



Well Fed in the Rockies

By Diane Selkirk

“All aboard!” rang out at 7:15am.

Despite the early hour, the train station buzzed with anticipation. Locals like us and tourists from all over the world were waiting to set off from Vancouver, B.C. for a trip through the Rocky Mountains to Banff and Calgary. But first, we were eager for breakfast.

We found our Goldleaf seats on the upper level of the dome car. My six-year-old daughter, Maia, was pleased with the view out the panoramic windows, but her primary concern was finding out how the 70 passengers from the dome would all fit in the dining car at the same time. Her unease deepened when Michele, our attendant, explained there would be two sittings and by virtue of our seat number, we'd be called to the second breakfast. Maia's worry (and growling stomach) was short-lived; after the first group headed down to the dining car we were offered freshly baked raspberry scones. We settled back and watched out the window as the spectacle of city commuters making their way to work gradually gave way to the pastoral farmlands of the Fraser Valley.

The Rocky Mountaineer is a tourist train. Unlike VIA Rail (Canada's national passenger service), the Rocky Mountaineer only travels along British Columbia and Alberta's most scenic routes during daylight hours between April and October. Our two-day trip on the Kicking Horse Route would include an overnight stay in Kamloops, giving passengers a chance to get off the train, stretch their legs, and sleep in a real bed. Along the way we would dine from menus created by four distinguished B.C. chefs: Frederic Couton, Joseph Lassaga, Jean Pierre Guerin, and Raoul Prigent.

Nancy Dery, from the Rocky Mountaineer's communications department, explained that the train recently updated the menu. “Since our guests come from all over the world, we want to make sure they are experiencing Western Canada in every way—including the cuisine. Travelers literally get a taste of the region through the food.”

Mistaken Identity

The train was traveling along the banks of the Fraser River when a group of Australians a few seats back began exclaiming and shooting photos. I looked out the window and studied the slopes of Vedder Mountain, wondering if they had sighted wildlife. “I thought they would be grander and more rugged,” a woman was saying. Michele, who also provided ongoing commentary, understood their confusion immediately. “Oh, these aren't the Rockies yet,” she

explained, giving a synopsis of the landscape to come. Rather than being disappointed, the woman said she was thrilled by the fact that we would be traveling through more than one mountain range.

Moments later we were called to breakfast. Maia led the way down the spiral staircase and claimed the first table. We were soon joined by one of the Australian couples, Barbara and Patrick, and together we considered the menu. Maia took a few seconds and decided on the buttermilk pancakes, which were served with a local berry preserve. The rest of us took longer to choose. Barbara was interested in the scrambled eggs served with smoked steelhead and had questions about what type of fish a steelhead is. This led to a three-table debate about whether a steelhead is the same fish as rainbow trout, which somehow branched off into a discussion about fly-fishing and fly-tying. Somewhere in between the chit-chat we all managed to order.

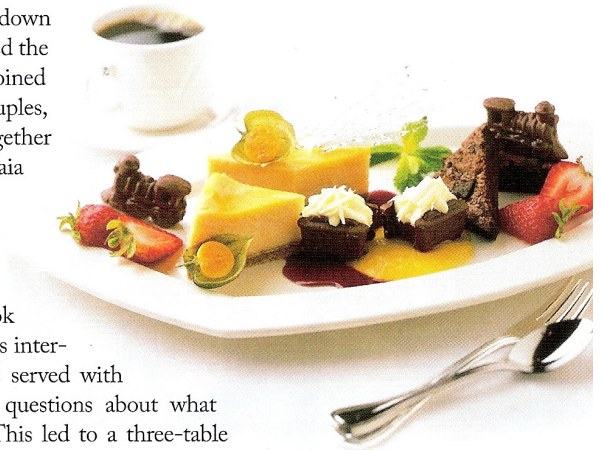
While we ate, Barbara said that she and Patrick were celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary with this trip of a lifetime. “When I was a little girl, I was given a calendar that came from Canada,” Barbara explained. “One of the pictures was of a deer standing under a tree with the Rocky Mountains behind him. I've dreamed my whole life of seeing that view.”

