



Hotel Alberta

Sure, the song's title is *Hotel California*. But the Eagles were writing about Jasper, weren't they? On a dark Alberta highway...

BY LORI KNOWLES

It's as if time has slowed...or nearly stopped. When I step off the VIA *Canadian* at the Jasper train station that bright February day, my nine-year-old son in tow, the first thing that strikes me is the silence.

The train has pushed off toward Vancouver and left us alone at the track, packs on our backs and skis on the station platform. The air is crisp, the town is empty and the mountains—just like postcards—are sharp and white and huge in the background. We look around. We look at one another.

"Now what?" my little one asks. More silence. I shrug my shoulders and reach for my cell phone. No service.

The train station—the beating heart of the Jasper community—is an old stone and stucco affair, with vending machines inside, a clock and a dozen padded wooden benches. Few people are about as we push open the

creaky old doors to enter, save for an elderly woman aghast at the cost of train travel to Vancouver and a enduring employee behind the counter left defending the ghastly price of...everything.

I locate a pay phone and lift the receiver, then pause for a moment and stare at the thing. "What's wrong, Mom?"

"Sorry," I say. "It's just been a long time since I've used one of these...one of these... *contraptions*."

"Welcome to the Hotel Alberta... Such A Lovely Place..."

The Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, about 10 minutes from town, is a cornerstone of Alberta's Jasper National Park. It's fitting then, that the hotel is also made of stone...and wood. JPL is as central to the community as Jasper's train station.

