

P A N O R A M A P O W D E R C O U N T R Y

BY LOUISE BOURBONNAIS

There is no road or traffic. The only sign of civilization is the distant whir of the helicopter as it gently lifts off over our heads, quickly morphing into a tiny black speck barely visible in the azure sky. Puffs of snow churned up by the propeller blades still swirl crazily about us. A few seconds ago, our little group could barely contain its excitement as we flew over the spectacular landscape. Now no one is uttering a word. The silence and sheer grandeur have taken our collective breath away. Like everyone else, I am trying to scan the scene with eyes mesmerized by the incredible beauty. Everywhere, snow-capped peaks seem to go on forever.

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TOURISTS HAVE BEEN SEARCHING FOR THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE CAN REMEMBER.

Here we are, 10 people alone in the heart of a winter fairyland, surrounded by magnificent mountains, majestic glaciers and powder snow finer than the finest milled flour. Our guide breaks the silence first with last-minute safety instructions before we set off to trace fresh tracks in the pristine snow, weaving our way down the slopes, all the while communing with the wondrous deep powder snow.

The sheer vastness makes you feel unique and privileged. But more than 3,000 people come each year to Panorama to try their hand at heli-skiing. It is quite simply "THE place" in Canada to indulge in the ultimate luxury downhill ski experience. Blessed with annual snowfalls of up to 1,100 cm, the region is a magnet for tourists from all over the world.

But Panorama is much more than a take-off point for flights into deep powder country. Nestled in the southeast corner of British Columbia in a valley framed by the Rocky Mountains and the Purcell mountain range, Panorama is also the name of an all-inclusive ski resort, the newest member of the Intrawest family.

I am staying in the heart of the ski village, and, like its twin sisters Whistler and Tremblant, this complex is teeming with activity. Several first-class hotels cluster around a central jewel, an impressive heated outdoor pool complete with seven Jacuzzi baths in which you can unwind on a cold winter's day. A galaxy of restaurants offer popular fare and fine cuisine, and pubs provide a party atmosphere. But for all the similarities with other members of the Intrawest family, Panorama is in a class of its own.

Panorama's "all inclusive" packages make it the ideal destination for family ski vacations. Forget the car keys during your stay - the pedestrian village has everything you could ever want at your fingertips. Every night there is something for everyone, from movies to torchlight skiing.

And just in case you become a little bored with downhill skiing or snowboarding, Panorama offers snowmobile touring, dogsledding, skating, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and ice fishing, to name just a few of the activities available.

And if you get the urge to do a little touring around, why not visit Radium Hot Springs just a few minutes away by car.

• RADIUM HOT SPRINGS •

Located at the entrance to Kootenay National Park, Radium is blessed with an inviting natural pool of thermal spring water. While the temperature of the thermal basin rises to 40°C, the water temperature remains at a constant and comfortable 29°C, ideal for a dip even in the middle of winter. Containing the largest thermal water basin in the country, Radium is a picturesque and especially seductive place, with its extraordinarily breathtaking setting at the foot of a sheer rock outcrop in the heart of the Rockies. Bighorn sheep and elk regularly graze at the edge of the thermal pool, adding to the character of this wilderness oasis. For anyone bitten by a last-minute urge to test the waters, towels and bathing suits can be rented on the spot. And to prolong that relaxing and pleasurable experience, massages are also offered.

From the earliest times, First Nations peoples in this country believed in the existence of sacred waters that could prolong health and even cure illnesses. For centuries, Aboriginal peoples in search of wellness came to bathe in the warmth of the mineral-rich thermal waters. With completion of the transcontinental railway in the late 1800s, tourists from the four corners of the globe began to flock to the area looking for a miracle cure and the therapeutic benefits the hot springs had to offer.

Today Radium draws 350,000 bathers annually - not for that miracle cure but for the sheer enjoyment of experiencing the hot spring waters of the Rockies. But there is no denying the health benefits. A therapeutic mix of high temperature and organic matter in the water creates the ideal bathing environment to reduce tension, relax muscles and increase blood flow. Some even claim that the waters help relieve pain and reduce anxiety. One thing for certain - the experience is an enjoyable and relaxing one.



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• KOOTENAY NATIONAL PARK •

Home to Radium Hot Springs, Kootenay National Park is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The park constitutes one of the largest protected zones in the world and offers sweeping vistas that take your breath away. The panoramic highway linking Banff and Windermere (at the foot of Panorama) serves as the gateway to this natural treasure in the southwestern corner of the Rockies. Inaugurated in 1923, the 98-km Kootenay Parkway was the first navigable road across the Canadian Rockies and provides picture-postcard scenery. The highway skirts the Vermilion and Kootenay Rivers, two waterways that lead directly to the Sinclair Canyon Gorge and end at the famous thermal waters of Radium Hot Springs within the confines of the park. The park itself is quite narrow. A mere 8-km swatch of mountains on either side of the highway was set aside to create the national park. The trip between Banff and Panorama, which takes you across this spectacular world forest preserve, is a holiday in itself, offering a myriad of attractions, from Stanley Glacier and Marble Canyon to crystal-blue glacier-fed waters.

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