

Calgary trip report – May 2012

This was a short visit to Calgary to stay with our friends Rick and Gill (who appear in many of our photos). They have recently relocated from the UK to Calgary for two and a bit years, and the opportunity of a spring trip to Canada to visit them was irresistible. Especially as we were able to use our two-for-one Airmiles voucher to obtain “free” flights, which I thought would never be possible (“free” – rather than free – because we still had to pay hundreds of pounds in costs and taxes).

Rick and Gill live in a large modern house that forms part of a condominium development in the very centre (downtown) of Calgary. This made it very easy to walk anywhere in the centre (Budget Car Hire’s building, for example) but fairly alarming driving there (back from Budget Car Hire’s building with the hire car, for example). It overlooked a park, which meant that there was birdwatching on the doorstep.

For the purpose of a brief description of the holiday, our stay divides neatly into three. For the first weekend, we drove a few hundred miles south of Calgary, to Waterton Lakes National Park. Rick and Gill came with us, but in their own car as they could only stay two nights, whilst we stayed away for four. Waterton Lakes is where the Canadian Rockies meet the US border. It is a small national park by comparison with most, and much emptier than the better known areas to the west such as Jasper, Banff and Lake Louise. This is mainly because it is not on the way to anywhere. It is about three hours of driving at a sensible pace with a coffee stop.

In the middle of the week, we returned to Calgary and did some gentle birdwatching and sightseeing.

On the second weekend, Rick was able to take a day’s holiday on the Friday. In one car this time, we explored the area to the East of Calgary, and stayed overnight in a small town called Drumheller which is on the edge of the Canadian Badlands – astonishing areas of eroded hills in the middle of the prairies. The term “badlands” is used throughout North America for such areas, presumably because the early settlers found the areas so inhospitable. Drumheller is Canada’s dinosaur capital. The local geology means that there have been (and still are) more discoveries of dinosaur fossils there than anywhere else, and a vast museum has been built there both to show off what has been found and to serve as a centre for further research. The town itself has maintained many of its Victorian buildings. Calling it attractive would be overdoing it, but it was an interesting place in which to spend a few hours. It also boasts the largest dinosaur in the world – a metal and plastic T-Rex 26 metres high.

Waterton Lakes National Park

We stayed in Waterton Lakes Lodge, which was virtually the only accommodation open in Waterton village at the beginning of May. The park does not come alive until the May long weekend (two weeks after our visit). We ate every evening in the resort’s restaurant as the many other eating places in the village were not yet open for the season. We had worked out before our arrival that we were arriving slightly too early but it was still somewhat unnerving to find everything still firmly closed. However there was no snow around, except at the higher levels. Last year, we were told, there was still six feet of snow in the village at the beginning of May.

On Saturday we took two short walks (hikes, for Canadians). The morning walk was to Blakiston Falls, about a mile from the parking area at Red Rock Canyon. The rock is argillite, which really is extremely red. The afternoon walk was to Bertha Falls (there is a theme developing here), in a gentle but persistent blizzard. This obscured the high

mountains on the day, but gave them a fantastic new coating of snow to admire on succeeding days.

On Sunday morning the sun shone intermittently and the wind ceased (for a time). We joined the first boat of the season plying Waterton Lake. In fact there were only six passengers on the boat – the four of us and two other tourists, but the boat owner agreed to take us out anyway, as we had tried unsuccessfully to do the trip on two occasions on the previous day. We motored down the length of the lake – some two miles or so – including the easiest crossing into the United States we have ever undertaken. As the boat does not land in the US this early in the season, there are no formalities whatever. There are fire breaks in the trees on both sides of the lake that indicate the line of the border. (Later in the year, trips do land at the Southern end of the lake, in the US state of Montana, and a temporary border post opens up to enable visitors to go hiking.)

That afternoon (Sunday, remember) Rick and Gill headed back to Calgary as Rick had to be back at work the following day. That afternoon we walked up to Crandall Lake, a beautiful alpine lake surrounded by snow (through which we had to walk). We stayed one more night in Waterton and then one night in a typical North American motel in a very small town half way between Waterton and Calgary. On those days we drove further around Waterton Lakes National Park and into the foothills of the Rockies. We had our greatest wildlife sightings on those days: a black bear and her cub (on one occasion climbing a tree), a coyote and, perhaps best of all, a great grey owl. This was most unexpected, as it was sitting on a fence post next to the main road (which at this time of year was deserted, apart from us). The book says that they live in forests and are nocturnal, but this one was clearly hunting for rodents in broad daylight. We watched it for at least 15 minutes.