Shared Adventure

There is a lovely intimacy that comes with train travel, and soon everyone in our car was getting acquainted. We learned who was celebrating a special milestone, we met grandparents who had grandchildren the same age as Maia, we discovered who was hoping to see a bear, and who had their heart set on sighting an elk. As we entered the rugged landscape of the Fraser Canyon, our journey took on the air of a shared adventure—an adventure where you were almost encouraged to eavesdrop on your fellow passenger.

“Of course she can have the lemonade. This is a very special day.” The voice came from across the aisle, from Mary, an older woman who reminded me of a schoolteacher who you liked far too much to disobey. I had just turned down Maia's request for her favorite drink and asked Michele to bring her water instead (thinking it might be wise to limit the amount of sugar that flowed into my six-year-old.) But I was overruled by Mary.

Happily sipping her lemonade, Maia struck up a conversation with Mary. The two were discussing ►



Savor dessert while enjoying spectacular scenery from the dome car.



COURTESY ROCKY MOUNTAINEER

“Travelers literally get a taste of the region through the food.”

All ages can enjoy the combination of savory flavors and scenic wonders on a leisurely train trip.



DIANE SELKIRK PHOTO

the lake we were passing, wondering if the water was warm enough for swimming, when they saw a tunnel in the distance. Mary asked Maia if she had ridden in the open-air vestibule while going through a tunnel, explaining it was an excellent experience. The three of us hurried downstairs and headed outside—just in time to pass from the bright sun into the cool blackness of the tunnel.

Regional Cuisine

It didn't seem possible to be hungry again, but midway through the first group's lunch seating speculation about what might be on the menu had begun to grow. "I saw prawns and chicken when I peeked into the dining car," reported one second-sitting spy.

When we were seated, tiger prawns—simmered with plum tomatoes and served over organic white beans—were, indeed, on the menu, as was Fraser Valley chicken with fragrant wild mushrooms. Wine choices were similarly regional in origin and included a variety of offerings from well-known Okanagan vineyards, including Black Sage, Quails' Gate, and CedarCreek.

Our first day on the train ended when we pulled into the station at Kamloops, slightly behind schedule (it's a train after all). Passengers were shuttled off to several different hotels, with some people opting to attend the Lumberjack Show or the Two River Junction Dinner and Musical Review. Maia and I headed to the riverside South Thompson Inn and Guest Ranch, where we enjoyed visiting their horses followed by a light dinner before heading to bed.

Memorable Sights

The second day on the train meant we got to switch from second to first sitting. It also meant that the soaring mountains of the Selkirks, Purcells, and Rockies were that much closer. But at 7am all everyone really cared about was who got first dibs at ordering a Sir Sanford Fleming Benedict—a tasty poached egg with Montreal smoked meat that's topped with a smoky chipotle Hollandaise sauce—named for the chief engineer who designed much of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

All aboard!

The Rocky Mountaineer offers two levels of service—Redleaf and Goldleaf—as well as an array of vacation packages. Rates start at \$579CDN (based on double occupancy).

From April to October the Rocky Mountaineer travels either direction between the coastal city of Vancouver and the Rocky Mountain destinations of Jasper, Banff, and Calgary with an overnight stop in Kamloops, B.C. Most travelers fly home out of Calgary.

Rocky Mountaineer also offers a third trip—the Fraser Discovery Route. This rail journey travels between Whistler, B.C. and Jasper, Alberta, with an overnight in Quesnel, B.C.

Go to rockymountaineer.com or call 800-665-7245 for complete information and to request a free brochure.



As we ate breakfast, we watched the light change and brighten across the arid landscape outside of Kamloops. The ponderosa pine and sagebrush, which appeared when we reached the rain shadow of the coastal range, gradually gave way to lush green foliage, fed by the spring run off.

Wildlife started to appear, and the announcement (relayed from the front of the train) that bear, bighorn sheep, or elk had been sighted resulted in all the passengers rushing to the windows for a glimpse. Craggy mountains began to rise around us, and this time there was no doubt: we were approaching the Rockies.

