

THE IMPORTANCE OF NOW

How one woman in the midst of a medical crisis discovered that hesitating to follow your travel dreams is never a good strategy

BY MICHELE SPONAGLE

I stared at my partner Brian

in disbelief. "What do you mean you've never seen the Rockies?" It was true. He had been to places, like Spain, Myanmar and Venezuela, but somehow missed this world-famous area of Canada, like many Canadians. We were thinking about a destination where we could celebrate our fifth anniversary and the West was calling to us.

But as self-employed people, we wondered if we could spare the time off. Maybe we should postpone until next spring? After much deliberation, we decided just to go for it. In hindsight, I'm so glad we did. I had no idea that my life was going to take an abrupt turn very soon—in fact, it happened the morning after we flew back home from Vancouver.

How best to see the the West? I had taken the trip from Banff to Vancouver on board the Rocky Mountaineer train a few years earlier and truly enjoyed the experience. For people like us who don't have time to book rental cars and hotels, and plan itineraries, it's an easy option, and seeing the Rockies by train is a unique way to see them. You wind your way through them in close proximity. You can smell the mountain air from the outdoor viewing platform and hear the screech of the raptors as they fly overhead.

We went ahead and booked the First Passage to the West journey, which would see us embark in Banff and stop in Kamloops for a night, before reaching Vancouver. We added overnight stays before and after our trip.

Banff in early October is blissfully free from the big crowds of tourists. As we walked back to our hotel one afternoon, it began to snow. Around us, visitors were snapping selfies, letting snowflakes melt on their tongues and videoing it. They were filled with joy as the sky turned a solid white. As Canadians, we're so used to it. Here, a snowfall was a thing of magic.

The next morning, we made our way to the train station in Banff to board the train. That blanket of snow had thickened overnight and made the trees

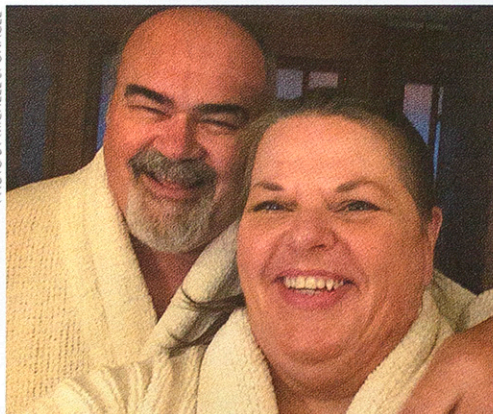
along the track droop under its weight. As the train departed, it felt like we were travelling through a white cocoon and it did feel magical to be a part of it.

Pretty quickly, we got into the groove of life on the train. Since we were GoldLeaf Service guests, there were perks aplenty, from the domed car that provided unfettered views from the window and reclining, heated seats, to meals offered in the dining car, tables dressed in fresh flowers and crisp white linens. Breakfast, lunch and sometimes a light dinner (in the case of a delay) were offered onboard. In between meals, the Rocky Mountaineer hosts came down the aisle with a steady flow of snacks, like warm biscuits and cheese, plus wine and cocktails. I enjoyed my daily pre-lunch gin and tonic greatly. The hosts learned on the first day that this was my drink of choice and I never had to ask for it by name again. It appeared, ninja-like, on my tray at my seat.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROCKY MOUNTAINEER

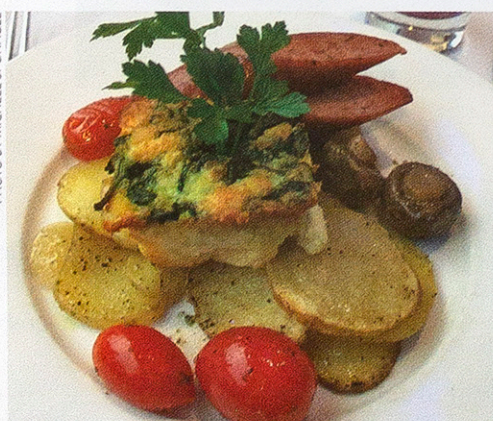


PHOTO BY MICHELE SPONAGLE



Brian and Michele

PHOTO BY MICHELE SPONAGLE



both winners). The meal was three courses, each paired with wines from the region. You could sit with other guests, if you wished, or you could be seated on your own. We did a bit of both, choosing on our first day to sit with a couple from Thailand. He was Canadian. She was Thai. He wanted her to see how beautiful his home country was. There was a mixed bag of countries represented on the train, with the lion's share from the Commonwealth—oodles of Brits and Aussies with a sprinkling of Americans thrown into the mix, too. By mid-afternoon, when “numb bum” struck

