

Canadian dreaming

City and spice make everything nice—cowboys and cosmos go hand in hand in Alberta

When you're a party planner to the stars, your girlfriends think you know where to find the best of everything. It's a good thing that's true, because being put in charge of planning the ultimate girls' getaway required an itinerary nothing short of fabulous. Carrie Bradshaw et al may have had the Hamptons, but with our decidedly west coast palette, my gal pals insisted I could do much better than that. Adventure! Nightlife! Eye Candy! I took to my task with vigor and instructed the girls to pack both their jeans and their stilettos: they needed to be ready for anything, because we were heading to the new frontier that is Calgary. The irresistible combination of an edgy, young cosmopolitan city amidst an unspoiled mountain playground awaited. But did cosmos have a place in the Wild West? We were about to find out.

HANG ON FOR STEER LIFE

First things first—we were all in a twitter to discover the urban cowboy is no myth and part of the ambience in Cowtown. Set in the rolling foothills of Alberta against the majestic Canadian Rockies, Calgary is home to “the greatest outdoor show on earth,” otherwise known as the famous Calgary Stampede. It's a wild, wild world when the west throws a party and we were up for some rough ridin' tail flyin' hoot 'n' hollerin' good times with rodeo action fit for an adrenaline junkie. We rooted on the barrel racers, bull riders and the crowd-pleasing chuck wagoners. There was no shortage of Stampede parties and clubs after the festivities and while some of us donned our big hats and channelled our inner cowboy, a few of us decided to savor Alberta's world famous steak and flirt with the real deal.

FIREWATER FEVER

Changing gears, we luxuriated in our digs at the Hotel Arts, Calgary's premiere designer boutique hotel, often called Miami North, and the chic and frequent choice for Hollywood's finest when filming in town. After a dreamy sleep-in and

poolside brunch, it was time to break out the strappy heels and slip dresses and sneak downstairs for some playtime at Raw Bar. Sophisticated and edgy elegance oozed from the lounge that boasts award-winning mixologists who concoct fresh, exotic cocktails that are second to none and with combinations I have yet to see in LA. The staff admits to having an irrational amount of passion for the feel-good microcosm of spirits and hospitality, and as a result Raw Bar is THE hot spot for cool hipsters who provided us with funky visual appetizers to gear us up for a night on the town. After a round of the smoothest martinis we've ever had, the obliging Hotel Arts staff swept us away in their Escalade SUV and into the night, where we were mesmerized by the throbbing beats of one club after another.

EAT, SHOP AND BE CARRIE

When our feet recovered from all that dancing, it was time to turn our attention to, well, shoes of course. I promised the ladies the shopping would not disappoint. We hit the Stephen Avenue Walk for the luxe goods and the Kensington district to kick up the funk and to our delight, adding some serious assets to our closets cost less, as Alberta boasts no provincial sales tax! We continued our material girl tour downtown, where we were impressed with the unique concept of modern day artisan villages in the funky setting of historic reclaimed buildings. Both Art Central and Fashion Central are the muse of local artists and designers who work and sell their creations from these giant downtown lofts. The vibe is cool as these studios, boutiques and galleries are a cutting edge collection of art, jewellery and clothing that has garnered international attention. We even took part in a mimosa-aided jewellery-making session, where we were nurtured along as we crafted our own gemstone bracelets as souvenirs of our getaway together. Two full hands and an empty stomach later, we took on the Urban Safari tour, renowned for the best



Photo Credit: Travel Alberta

way to take a bite out of Calgary's culinary scene. Our enthusiastic host took us to not one, two but FIVE of the city's best restaurants in under three hours. After the Asian fusion, Cuban, French and Pacific Northwest fare, we could do no more but toast our shiraz and emit some heavy sighs.

ROAD TRIP!

We couldn't leave Alberta without hopping in our rental and taking in over 70 million years of history only over an hour away as our adventurous spirits led us to the Badlands. The moon-like landscape and the eerie hoo-doo formations made from wind and water were a sight to behold. Forget Hollywood, this is the real life Jurassic Park, home to the most spectacular displays of dinosaur skeletons in the world. The prehistoric gardens of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology were astounding, as were Drumheller's Dinosaur trail and the Dinosaur Provincial Park, a Unesco World Heritage Sight.

CITY HOPPING

History lesson—check! Back to some city spice—so we continued on to the city of Edmonton, just a few hours drive and known as Canada's festival city. Our timing couldn't have been better, having arrived in the middle of the Edmonton Fringe Festival, Canada's largest party when it comes to live theatre. We strolled along Whyte Ave and took in this vibrant metropolis with a bustling arts and culture scene. And not to be outdone by our Calgary shoe-fest, was the promise of one of the largest—yes—shopping centers in the world. West Edmonton Mall was the perfect place to end our gal pal getaway. We shopped, we dropped. We collapsed at the dizzying amount of dining choices, settled into a cozy booth and ordered cosmos all around. We toasted to the best friends a girl could have and a destination that planned its own party...with just a little help from me.



