

BAFFLING BANFF

**The perfect introduction to
Canada's favorite little town**

JEROEN VOGEL

BOOKS BY JEROEN VOGEL

In Australia
In Vietnam
Baffling Banff
American Safari
In Britain

© 2017 Jeroen Vogel
ISBN 9789402184198

www.writingtraveller.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Except for use in a review, the reproduction of this work in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, and in any information storage and retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author.

DISCLAIMER: While all story elements have taken place as described, the time line - originally two years - has been severely altered and reduced to one year for story line purposes. The nightly events have been compiled into a handful of nights solely for entertainment purposes (98% of the nights on the job were truly uneventful). The opinions expressed in this work are based on freedom of speech. The hotel in this book has been completely fictionalized.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeroen Vogel (Hoorn, the Netherlands, 1981) is a travel writer, blogger and adventurer. Since the age of 18, he's been travelling around the world and has published six books about his journeys. In 2015 he travelled through the Americas on public transport from the polar bears to the penguins. Three years later he became the first person ever to walk "The Bryson Line" through the United Kingdom.

CONTENTS

Chapter one: The arrival	5
Chapter two: Banff's Ambassadors	15
Chapter three: The Trading Post	29
Chapter four: "If you can't get laid in Banff..."	35
Chapter five: Snowmobiling	47
Chapter six: Sulphura's Vagina	52
Chapter seven: An old friend	62
Chapter eight: The Gondola	68
Chapter nine: The Ruins of Bankhead	84
Chapter ten: "She wanted a hundred bucks!"	95
Chapter eleven: The Avenue	104
Chapter twelve: The Contract	128
Chapter thirteen: The Bear	156
Chapter fourteen: The Lure of the Mountains	173

CHAPTER ONE

THE ARRIVAL

The Bow Falls Trail

Canada can do no harm. It sits in its northerly, frozen corner of the world, shares a border with a country that draws plenty of global attention for itself, has one politically correct government after another, and when speaking of Canadians, we think of them as friendly, modest, easy-going – the toned-down version of the North American. Canada is the well-behaved kid in the classroom. It doesn't have Colombia's guerrillas or Russia's desire to restore world dominance; neither does it have China's pollution nor America's track record of invasions.

As with humans, the vocal types attract more attention, and in my younger years I had been ten times to the United States – visiting family, being an exchange student at a high school, working at a summer camp – but never to Canada. Canada was the still-waters-run-deep variant and only with age, and accumulated wisdom does one start to show interest in the quiet ones, and I grew into wanting to go there the way I had been to Australia – on a working holiday visa, being allowed two years of exploration. But by then I was too old. Dutch nationals, unlike the Irish and the British, can't be older than 30 years of age when applying for the Canadian working holiday visa.

Then I got an opportunity. A hotel in Banff, Alberta, was looking for a night auditor and offered a contract and two-year-work permit, a kind of sponsor-

ship, to a foreigner willing to do this job. Two years in Canada! Two years in a Canadian national park – which is what Banff is. At home, the imagination can not help itself. A national park in the Rocky Mountains had to be about hiking, trekking, and mountain climbing. I imagined the eccentric hiker – grey goatee, Nordic walking sticks, skinny, vivid storyteller of past experiences in Alaska and South-Africa –, the weathered helicopter pilot who was going to fly a group of backcountry skiers out, and the observing writer who sought the tranquility to work on his projects. I would hold conversations with a nature lover or a painter of landscapes or an extreme sportsman. We would talk books and the outdoors, and consider politics a laughing matter in this wild setting, something for silly people far away from these mountains. Here, it would be the passion that counted, and nothing else.