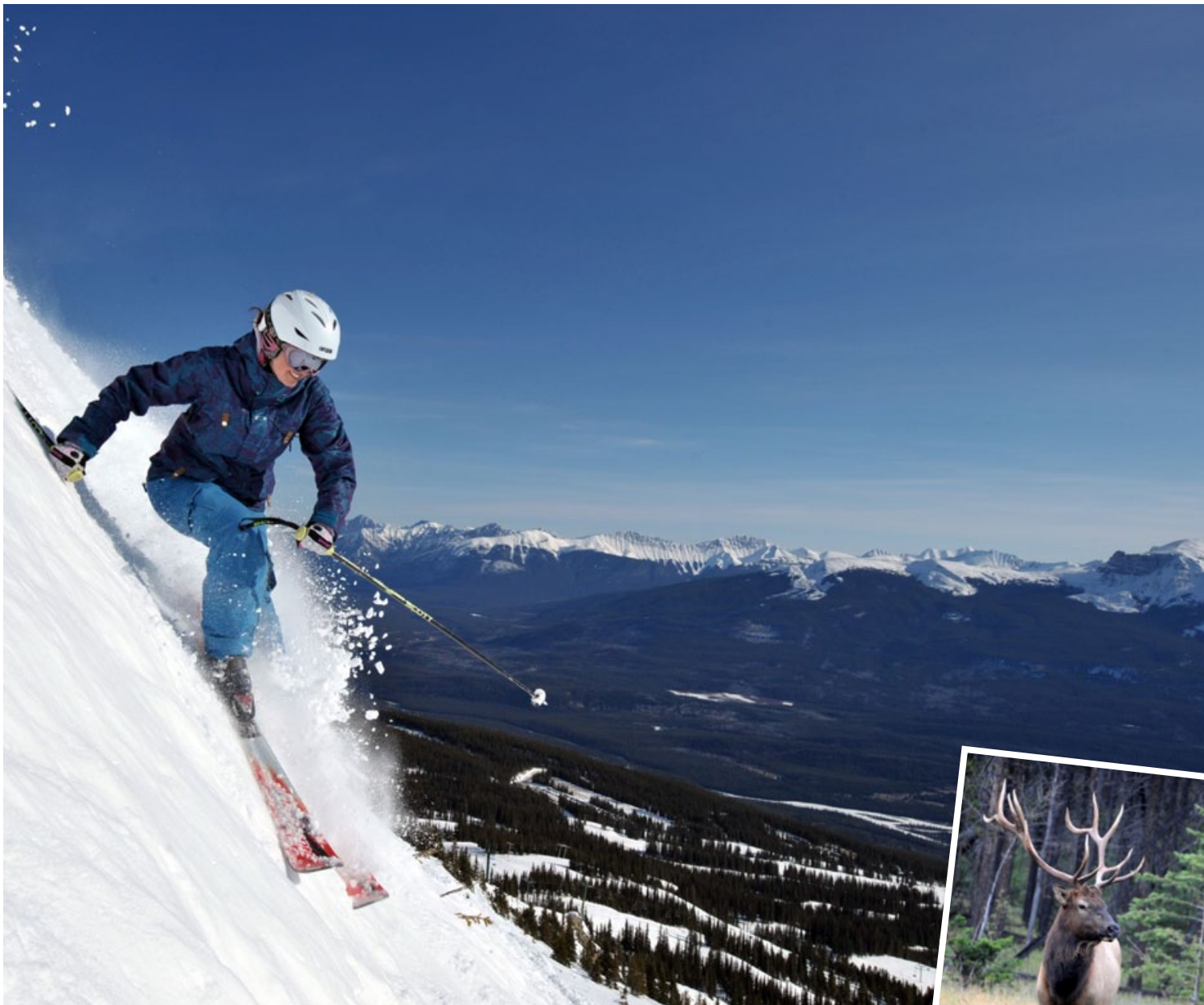
When the hotel operator answers my pay

phone call, there isn't even a hitch in her giddyup. "Ah, Ms. Knowles, your train is in? We've been expecting you. We'll send someone in straightaway to fetch you."

And so, without much fuss, a hotel truck arrives—an oversized Yukon 4WD with a carbon footprint larger than most small countries. I must be in Alberta. The driver, dressed in red Canada Goose, places our stuff in the trunk and moves everything comfortably along a wide deserted highway toward the hotel. Everything at Fairmont's JPL, I discover, is done *comfortably*.

"On a Dark Desert Highway, Cool Wind in My Hair..."

The Eagles are in my head, making it hard to hear the driver, who I *think* is telling us how he ended up in Jasper. Something about arriving a few years back after graduating, with the intent to ski and meet girls and drink beer and generally live his life before he has



MR. CANADA GOOSE CLEARS HIS THROAT. “ACTUALLY, MA’AM, IT’S AN ELK. THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF ELK IN JASPER NATIONAL PARK.”

to commit to life. But he’s never left, he tells us. And now, after several years, he’s doubting he ever will.

That, I discover, happens a lot in Jasper.

Jasper Park Lodge extends a grand greeting to its guests via a sweeping entranceway and multiple flags a-flying. Through the course of checking in, we’re told that at JPL we can: skate, cross-country ski, hike, snowmobile, ice climb, swim and shop. We’re also told *sotto voce* that the sushi in the Lodge is the best in Jasper.

But we’re here to ski, we tell the staff. Immediately they pitch in with personal tips for nearby Marmot Basin. Everyone here is a

skier, it seems, and everybody *loves* their local ski area.

We’re then driven—yes, *driven*—to our room, a little cabin in the woods on the bank of a snowy river. There are big-horned animals the size of Secretariat all around. They’re pushing their snouts into the snow and munching the frozen grass beneath, which, apparently, is really quite tasty.

“Look, a moose!” This from an Australian guest. All of us look where the Aussie is looking.

“Is it, Mom?” my son asks. “Is it a moose?”

“Nah,” I answer with authority. “It’s a caribou.”

Mr. Canada Goose clears his throat. “Actually, ma’am, it’s an *elk*. There are all kinds of elk in Jasper National Park.”

“Then She Lit Up The Candle, And She Showed Me The Way...”

Our driver sets us up in our room, shows us a bath the size of a baseball diamond and lights a crackling fire. He promises there’ll be a bus waiting for us by the front desk at 8:30 a.m. sharp to take us skiing...

And sure enough, the next morning there it is, a free hotel shuttle assigned to drive JPL guests the 30 minutes (22 km) to ski Marmot



Basin. Turns out, we're the only ones on it. We have an entire bus to ourselves...just my son and me.

"We Haven't Had That Spirit Here Since 1969..."

Waiting for us at the other end of the ride is our Marmot ski guide, Milt Gilmour.

Milt arrived in Jasper to work on the railroad in the late 1960s and never left. He's now a mountain guide, a ski pro, a ski shop owner and a lover of a pint of ale at the end of the day at the D'ed Dog, a Jasper après-ski hangout. Milt has been assigned to show us the mountain. We stand at the ski lodge and look up.

The layout of Marmot Basin reminds me of a five-card flush in a game of poker. Its ski runs fan out in front of you in a semicircle, and all the good stuff is there. The black diamonds of Eagle East are on the left, open bowls and easy greens are in the middle, and long, steep, super-fast cruisers trail like ribbons along the far right ridge. Milt talks of Marmot's pre-lift age, when skiers walked or skinned these marvellous, tree-spotted pistes or rode part-way up the logging trails in pickups.