Our trip back to Calgary was via a roundabout route as Penny wanted to see a bird called a Wilson's Phalarope (see picture on website). These pretty little birds with long thin bills migrate up from Mexico to breed on the prairies, and we knew from a website where we had a pretty good chance of seeing them. And there they were, although it entailed quite a long diversion to see them. But as the roads were (a) virtually all entirely straight and (b) virtually all entirely empty, the driving was very easy, and the cruise control helped us to stay within the speed limit.

We then stayed the next three nights in Calgary, doing remarkably little, particularly compared with our usual holidays. On one day we walked around a local (by Calgary standards) reservoir, in which we saw a beaver. We would have visited the Calgary Heritage Park as well but it too had not yet opened for the 2012 season. On the second day we joined a short guided walk around the local bird reserve.

To the dinosaurs

On the Friday of the second weekend we drove about 100 miles East, past the phalaropes, to a small town called Drumheller – the dinosaur capital of the world. It gained this title from the vast number of fossil dinosaur skeletons that have been found in the vicinity. There is so much work for the scientists to do that a museum – the Royal Tyrrell Museum – has been built just outside the town, which not only provides a base for the researchers but contains the exhibits as well. It's a painstaking process, separating the skeletons from the surrounding rock – with what is effectively little more than a dentist's drill. We spent several hours in the museum but could easily have spent half a day there, had the museum not closed at 6.00 pm. After the museum visit, we walked around a trail nearby, marvelling at the astonishing colours of the badlands hillsides, with their different colour bands of coloured rock. The photographs do not do justice to the beauty of the landscape, because the sun had vanished behind the clouds by the time we

left the museum. It was very hot and very dry. The term "badlands" seemed very appropriate.

We then went to our B&B in the centre of town just beneath the iconic water tower – the fantastically named Taste the Past. It was an early 20th century town house originally built for Jesse Gouge, who started the coal industry in the Drumheller area. It had been beautifully restored, right down to the decorations, and had just been bought by an English couple Mike and Lynne Nevell. They had previously been living in Edmonton before making the momentous decision last year to buy the place. We were among their earliest guests and so far it all seemed to be going fine for them.

Dinner was meant to be a festive occasion: our last night in Canada when we were taking Rick and Gill out for a meal. In Calgary that would not have presented any problems at all, but Drumheller on a Friday night didn't have a lot going for it – apart from a large number of brightly coloured dinosaurs. Our first choice proved to be fully booked by a large (extremely large – they had booked the whole restaurant) party, so we ended up in one of the two Chinese restaurants in the town eating a meal that was OK but not quite as magnificent as we had been anticipating. We were the only people in the restaurant, for a start, apart from the owners' not entirely well behaved children. The brick 19th century buildings in the downtown area were nicely preserved and the dinosaurs were a joy. But stopping at the local corner shop for an ice cream at 10 pm on the walk back to the B&B was probably the highlight of our evening in Drumheller.

On the following day we drove out to the Atlas Coal Mine, about 20 minutes' drive from Drumheller. This used to be coal country, with dozens of mines producing coal for industry and for the railways. One mine has been re-opened for tourists to visit. Improbably, you have to go uphill to reach the entrance. The miners climbed the bare hillside. We walked up the inside of the conveyor building, which was originally constructed to protect the conveyor belt that brought the coal from the mine entrance down to the bottom of the hill. It has been massively strengthened, to protect us tourists, but it's still a potentially dangerous place, and very very dark when the torches are switched off half way up. Once at the top, there isn't anywhere else to go as the mine entrance has been obstructed to prevent anyone finding their way in after it was closed. There are plans to open it back up again, again for the tourists, but the cost runs into tens of millions of dollars. There is a separate tour of the "tipple", the huge structure in which the coal is stored (sorted into five different grades, we were told) and also dropped into railway trucks beneath, but we didn't have time for that. Always leave something for the next visit.

Next stop was a small enclosure containing a few hoodoos. These are strange mushroom-like columns, protected by a hard cap of rock. Some of them are ten feet high or more. Unfortunately they are easily vandalised by destroying the cap; once this has gone, the column disintegrates rapidly in the weather. There are only five or six left in this enclosure by the road, but presumably there are thousands well away from the road, in the parts of the badlands where people have never been.

We dropped in to the Last Chance Saloon in Wayne, a small town that had been virtually abandoned at the end of the industrial era but has been brought back to life by the success of the local inn. In the afternoon we went for a circular drive through the badlands to Horseshoe Canyon lookout. The route continued over the Bleriot chain ferry, and we then made our way slowly back to Calgary, stopping off for a spot of birdwatching to keep Penny happy – and perhaps Rick and Gill caught the bug as well. They dropped us off at the airport to catch a late evening plane back to London.

Rick and Gill were excellent hosts and we can thoroughly recommend their hospitality, should you be passing through Calgary in the next couple of years. After that, they are likely to be back in England and you'll have missed your opportunity.