The only downside was that I'd be working under the rules of modern feudalism. The feudal system, as it was known in medieval times, implied the protection of a town and its inhabitants, the peasants of the surrounding farm communities, and all those within the boundaries of a certain area by the ruling authority – I pay you with labour or hard currency, and in return I shall receive your protection and land to live on. The farmer working on the land of a Lord is perhaps the best-known example of a feudal system – the poor peasant was commonly unable to buy his own property but received a plot of land if he sacrificed part of his produce to the community and the knights in the protective castle. This system is being applied by the Canadian government through their sponsor-

ship system: the foreigner gets to be on Canadian soil as long as he works for the company that has sponsored him. Resignation, then, translates into his departure from Canada.

I arrived in Canada under those conditions, knowing very little about the hotel that was to employ me – just its name, its location, its size – and even less about the town and national park of Banff. It was a deliberate gamble. You see, in the weeks prior to my departure, I hadn't looked up anything on Banff, except for some pictures. I wanted the place to open itself up to me during my time there, and to discover its history and spirit, its ways and inhabitants from within, like a local.

And after seven weeks of waiting for the paperwork and the green light, well, here I was rolling on a bus through Banff National Park, through the town of Banff. The bus driver opened the airport express shuttle's door, and said, 'Here you are, buddy. The Settlers' Inn.¹ It's just across the road.'

'Thank you,' I said, grabbing my luggage. 'You have a good night.'

He gave me a friendly nod. 'You enjoy your time in Banff, buddy.'

I stepped off the bus, the half-frozen snow crunching under my shoes, a freezing cold temperature of -9° smacking me in the face, and stood in a deserted street, while strapping my backpack to my shoulders. The bus drove off behind me. I turned around, and stood face to face, as if I was looking at a picture on

¹ The name The Settlers' Inn is fictional. Obviously.

the computer screen back home in the Netherlands, with The Settlers' Inn – the yellow lights inside made the hotel look cozy in this cold and dark environment. I crossed the street and entered the place where I'd be working within a few days.

The coziness of the lobby was enhanced by the little fire in the fireplace. I received the key card from the front desk agent and went upstairs to my room on the second floor. It was a standard North American hotel room, with the two queen-sized beds, complimentary coffee and tea, flat-screen television, and a spacious bathroom with bathtub. I would spend one night at the hotel before moving into my staff accommodation the next day.

With the cigarettes I'd bought at Calgary Airport – against my intention to no longer smoke once I'd be in Canada – I stepped out onto the balcony of my hotel room, closed the doors behind me, and lit one of those damn sticks up in the chilly air on this dark November night. I had recently started to worry about my smoking addiction. Writing had caused more weight; more flesh on the ribs made it harder for the lungs to fill with air, making it harder for the heart to pump blood and oxygen around. You can tell by grabbing the loose skin on your sides and pulling it up: the weight is then off the ribs, and breathing becomes easier. The body was telling me to quit, and I'd tried often – oh yes, many times. I might be the world record holder of failed attempts to quit. This was yet another one.

And you wonder how such a thing starts. I think it helped that my parents were non-smokers – I only

started one week before my 21st birthday. I spent the summer in which that birthday took place in Croatia, working as a so-called campsite courier – a job that involved cleaning large family tents, manning the reception, repairing things such as toilets and broken lights, providing the guests with information about the area. It was my first real stint in tourism and part of life on the campsite involved drinking, from which it was only a small step to lighting up that first cigarette. Back then, in 2002, you could smoke anywhere in Croatia, a country dominated by economic mayhem after the devastating war in former Yugoslavia – nobody was even considering a smoking ban. We drank a lot, and we smoked everywhere. Boy, did I have a good time!

Between that first cigarette in Croatia, in a discotheque located in a basement, and this second or third one in Canada, on this balcony of The Settlers' Inn, eleven years and four months had passed. My first grey hairs, only a few, were visible. I blamed the cigarettes. I always breathed slightly heavier when I smoked. I blamed the addiction. And yet I could never stop. At the end of the day, I could only blame myself. And here I was: puffing away once more, as though I wanted to compensate for the healthy fresh air eluding from the gigantic forests around Banff.