I could tell Brian was enjoying himself. He's a world champion napper and, despite the gentle sway of the chain of coaches travelling at a sleepy average speed of 56 km/h, he was wide awake and seldom turned his head away from what was happening outside of his window. He took pictures of an osprey nest perched on a telephone pole, bald eagles swooping above, grazing big horn sheep, cascading waterfalls and highlights, like Hell's Gate where 909,218,000 million litres of water rush through a narrow gorge in the Fraser River just 33.5 metres wide, and the site of The Last Spike, which brought eastern and western Canada together with the completion of the railroad on January 23, 1915. And with a steady flow of useless but amusing factoids and history from the Rocky Mountaineer hosts, he was in his happy place.

I was, too. All I needed to do was sit back and take it all in. It's amazingly relaxing and the service is truly top-notch. I really came to believe that the staff do indeed love their jobs. If they didn't, I never saw the slightest indication. There's an incredible attention to detail that's downright impressive.

Around noon, hot towels were handed out—a sign that it was lunchtime. Rocky Mountaineer lived up to its reputation for having excellent, farm-to-table local cuisine (B.C. salmon and Alberta beef,



PHOTO BY MICHELE SPONAGLE

from too much sitting, we could go downstairs and get some fresh air on the outdoor viewing platform and breathe in the fresh mountain air. As we got closer to Kamloops, where we would be staying in a hotel for the night, the landscape had started to morph into scrubby desert and rolling hills covered with long, golden grass, dotted by sprawling ranches. It was picturesque, too, but in a different less-showstopper way than the dramatic, jagged mountains of the Rockies.

After an overnight in Kamloops and quick dinner at a local pub, we were back on the train for our second and final day. Rocky Mountaineer has itineraries that are longer, but two days were perfect for us. We were back in the dining car for breakfast where

INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEYS

ROCKY MOUNTAINEER

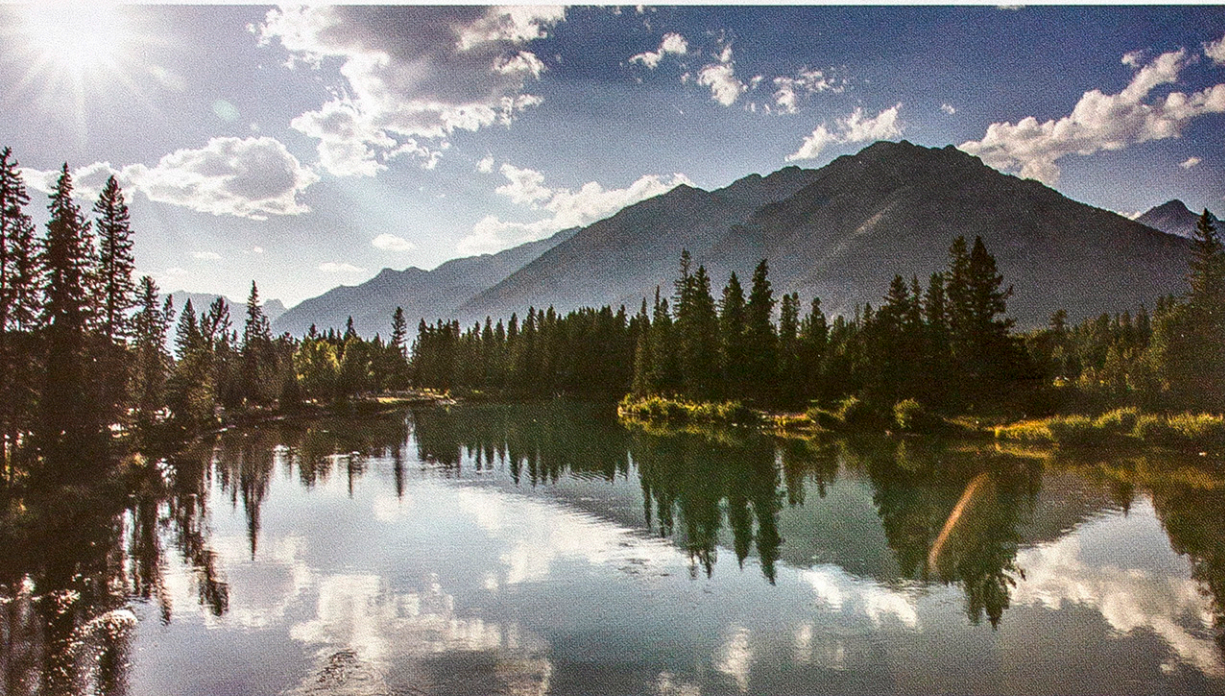


PHOTO COURTESY OF ROCKY MOUNTAINEER



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you always had a choice of entrée. My boyfriend is hooked on anything with the word “Benedict” in the descriptor, so he had eggs, while I went the pancake route, accompanied by copious cups of tea. As I mentioned earlier, it’s all in the details. Meals are timed, according to the scenery the train is approaching. When passing by big highlights, like Hell’s Gate, the Spiral Tunnels or Cisco Crossing (where the tracks of CP and CN cross), they make sure guests can enjoy the views fully, stand up and take photos, if they like. At mealtimes, such behaviours would create chaos.

I’m usually tethered to my email like there is no tomorrow. As a writer and editor, I’m always juggling multiple freelance clients, who often email out of the blue: “Can you do this story for me in two days?” At some points along the route, there is no internet or cell phone service available, so I just had to chill and remember that it wasn’t like I was waiting for a heart to be flown in to do a transplant or something. Everything could wait.

That was freeing somehow. It gave me permission to unplug. It allowed Brian and I to have many good conversations and learn more about one another in the absence of outside distractions. It definitely brought us closer and reminded us why we’ve been happy for five years now.

By the time we got to Vancouver, we were ready to get walking, exploring and eating more. We had a romantic dinner at Hawksworth, a restaurant that was high up on my bucket list and did not fail to disappoint. We indulged in piles of photogenic and delicious sushi at Miku Waterfront, with a fantastic view of the bay. We checked out an Emily Carr exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery before heading to the Fairmont Pacific Rim, where we enjoyed massages and a soak in a hot tub overlooking the city, followed by naps al fresco and dinner at the hotel’s critically lauded Botanist. The multi-course tasting menu, that showcases everything from hand-cut tagliatelle to butter-poached lobster, still ranks up there with my best meals of the year.

Our final two nights of our vacay were spent at the Shangri-La Vancouver, an intimate boutique hotel that always smells like flowers and Asian spices. There, too, we did the spa thing, enjoying a very chillaxed couple’s massage that ended with us getting happy anniversary chocolate-covered strawberries. Before we changed out of our cozy robes, I snapped a picture of us in the mirror of the change room.

Today, I still look at the image of us smiling broadly and laughing with a hint of sadness. It was before my life—our lives—changed. The next morning, I went to an ENT specialist to get the results of a needle biopsy on a swollen lymph node on my neck. I had already had two similar tests and they were negative. I expected the same this time. I hadn’t even thought about this appointment while we were away. My heart felt like it stopped beating when the doctor told me I had cancer, an aggressive form of Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. I knew at that moment the life I had known had vanished.

No one gets through cancer unscathed. It changes who you are, how you feel about life, how you live it and the people you invite into it. My cancer diagnosis that day was followed by surgery to remove the lymph node and my right tonsil—truly the most painful procedure I’ve ever experienced. Then there was a two-month wait over Christmas to find out when I could get into the Juravinski Cancer Hospital in Hamilton, Ont. to begin treatment—six rounds of intensive chemotherapy.

That meant my days of being able to travel are curtailed. Chemo leaves you vulnerable to infection, which you may or may not have the strength to fight. Taking a flight is high risk since you don’t know whether the person sitting near you is sick with a cold or flu. Doctors recommend that you avoid crowds, don’t eat sushi or unpasteurized cheeses, have pedicures or touch soil with your hands—all of these things are a risk to chemo patients like me.

That’s where I find myself now. I’m grounded for now from travelling very far until this ordeal is over. I know I’ll be okay, but it’s difficult right now to feel how small my world has become. It makes me grateful that Brian and I decided to go ahead with our Rocky Mountaineer vacation. It proves what, up until now, I’ve known in theory: You should not put off the things that you really want to do. Memories of our trip together provide real moments of joy and comfort. My lesson to share is that we should go where our heart desires and celebrate every journey to the fullest. You don’t know what tomorrow will bring and it’s better to live with no regrets.