Planning this trip

Many airlines offer direct flights from LA to Calgary. See your travel agent for details.

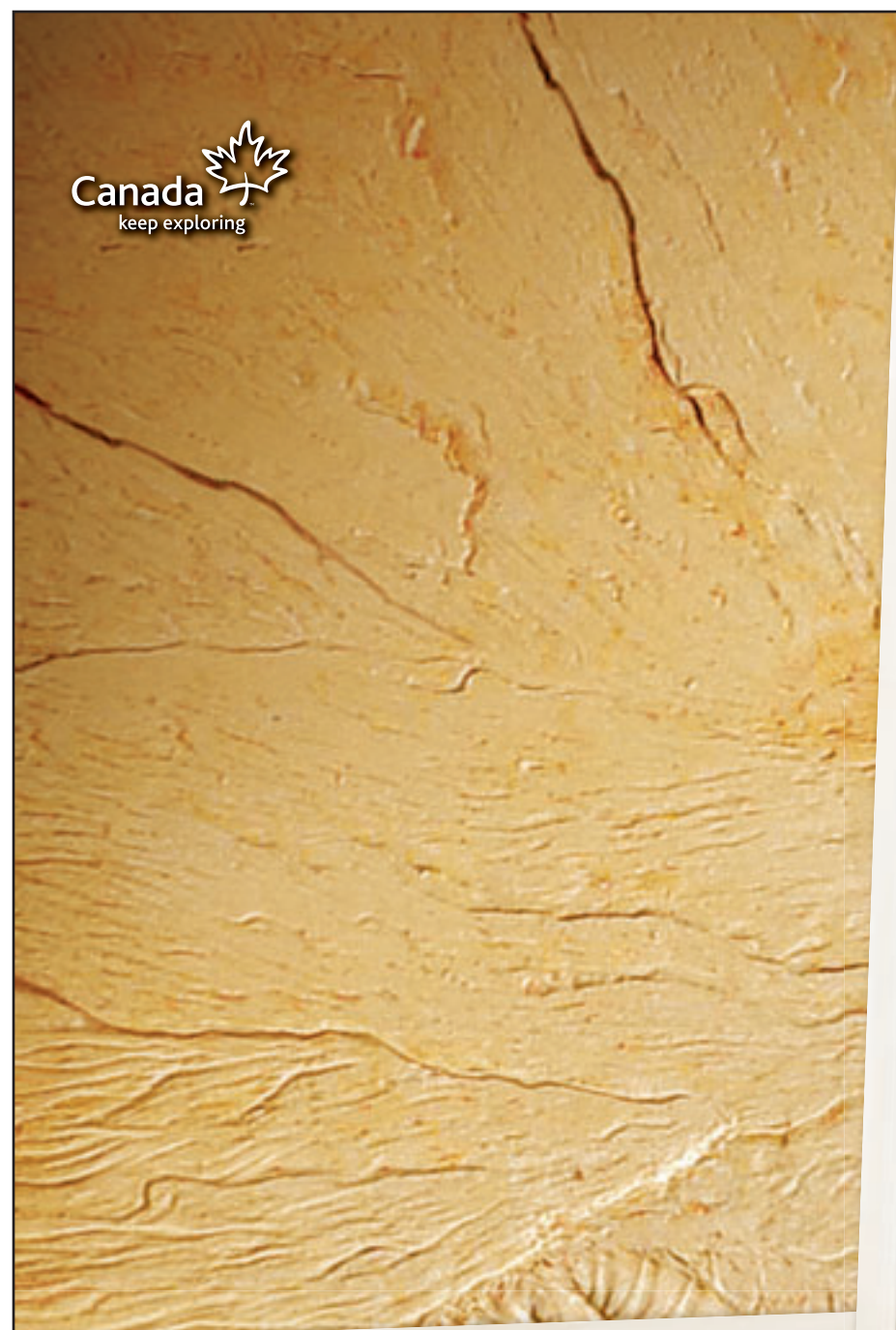
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We were glad the dinosaurs couldn't eyeball us back.

Once the kids heard that the museum allowed sleepovers we knew there was no getting out of it. We saw the skeleton of an ancient sea creature and what was left of its dinner. On the way back, we grabbed milkshakes and marveled at giant sandstone pillars called hoodoos at Dinosaur Provincial Park.



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