

Dawn was breaking as I sat upstairs in a glass-roofed Dome observation car on *The Canadian*, just in time to glimpse the vivid, pink-coloured cirrus clouds stretching out above the snow-covered prairies.

It was an awe-inspiring sight – one that I knew would stay with me for ever. Ten minutes later, the clouds' pink hue had gone as the sun rose in the sky. Like so much in life, timing was everything.

This was just one of the magical moments I experienced during a winter rail holiday on *The Canadian*.

The sleeper train (which has even featured on Canada's \$10 note) is recognisable for its streamlined stainless steel carriages – or “cars”, as they're called in Canada – dating back to the 1950s, a golden age of rail in North America. It offers the continent's only four-night sleeper journey.

Given the rebirth of many European sleeper routes, could it be time for Canada's rail industry to enjoy its own resurgence?

Via Rail, which runs three sleeper services in Canada, including *The Canadian*, has noticed an uptick in interest for rail travel since the pandemic. Its long-haul services are often full during peak season.

Josephine Wasch, senior manager, international and domestic sales, says: “We have seen an increase in younger travellers and people who are interested in enjoying winter scenery and winter activities in nature and in city centres.”

“These clients also know that travelling in winter allows them to visit areas that are less crowded, and better pricing is available for everything they wish to enjoy.”

I'd first travelled on *The Canadian* – which connects Vancouver and Toronto, a 2,775-mile journey – in summer, more than 10 years ago. I was interested to see how different it was in cold weather.

I'd been told the scenery was even more spectacular. Tickets are considerably cheaper in winter, too. The starting price for a cabin between November and April is 57 per cent less than it is between May and October.

And there is flexibility en route. Several people who had boarded in Vancouver got off at Jasper to do a couple of days' sightseeing before catching the next train



east. Some passengers choose to break up the journey so they can explore a particular part of Canada, most commonly the Rockies.

But I'd gone straight to Jasper, via Edmonton Airport, and done my sightseeing first. Basing myself at the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, which dates to the 1920s, I'd seen elk, bighorn sheep and a moose (*inset*) on a wildlife trip with SunDog Tour Co and tried a guided ice walk in the 50-metre deep Maligne Canyon with its stunning frozen waterfalls.

Then came *The Canadian*, a man-made wonder. My heart missed a beat as the train – all 12 carriages, plus a powerful diesel locomotive – pulled into Jasper's railway station.

The station's arts and crafts style – built with local and natural materials, such as wood, stone and slate – is strikingly low-key. After being assigned a cabin,

I headed straight to one of the Dome cars to enjoy the scenery.

Snowy mountains, frozen lakes and rivers dominated the magisterial landscape that was almost Tolkienesque in its wintry beauty.

“Keep your eyes peeled – there's a good chance of seeing some mountain goats,” announced an attendant, over the loud speaker.

Minutes later, I spotted a couple of the animals perched precariously on a cliff ledge, by the side of the track.

The occasional announcement is just one way in which travelling on *The Canadian*, which spans four time zones, is a bit like going on a cruise.

However, there is often more to see from the train than there would be at sea: be it the mountains; the prairies with their

grain elevators; or the Canadian Shield, the lake-studded wooded wilderness that covers much of western Ontario.

It was also worth keeping watch for the mile-long freight trains with 100-plus cars, carrying everything from grain to potash, that criss-cross the country.

Travelling on *The Canadian* is an entirely different experience depending on whether you go in winter or summer.

No doubt, some will prefer the latter – but, for me, the snow gave the landscape greater definition and added to its beauty.

But extended rail journeys are not just about the scenery; they're also about the people you meet.

While my cleverly designed en suite cabin (I'm over 6ft tall, so I was glad to have a cabin, rather than a compact berth), with its fold-down bed might have been a comfy enough “home from home”, I spent as much time as possible in a Dome car or the Park car at the rear of the train.

Here, I admired the scenery and talked to fellow passengers, all of whom had a story to tell.

It was mostly a mid-life-to-mature crowd. Plenty were retirees – although there were also a few people in their thirties and forties.

I became friendly with one retiree from Virginia who told me she'd gone horse-riding with Elizabeth Taylor when she was younger. She'd taken *The Canadian* a few times, but said she enjoyed its cosiness in winter.

The dining car was another place to socialise and also where I enjoyed three-course lunches and dinners (meals are included with berth or cabin tickets).

A silver arrow through the snow

The Canadian sleeper train is a legendary journey – and one that is particularly memorable in winter, writes **York Membery**



The train travels 2,775 miles between Toronto and Vancouver twice a week

The magisterial landscape was almost Tolkienesque in its wintry beauty



Go in winter and the snow adds to the beauty of the Canadian scenery

Travel essentials

Getting there

The writer flew with Air Canada, aircanada.com. Via Rail offers twice-weekly all-inclusive trips between Vancouver and Toronto. Prices start from £550pp for a berth or £940pp for a cabin, from November to April, viarail.ca

Staying there

Doubles at Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge from £230. Doubles at the Fairmont Royal York from £190, fairmont.com

More information

travelalberta.com
destinationontario.com
destinationcanada.com

On reaching Toronto's Beaux Arts Union Station after the best part of three days, I checked into the adjoining Fairmont Royal York hotel. It is, fittingly, one of Canada's grand railway hotels – a series of landmark properties that were developed as the railway pushed west.

I stayed here for a couple of nights so I could go up the CN Tower, visit the thriving St Lawrence Market, which does the best peameal bacon sandwiches in town, and see a relative.

There's no point going to the world's second largest country and making a single stop.

The Canadian allows hours to take in those vast landscapes. Is it the winter rail trip of a lifetime? Undoubtedly. And, as a bonus, it offers unforgettable sunrises, too.

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