We entered the dark of the first of two, nearly 3,000-foot-long Spiral Tunnels, a spectacular feat of engineering constructed through Mount Ogden and Cathedral Mountain. While the train completed almost two full circles inside the mountains, we savored a lunch of slow-cooked Alberta short ribs and wild salmon with Asian flavors (see accompanying recipe), followed by a lemon mousse for dessert. When the meal (and tunnels) ended, Maia and I headed back to our favorite spot in the outdoor vestibule. Barbara and Patrick joined us, and together we watched the Rockies as they grew imposing, becoming as rugged and grand as Barbara had always imagined.

It was Maia who pointed out the deer standing under a tree with mountains as his backdrop. "Look!" she said to Barbara, "The deer from your calendar is still here."



Diane Selkirk loves trains and she rides and writes about them whenever she gets a chance. Her last story for Northwest Palate was about ferries ("In Search of Gulf Islands Wine," March/April 2008), proving she likes any transportation that gets her closer to good food.

Choo Chew

Nancy Dery explains that while the Rocky Mountaineer has always had great food, "The new chefs have revitalized the onboard menus, taking our culinary profile to a whole new level." Considered a culinary dream team, the four chefs have combined their diverse backgrounds and passion for farm-to-table cuisine into menus that highlight Fraser Valley free-range chicken, wild salmon, Alberta beef, and other locally sourced products.

Chef Frederic Couton, who trained at Michelin-starred restaurants, brings to the team more than 10 years of experience as Executive Chef of The Cannery Seafood Restaurant in Vancouver, while Chef Joseph Lassaga, previously the popular Executive Chef at the Bistro Chez Michel in North Vancouver, gives the food an international flare with techniques from Basque, French, and Spanish cuisine.

Making sure menus will appeal to a broad range of palates is the responsibility of Chef Jean Pierre Guerin, who brings his experience as Corporate Chef in charge of menu design and development for Lufthansa Sky Chefs. Chef Raoul Prigent, former Banquet Chef at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Vancouver, applies his logistical expertise to ensuring that up to 2,800 meals a day are prepared in the rolling restaurants and reach the hungry passengers as delectable meals.

Soy Marinated Wild Pacific Salmon with Berry Vinaigrette

Adapted from Frederic Couton, Corporate Chef, Rocky Mountaineer Catering. Serves 2.

2 salmon fillets (6 ounces each), deboned and skinned
Soy Marinade (see recipe below)
Salt and pepper to taste
1 teaspoon olive oil
Berry Vinaigrette (see recipe below)

SOY MARINADE

5 ounces light soy sauce
1 Tablespoon buckwheat honey
½ ounce fresh cilantro, cleaned and trimmed
1 ounce fresh ginger, peeled and chopped
2 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped

Place all the ingredients in a blender and purée to a smooth consistency, about 1 minute.

BERRY VINAIGRETTE

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
1 Tablespoon red wine vinegar
5-6 fresh raspberries
2-3 fresh blackberries
5 Tablespoons hazelnut oil
Salt and pepper to taste

In a blender, add the mustard, vinegar, and berries and purée to a smooth consistency. Pour in the oil 1 Tablespoon at a time, blending between additions, until the sauce is emulsified. Season to taste. Keep in the refrigerator until needed.

TO MARINATE THE SALMON:

Place the salmon fillets in a container and pour the Soy Marinade over the salmon; toss to coat. Marinate 3 hours, flipping the fillets over midway to coat evenly with the marinade.

When the salmon has finished marinating, remove the fillets and pat dry on paper towels. Keep refrigerated until ready to cook.

TO COOK THE SALMON:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Season the salmon with salt and pepper. Heat a non-stick, oven-safe sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add the olive oil and gently place the salmon flesh-side down. Sear for 1 minute and then flip them over onto the skin side. Place in the preheated oven for about 5 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fillets.

Serve with a combination of cooked seasonal vegetables (such as fingerling potatoes, asparagus, zucchini, beets, and carrots), tossed with the berry vinaigrette.

