



By Kalpana Sunder

IT'S MY 'National Geographic' moment — a sure-footed big horn sheep on a craggy precipice, licking the salt off the rocks. I feel like Mary Schaffer, a Quaker from Pennsylvania, and an intrepid explorer, who followed a Stoney Indian tribesman's map in the early 1900s to reach Maligne Lake. She says of her expedition, "Our real objective was to delve into the heart of an untouched land, to turn the unthumbed pages of an unread book, and to learn daily those secrets which dear Mother Nature is so willing to tell to those who seek."

Jasper is the quintessential one-horse frontier town in the Rockies in Alberta, Canada. It's one of the few towns that are inside a national park. With an impossibly scenic setting of icy peaks scraping the heavens, a U-shaped glacial valley and meadows bursting with wild flowers, it was named after a fur trader called Jasper Howes who set up a trading post here in the early 1800s.

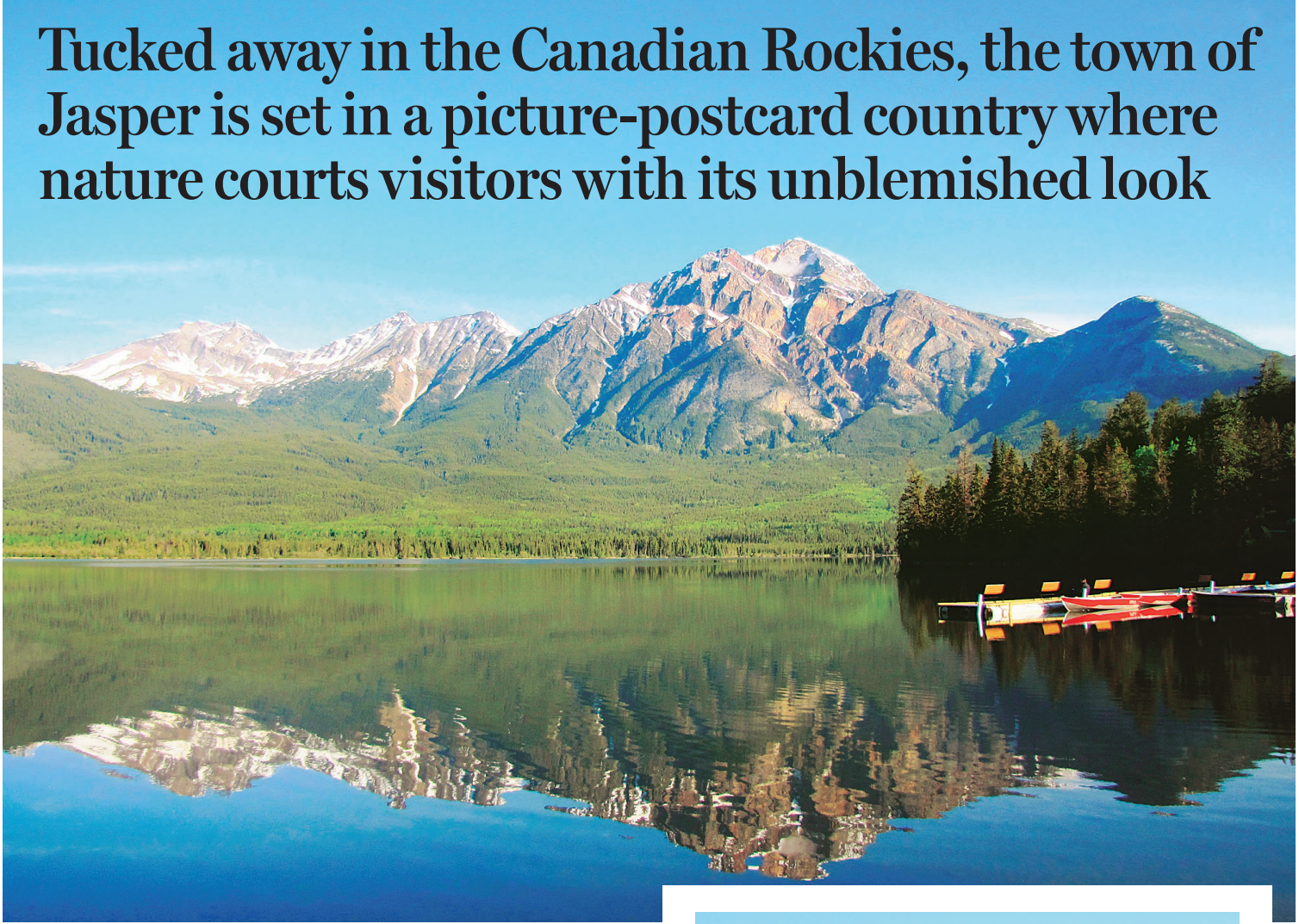
Jasper is a key connection in Canada's railway network and we see extraordinarily long freight trains at the heritage train station, with a 1923 steam locomotive parked outside. The main street has a line of shops with names like Rocky Bear Gifts and Edelweiss Gift Shop alongside small cafés. We have fresh-off-the oven baked goodies, sandwiches and freshly brewed coffee at the Bear's Paw Bakery, the kind of place where you meet your neighbour or catch up on local gossip.

