 to 8 AM in summer and rangers turn cars away, so arrive before then or take the Park and Ride shuttle from the overflow lot.

- Walk the lakeshore, then hike up to the **Lake Agnes Tea House**, a kid-friendly climb of about 3 hours return with a working tea house at the top.
- Afternoon: canoe on the lake (premium, optional) or rest.

Day 4: Moraine Lake at first light

- **Moraine Lake is shuttle-only.** Take your pre-booked shuttle (see the warning below). Sunrise slots are the most prized and the earliest to sell out.
- Walk the Rockpile Trail for the classic view of the Valley of the Ten Peaks.
- Afternoon: back to Lake Louise village, easy time, early night before the big drive.

Day 5: The Icefields Parkway to Jasper

One of the great mountain drives anywhere. Lake Louise to Jasper is about 230 km (3 hours without stops, so allow a full day with them).

- **Bow Lake** and **Peyto Lake** viewpoints (Peyto is a short walk from the parking area).
- **Columbia Icefield:** the glacier walk or Ice Explorer is a premium add-on (about CAD \$115 per adult), optional.
- **Athabasca Falls** before you reach Jasper.
- Overnight in **Jasper** (read the wildfire note under What nobody mentions).

Day 6: Jasper

- **Maligne Lake** and the boat cruise to **Spirit Island** (premium, about CAD \$90 to \$115 per adult, book ahead).
- **Maligne Canyon** walk, and **Pyramid Lake** for a calm evening.
- Wildlife is common along these roads: elk, bighorn sheep, and black bears. Keep your distance and never feed them.

Day 7: Drive back and fly home

Jasper to Calgary airport is about 4 to 4.5 hours. Either drive straight back for an evening flight, or break the trip with a final night in **Canmore** (20 minutes outside the park) if your flight is early the next day.



Real family-of-4 cost

SEVEN DAYS, FAMILY OF 4, MID-TIER HOTELS, RENTAL SUV, SUMMER:

CATEGORY	COST (USD)
US flights to Calgary (4 people)	1,200 to 2,400
Accommodation (6 nights, family rooms)	800 to 1,300
Rental SUV (7 days + full insurance)	500 to 800
Fuel	120 to 180
Park pass + shuttles	60 to 120
Food (3 meals/day for 4)	700 to 1,000
Activities (gondola, hot springs, boat, canoe)	300 to 600
Family total	\$4,500 to \$6,500

For comparison, the same trip in Switzerland runs \$11,000 to \$16,000. Staying in Canmore instead of inside the park cuts accommodation by roughly 40 percent for the same scenery.



Where to stay

LOCATION	WHY	PRICE/NIGHT (SUMMER)
Banff townsite	Walkable, restaurants, close to gondola and hot springs	\$150 to \$250 family room
Lake Louise village	Walk to the lake, beat the parking problem	\$180 to \$320
Canmore (20 min outside park)	Same scenery, about 40 percent cheaper	\$120 to \$200
Jasper	Base for Maligne Lake (confirm it is rebuilt and operating)	\$150 to \$260







What nobody mentions

- 1. The Moraine Lake shuttle is the whole trip.** Since June 2023 you cannot drive a private car to Moraine Lake. You reach it by Parks Canada shuttle, Roam transit, or a commercial tour only. Reservations open in spring and sunrise slots sell out within minutes. Book it the moment your dates are fixed, before the hotel if you have to. Miss it and an overnight in Lake Louise village is your fallback walking-distance option.
- 2. Lake Louise parking fills before breakfast.** The lot is full by 7 to 8 AM in summer. Use the Park and Ride shuttle from the overflow lot or arrive in the dark.
- 3. Jasper is rebuilding.** The July 2024 wildfire destroyed about a third of the Jasper townsite and some hotels were lost. The national park, the lakes, and the Icefields Parkway reopened, but confirm your specific accommodation is operating before you book. Do not assume the town is exactly as older guides describe it.
- 4. Distances are real.** Banff drives are 2 to 3 hours between major stops, and Jasper to Calgary is over 4. Build in food, fuel, and bathroom stops, and do not schedule a

marquee activity for a long driving day.

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Booking

- **Hotels:** search  [Booking.com](#) for Banff family rooms. Compare Canmore for the savings.
 - **Rental car (essential):**  [DiscoverCars Calgary](#), mid-size SUV.
 - **Shuttles and tours:**  [GetYourGuide Banff](#) for Moraine Lake shuttles, glacier walks, and the Maligne Lake cruise.
 - **Family travel insurance:**  [SafetyWing Nomad Family](#) for longer trips.
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Related reading

- [Banff vs Switzerland: the math nobody runs](#)
 - [Family vacation under \\$5,000](#)
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