

Sumptuous Chateau Style

Young or old, who has never dreamed of living in a fairy-tale castle? You don't have to have blue blood to indulge in majesty, opulence and pampering. You have only to treat yourself to a sojourn at a luxury hotel which transforms exclusive privilege into the ultimate vacation. If I had my choice, I would choose a chateau which, like a precious jewel, nestles in a velour of green. And the green would be a velour of spruce, fir and larch, and the royal ermine would be the snowy peaks in the heart of the Canadian Rockies. These sublime landscapes are the real crown jewels. **And what strong emotions they evoke!**

BY LOUISE BOURBONNAIS

Like most of us, I'd heard all the praises sung about Lake Louise and its Chateau and I'd seen gorgeous photos of the area. But once I got there I was stunned to see just how pale a reflection of spectacular reality a photo can be. Paradise. Intoxicating. No words or photos can capture its celestial essence. Here one feels the peace of heaven, listens to the awesome silence and breathes the calm emanating from the landscape's grandiosity.

Its beauty plunges you into a state of serenity. Clouds ... glacier ... mountains ... forests ... lake and Chateau. No surprise that this mysterious and bewitching site is known as the Mona Lisa of Mountains. It is a true masterpiece of nature, a measure of perfection.

LAKE LOUISE, THE JEWEL OF THE ROCKIES GLISTENING AT THE FOOT OF THE VICTORIA GLACIER, OWES ITS WORLD RENOWN TO ITS OPALESCENT EMERALD GREEN COLOUR.

The impressive Chateau at the edge of the lake completes the perfectly divine scene in the heart of Banff National Park, the best known and most visited of all Canadian Parks.

My eyes riveted on this world famous landscape, I must admit that it really is real. It's amusing to think that the Chateau's management has even been accused of tinting the lake and erecting fake glaciers, because the panorama seems too gorgeous to be real. Actually, it is the sparkling particles of glacier alluvium suspended in the lake waters that give Lake Louise its supernatural colour. You don't have to stay at the Chateau to enjoy Banff's postcard beauty. The park is open to all and at least 6 million visitors take advantage of this each year. Many rent kayaks or canoes for excursions on the lake. Others come for exhilarating hikes along the trails, and the more daring climb the mountain for a breathtaking view. Active or contemplative, one thing is certain: no visitor can turn his or her back on this mind boggling panorama.



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Chateau Lake Louise



© Lake Louise heritage archive



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Chateau Lake Louise

As sublime a site as is Lake Louise, the legendary Chateau Lake Louise, the “Diamond in the Wilderness,” is an important jewel in Banff’s sparkling tiara. Although the Chateau is not the original building erected in 1890, it is still imprinted with history.

It all began one evening in June of 1882 when Thomas Wilson, a young man working for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, camped out with the Stony Indians. Wilson heard the deafening rumble of an avalanche and using sign language, the natives told him that it came from “the snow mountains above the lake of the little fish.” The next day they took him to see the lake on horseback and Wilson, the first white man to view the lake, was so flabbergasted by its colour, that he exclaimed that it should be named Emerald Lake. Two years later, Emerald Lake was renamed Lake Louise in honour of Queen Victoria’s fourth daughter, Princess Louise Caroline Alberta.

It was William Van Horne, the visionary first General Manager of the Canadian Pacific, who had the idea of building a chateau. **The moment he saw the beauty of the panorama, Van Horne saw its tourist potential and remarked, “If we can’t export the scenery, we will import the tourists.”**

In 1890, the railway company constructed the first Chateau Lake Louise Hotel at the foot of the lake. That building, much more modest than the grand structure standing today, burned down completely two years later and was reconstructed the following year. Gradually the rebuilt hotel was enlarged, and by 1909 it accommodated 500 guests in rooms costing \$4 a night. Another fire devastated the structure a few years later. Despite all this bad luck, the Chateau’s popularity grew and grew as tourists flocked to the spectacular beauty of the region. To accommodate this demand, the Canadian Pacific constructed a railway line closer to Lake Louise. Tourists arrived by rail at the Laggan Station 6 km from the lake. From there, they were brought to the Chateau in horse-drawn sleighs, until 1926 when a road was built between the railway station and the hotel.

Since then the hotel has continued its expansion with construction to enlarge and beautify the establishment. For the hotel’s 100th anniversary in 1990, \$65 million was invested in restoration and expansion works. Today the prestigious hotel has 511 rooms, accommodating 1,300 guests. A staff of 725 assures clients a quality of service on a par with life in a castle.

BANFF SPRINGS HOTEL

William Van Horne’s initial hotel development adventures had begun three years earlier in Banff, when he built an impressive Chateau more grandiose than that of Chateau Lake Louise.

It was in 1885, as he discovered the hot springs on the slopes of Sulphur Mountain in Banff, right near the railway line, that he had the idea of constructing a luxurious hotel that would rival the spas of Europe. Three construction workers of the railway had discovered these springs while they were panning for gold. The springs really did produce gold – tourist gold – when word of their discovery spread to the management of the Canadian Pacific.

The General Manager quickly saw the enormous economic potential of this spectacularly scenic landscape and its Cave and Basin hot springs. To protect these hot springs, the federal government bought the concession rights from the three workers and created a natural reserve that very year. Two years later, in 1887, the reserve became Canada’s first national park, initially named Rocky Mountain Park, and then later changed to Banff National Park.

It was at this time that the Luxurious hotel was built to attract tourists to the hot springs. To design a fabulous Chateau, the Canadian Pacific employed Bruce Price, the celebrated New York architect who designed Montréal’s Windsor Station and Québec City’s Château Frontenac. Price took his inspiration from the style of the ancient baronial castles of Scotland. The Chateau was constructed in record time and opened its doors in June 1888. Construction costs soared to \$250,000, a colossal sum in those days.



© Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel



© Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise



From its very first year, the Chateau was a roaring success with 1,500 guests coming from mainly the United States and Great Britain. To meet growing demands, over the years the Chateau was enlarged. Still respecting its prestigious image of the time, the Banff Springs Hotel knew how to preserve all its original splendour and elegance while adding a superb 27-hole championship golf course endorsed by Stanley Thompson. As for attractions, the Hotel offered luxurious rooms with antique furniture, a fabulous view of the Bow River, the picturesque village of Banff and its majestic mountains. The Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel has recently been named a historic site by the Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.



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