But the world has changed. Last winter, Marmot Basin entered the space age of skiing, debuting not one but *two* new lifts: the Paradise High-Speed Quad and the School House Triple. The installations brought an

end to a flurry of Marmot improvements that totalled \$25 million—positively payload for a ski area *inside* a national park. The updating craze also included the welcome launch of the Canadian Rockies Express in 2010, the longest high-speed quad in the Canadian Rockies.

"Mirrors on the Ceiling..."

Once we get skiing, I find the new lift system make a massive difference. My last visit to Marmot was at least 10 years ago when T-bars pulled our tired bums up the hill, and riding the kick-ass terrain along Chalet Slope and Eagle East required a hike or a ride on a sled from a willing patrolman. Now these double diamonds—Poacher's, Easter Alley and Outback—are only a lift ride away. Spectacular.

Our first favourite run turns out to be a surprising little pocket of trees that lead down Chalet Slope toward Paradise Chalet. We while away an hour riding around loosely gladed



trees, ducking branches and rolling over mini gullies. Marmot's mini-rail park is a major draw for a nine-year-old boy, but I manage to pry him off long enough for some race-speed cruisers off the new Paradise chair.

At some point we meet Warren.

Warren Brown is the retired railroad engineer who, again, arrived in 1972 and never left. He skis *every day* in winter and golfs *every day* in summer. He says simply, "I'm Jasper's idea of a couch potato."

Warren skis Marmot as if by feel. He leads us along Eagle East, down narrow chutes no wider than our skis, under snow-laden tree branches, over mounds of fluffy white stuff, and past rocks and frozen streams.

We end up down in the bowels of Marmot's empty Eagle East, where we find our second favourite run of the day: a bumpy open field Warren happily calls the Pumpkin Patch.

"They Stab It With Their Steely Knives..."

Nearly exhausted, we take in the spectacular views from the high-alpine Knob Chair with Wilt Gilmour one last time, and my son skis his first fantastically steep face: Dupre Chute. It leads into Charlie's Bowl—a vast, treeless, all-white abyss that, on a sunny day with the Rockies all around, looks glorious.

"Who's Charlie?" my son asks.

Charlie Dupre, Milt says matter of factly, was one of Marmot's first skiers, way back in skiing's Dark Ages, before Super Mario and Koopa Troopa...

"Charlie died right here where we're standing," Milt whispers. "In an avalanche."

My son's eyes widen behind his goggles.

"But they say Charlie's ghost still lives in the Paradise Chalet over there." Milt points his pole toward an old log cabin.

My son looks doubtful. "Does he haunt it?"

"Sometimes the phone rings," Milt says.

"But there's no one there. We figure it's Charlie calling."

"Pink Champagne on Ice..."

Milt and his pals suggest après at the D'ed Dog, a joint in town famous for its Dead Wall—every photo on it is of someone, Milt says, "doing things he's not doing anymore."

One guy pictured on the Dead Wall was killed in an avalanche. Another died climbing Jasper's ice walls. Another lost his life swimming across a stream with his horse...the animal kicked him in the head.

"It took them three days to find him," Milt says. He pauses. "Every one of them has a story."

"You Can Check Out Anytime You Like... But You Can Never Leave."

We end up skipping the D'ed Dog, opting for something close to home, the massive fire back in the main lodge of the JPL.

Sitting there, flames crackling, my son gnawing on an Alberta beef burger, a man tinkling the keys of a grand piano, I realize I've lost *total* track of time in Jasper. Since

that VIA train dropped us on the platform, I haven't checked in with the folks back in frenetic Toronto.

I think: Maybe *this* is why people never leave Jasper. ☑

Go Marmot Basin

WHAT'S THERE: 86 named runs, 915-metre vertical, 678 hectares of terrain, seven lifts including three high-speed quads and a Magic Carpet, plenty of above alpine to traverse and hike to, 400 cm average snowfall per year, lots of sun and the highest base elevation of all Canadian ski areas. www.skimarmot.com

Go Jasper

GETTING THERE: Jasper sits approximately 400 km from both Edmonton and Calgary. SunDog Tours offers daily shuttles between both international airports. VIA Rail runs *The Canadian* snowtrain regularly between Edmonton and Jasper.

LODGING: Marmot Basin is inside Jasper National Park and therefore there is no on-mountain accommodation. Most lodging is located 19 km from the ski area in the town of Jasper, or 22 km from Marmot Basin at Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge. All hotels are connected to Marmot by daily ski shuttles. www.Jasper.travel
www.Fairmont.com/Jasper
www.sundogtours.com
www.viarail.com or
www.snowtrainjasper.com