Naturally, I did the same thing the next morning, but now I could see the mountains, which surrounded Banff, with this winter's first snow and frost. The wilderness was everywhere, and it promised to be a beautiful day, too. The sky was already cloudless and blue, the humidity was slightly palpable, and I felt an urge

to explore this area. But first I needed to move into my new apartment.

* * *

Two apartment buildings, entirely occupied by temporary workers like me, were situated on the other side of the Bow River, which flowed through the townsite. I was given a shared apartment in the first building, which on the outside looked to have been assembled by a bunch of workmen who had been given a stack of prefabricated plates, nail guns, a construction plan in Chinese, and the order to throw it up within a week. But, in contrast, the apartment itself was extremely comfortable. It had a sofa and an armchair, an open cabinet with books and a television set, a coffee table, and a dinner table with two chairs. The dark red-and-yellow carpet and the beige walls provided a warm atmosphere. The curtains were white. The kitchen, which contained an enormous fridge, was big enough to take up about 1/3 of the common living space. Yes, here I could settle for two years; it was simply a great home, especially considering it was in the back of the building, had a mountain view, and was relatively quiet. Once I would commence my job as a night auditor, I figured, I could easily sleep here during the day.

I was alone; Aiko, my Japanese roommate, was working the morning shift at 'The Settlers' Inn. I dumped my two bags on the floor in my new bedroom, made the bed, and left, in spite of the cold temperature, to go for a hike. I crossed the parking lot

and came across a structure of logs – a wild west fort, which would not have looked out of place in a cheap western movie and had the words “Buffalo Nations Luxton Museum” written above the door. The Canadian flag flew on each of the two guard towers. I had no idea what “Buffalo Nations” were, or what a “Luxton” was, and just smiled – yes, I would get to know this town little by little.

Ice started to form on the Bow River’s edges; it wouldn’t take much longer before the entire river would be frozen over. On the other side was a park, a walking trail lined with pine trees; ahead was the Bow River Bridge. Once the river would be completely frozen over, I could walk across it and continue through the park, making the bridge unnecessary, shave perhaps six or seven minutes off my daily commute. I approached another wooden structure with light-yellow painted walls, which had “Indian Trading Post – Furs – Trapper” written on its roof. Before the actual building there stood an aged log cabin, which was so old that its door post was lower than the road.

The ‘Indian Trading Post’ was a souvenir shop. I decided to never enter it. There was something I disliked about the word ‘Indian.’ Yes, I get it – Christopher Columbus made a mistake, and this shop banked on the settlers’ culture. But did it need to take more than five centuries before we knew better? Oh, I know. Australian Aborigines now are First Australians; in America, there are the Native Americans; Eskimos became the Inuit. But hey: five hundred years, people? Seriously? Yet in Dutch – and possibly in many more languages – people still speak of In-

dians, because the politically correct new terms have rarely been translated (only the Aborigines are known as ‘aboriginals,’ but then Columbus did not stumble upon Australia). I don’t want to make a meal of it, but five centuries of mistaking the headdress for a turban is impressive. Very impressive.

I continued along the river toward the bridge ahead of me.

The Bow River Bridge rested on four pillars: three stood in the river, and the fourth on the bank, giving way to the road I was on. Cars were allowed to drive here, as long as they were lower than “2.47m – 8’ 3”.” Clearly, not everyone was a keen observer of the enormous sign that hung there, as evidenced by that same sign hanging there at an angle. Four more signs, hanging from the bridge above the water in each of the four passageways, said, “Danger – Falls ahead – Chutes en aval.” The water flowed faster on the other side of the bridge. Ahead the road bent off to the right, where I continued on the Bow Falls Trail, passing the new pedestrian bridge, entering the forest.

This setting – a wide trail through the pine forest along a beautiful, shallow, rapidly flowing river – was paradisiacal – the sound of water, the smell of pine. It was with gratitude that I walked here, in happiness, with my own thoughts, listening to the raging waters ahead. The river narrowed, making the flow go even faster, and the Bow Falls were now becoming audible.