This region is lake country. The placid Maligne Lake is reached by a winding road from Jasper Town. Keep your eyes open for wildlife that is rife: Moose, elk and bear inhabit this territory. There are countless tales of naïve tourists and animal encounters. Our guide tells us to stay in the vehicle at all times.

On the way is glass-like Medicine Lake, the source of Indian myth and tales. Native tribes thought that it was inhabited by spirits because its level varied radically through the seasons! Geographically, it's a body of water without a river outlet. It drains annually in to an underground river and limestone caves through sink holes in the bottom: just imagine a huge basin with the drain open and the tap running!

Maligne Lake used to be called the 'Sore Foot Lake' because of the arduous journey one had to undertake to reach it. The scenic lake is framed by wisps of wild pine like a cloak of iridescent green and an amphitheatre of rugged peaks. Why Maligne? Because a Jesuit priest called Father Pierre had trouble crossing the raging

# The unthumbed pages of Canada



The Pyramid Lake has bright canoes bobbing on its waters and a log cabin with sepia pictures of Jasper's original settlers.

waters and named it Maligne (French for wicked). The boat tour on Maligne Lake takes you to the diminutive Spirit Island which is an icon of the Rockies, featuring on postcards and posters.

Seven miles south east of Jasper, is the spectacularly deep Maligne Canyon, ringed by Douglas fir and pine trees — a gorge which has been gouged over a million years by the savage effects of wind, ice and mechanical action. Our guide Dieter, a feisty German, points out fossils of snails and other marine animals on our path: it's bewildering to imagine that this was the bottom of an ocean long ago!

There is a tea-room which was visited by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1915 who was inspired by Jasper to even write a poem. A trail follows the canyon along the limestone cliffs, with six bridges, that serve as viewpoints above the raging river under our feet. There are splashes of rust and yellow lichens on the limestone walls and raven's nests. We see an elk grazing in the parking lot. Though it looks harmless, Dieter warns us that anyone coming in between a female elk and her calf is asking for trouble (elks can weigh up to 400 kg).

In a quite different genre is the

Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, skirting the turquoise Lake Beauvert, where we spend an evening. Celebrities from Queen Elizabeth to Marilyn Monroe have graced it with their presence. Chandeliers with animal motifs, a hearth to snuggle by and cedar log cabins for accommodation, this is a rugged beauty. The Golf course has some spectacular scenery and resident bears, elks and coyotes. Blair Keating, the sales manager of the property says that the railways and the hotel industry in Canada are intertwined. It was the Canadian Pacific railway that built properties to get the tourists in. And it invariably got stunning lakefront locations! There are wood accents everywhere, bringing in the rich nature outside, with tables made of raw logs, Canadian contemporary art and rainbow coloured chairs on the lawns facing the lake.

Outside the town is the photogenic Patricia Lake with the most perfect reflections of the snow capped mountains. Below the cold waters are the remains of Project Habakkuk — a top secret World War II project where an experimental aircraft carrier was made out of icebergs and wood to help the fight against the German U-boats, but was abandoned because of the enormous costs of labour and construction. Today, you can take a diving trip to see the remains. The road ends at Pyramid Lake, which has bright coloured canoes and a log cabin with sepia pictures of the early settlers. Sitting on the banks of the pristine lake and in the deep silence of the forests, it's easy to imagine that you are light years from civilisation!

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The frontier town of Jasper in the shadow of the Rockies has the quintessential feel of mid-western America.



An elk takes a break from grazing for a photo-op at the Maligne Canyon, ringed by Douglas fir and pine trees.

Arthur Conan Doyle visited Jasper in 1915 and was so inspired by one of its tea rooms that he wrote a poem on the quaint town