The Bow River had traveled about one hundred kilometers before flowing through Banff and was about 587 kilometers long from its source (the Bow Glacier) to its confluence with the South Saskatche-

wan River. On the other side, the river edge became a steeply rising, bare rock wall, while the water beneath it was speeding up still. A few dead trees stood at the top of which was a road. Where the water started flowing dangerously fast, a wooden fence, held up every few meters by pillars of Rundle rock, as the locally quarried rock was known, prevented the hiker from coming too close. Here, one could go right, and back to the main road, or continue up a stone-and-wooden staircase along the river. A metal chain with a "Trail closed for the winter"-sign hung across the trail above the first stair step, but I stepped over the chain and climbed the stairs anyway. While the water dropped its first level, I ascended the hill.

The now raging water was visible between the pine trees, the never-ending white noise had a calming effect, another staircase presented itself, and looking down from it, I could see how the river narrowed even more and then dropped down the actual Bow Falls – a total drop of 9.1 meters. It was not a steep waterfall with a vertical drop, but a gradual one – I could see the sharp rocks beneath it, sometimes even sticking out, making rafting down these falls impossible. There was not a lot of volume in November, and soon there would be even less; eventually, the falls would be nothing but a wildly frozen surface.

The trail went down to the parking lot, where people could park and then enjoy a superb view of the falls. The river widened and calmed, making its way through an absolutely beautiful landscape. A tiny beach sat in the left corner. On the right, from where I was standing, I could see the steeply rising Rundle

Mountain with its few, scattered trees beneath the summit, and on the left was Tunnel Mountain, and in between, there was this wide river – joined by the Spray River in the right corner – lined with pine forest. In the background were three other mountain peaks visible, and in the foreground were a few inuk-suit, probably built by people who imagined themselves to be on an adventure.

CHAPTER TWO

BANFF'S AMBASSADORS

Banff Ambassador Program

I could not just enter the hotel one night and commence my job as a night auditor. There had to be some sort of training, and at 'The Settlers' Inn, they took that first period of my employment seriously, which gave me the sense of a professional organization. I spent a week on the morning shift, another week on the afternoon shift, and finally was trained up during a fortnight as a night auditor by a talkative guy named Adonias. The team of co-workers was most welcoming and consisted of some fascinating people. Most of them were foreigners, too, away from home, free-spirited, people with the greatest plans involving all sorts of next adventures.

One of these colleagues was Archibald, an Englishman of 26 years old. He was a tall guy with an inverted triangular, boyish face and hairstyle – a blocked nape finish with a thin, about one-centimeter long outgrowth of hair down the neck, and then longer at the top, highly appropriate in an office setting. He spoke articulately and politely, sounding professional and correct, and had arguments to support his sometimes strong views. He could be very convincing indeed and frequently took to the aid of the eyebrow cock – the singularly raised eyebrow that was supported by a slightly tilted head and rather a cheeky smile to emphasize his snarky demeanor. He questioned things and was opinionated. There were many things we

agreed on and many things we disagreed on. Our discussions were friendly yet sharp. It was a pity I only worked afternoons this week and would then move on to night shifts.

One of those afternoons, we were standing behind the desk, once again engaged in a conversation.

‘One thing I have noticed here in Banff, Jesser,’ Archibald said, ‘is that you can tell by the clientele what the rates are. In summer, all hotels in town sell out, charge insane amounts of money and, accordingly, you get all these people that are well off – they behave, they have manners, they got money to spend, less to worry about. But now that the rates have dropped, so has the standard of the people we receive here in the winter.’

As if to prove his point, an older lady, who had just entered the hotel with her husband, held something hairy in her arms. It attracted my attention. Archibald followed my gaze.

The husband asked, ‘What room is she staying in, again?’

‘In 261, I think it was,’ the lady answered.

She held a small spaniel in her arms, inconspicuously to her mind, trying not to be seen by the front desk agents of this pet-unfriendly hotel.

‘Excuse me,’ I said.

The couple turned to us.

Seeing the animal, Archibald instantly strode toward them and said firmly, ‘We do not allow animals in our building.’

The husband gave his wife, who seemed desperate for a second, a look as if to say, ‘I’ll handle this

one, darling,” and he nodded. ‘Oh, okay. Sure. I’ll bring her to my daughter.’

The woman gave her little mutt to the man and proceeded to the second floor in the elevator. The husband left the building and Archibald returned with a satisfied face. But there was something off here, and it was not too cryptic for a simple mind to decode what he was up to: they were middle-aged, there was a female upstairs in room 261, and he was going to bring the dog to his daughter. I thought for a second, checked the CCTV system, and saw how the husband was just walking down the ramp in our underground parking.

‘Remarkable,’ Archibald said.

I said, ‘I’ll send him back up, or out through the lobby. Could you meet him at the top and ensure he leaves the hotel?’

Archibald smiled. ‘With pleasure, mate.’

I went down the stairs into the underground parking and it was right near the elevator that I met the husband. ‘We still do not allow dogs in this hotel, Sir.’

‘You don’t allow them in the garage, either?’ he asked with a look as if he saw water burn.

‘No, Sir.’

He angrily walked back up the ramp – inconspicuously followed by me – and was met at the exit of the parkade by Archibald.

‘Sir, a second reminder...’

‘Yes!’ the husband bawled. ‘The other guy told me already!’

Archibald grinned at the fool, saw me approach-

ing, and gave me a nod in anticipation. ‘Sir, a third reminder...’

The husband and the mutt left the hotel, cursing and bitching, while we walked back into the lobby with a smile.

Archibald shook his head. ‘What a repulsive human being.’ Turning to me, he said, ‘Mate, what I wanted to ask you, have you heard about the “Banff Ambassador Program”?’

I nodded. ‘Yeah, though I still need to look into that.’

The “Banff Ambassador Program” involved an introduction to the town for newly arrived workers. The reward, if you will, was the “Banff Ambassador Passport” – \$725 worth of free entry to all the museums and attractions in and around Banff, and even a free night in any “wilderness” hostel in Banff and Jasper National Parks – and to obtain it, we needed to be present at the two components of the introductory program. An informative meeting was the first component; a compulsory tour of Banff and its surroundings the second.

‘We are both new to town, let’s go together. There’s a meeting at the Whyte Museum tomorrow, if you’re free.’

‘Yep, I’m off. Sure, let’s go together.’

An Indian man presented himself to check in. ‘Unfortunately your room is not ready yet,’ I explained. ‘Your room will be ready at 4PM.’

He looked thoughtful. ‘Can I get an early check-in?’

That is that moment where you look someone in

the face speechlessly, wondering what went wrong in terms of communication just then, before repeating yourself extra carefully and articulately. He nodded, understanding that no rooms were ready until 4PM, including his, because of course we would not make him wait otherwise. It's also to the advantage of a front desk agent to get each check-in out of the way as soon as possible.

And then an Asian guy presented himself with a pile of restaurant leaflets and directed himself at Archibald.

'Hi,' he said, 'I work for an Asian restaurant, and I was wondering if we could put some pamphlets on your front desk?'

'Do we get a commission for each guest we forward to your establishment, Sir?'

He looked pitifully. 'I'm afraid not.'

'Then the answer is no.'

'But every hotel allows us to do this.'

'Well,' Archibald said, 'perhaps they are operating on another level than I am. Why would I look after your leaflets, sacrifice desk space, and recommend your restaurant if you offer nothing in return?'

'No restaurant offers commission.'

'That's why you see no restaurant leaflets in our hotel beside the *Banff Dining Guide*, which is a general piece of info as a service to our guests.'

Sighing, the guy said, 'Okay, thank you for your time.'

Archibald shook his head while the guy exited the building. 'Unbelievable, mate. Unbelievable! We are working hard to sell tours that earn us a modest