

Ride an

TRAVELLING OVERLAND FROM VANCOUVER GIVES YOU THE CHANCE TO SOAK UP SOME OF CANADA BEFORE JULY'S CALGARY STAMPEDE.

BY **MARK MULLER**

KATERI COWLEY leans gently forward in the saddle and eases her horse into the cold, gin-clear water of Alberta's Kananaskis River. "Just keep 'em pointed upstream and watch out for big rocks," she laughs over her shoulder. Rising up to her left like the spine of a fish are the jagged granite monoliths of the Canadian Rockies. Their slopes are covered in deep-green, regimented lines of fir trees; poplars and dappled birches line the riverbanks. The air is crisp and clean in the bright afternoon sunlight. There is a steady, wetly muffled clump and clop as the steel-shod horses push further across 30 metres of running water, soon soaking their bellies and Kateri's worn boots and faded jeans.

The Kananaskis flows through the Cowley's family ranch, the "Rafter Six", which has been open to paying guests wanting to experience something of ranch life in the Rockies since the late-1970s. Kateri's 22 years have been shaped and guided by these mountains and meadows and she is at home and at ease in the breathtaking environment. "This is where I want to be," she says simply. "I love horses, love the mountains, love my family and am blessed with the opportunity to share it all with so many different people."

Kateri's friendly openness is being utilised further afield this year – she is one of Calgary's two stampede princesses, who, along with the Stampede Queen, spend the year working as goodwill ambassadors for the world-renowned annual Calgary Stampede, held about 70 kilometres east of the Rafter Six from July 3. It is

billed as the greatest outdoor show on earth, not without good reason. Throughout a 10-day period more than 1.25 million people pass through the gates of Stampede Park to thrill to some of the best rodeo action the world has to offer. With more than \$3 million in prizemoney up for grabs, the talent pool is deep and hungry, and a handful of the competitors, and hundreds of spectators, are Australian. They punch above their weight, naturally.

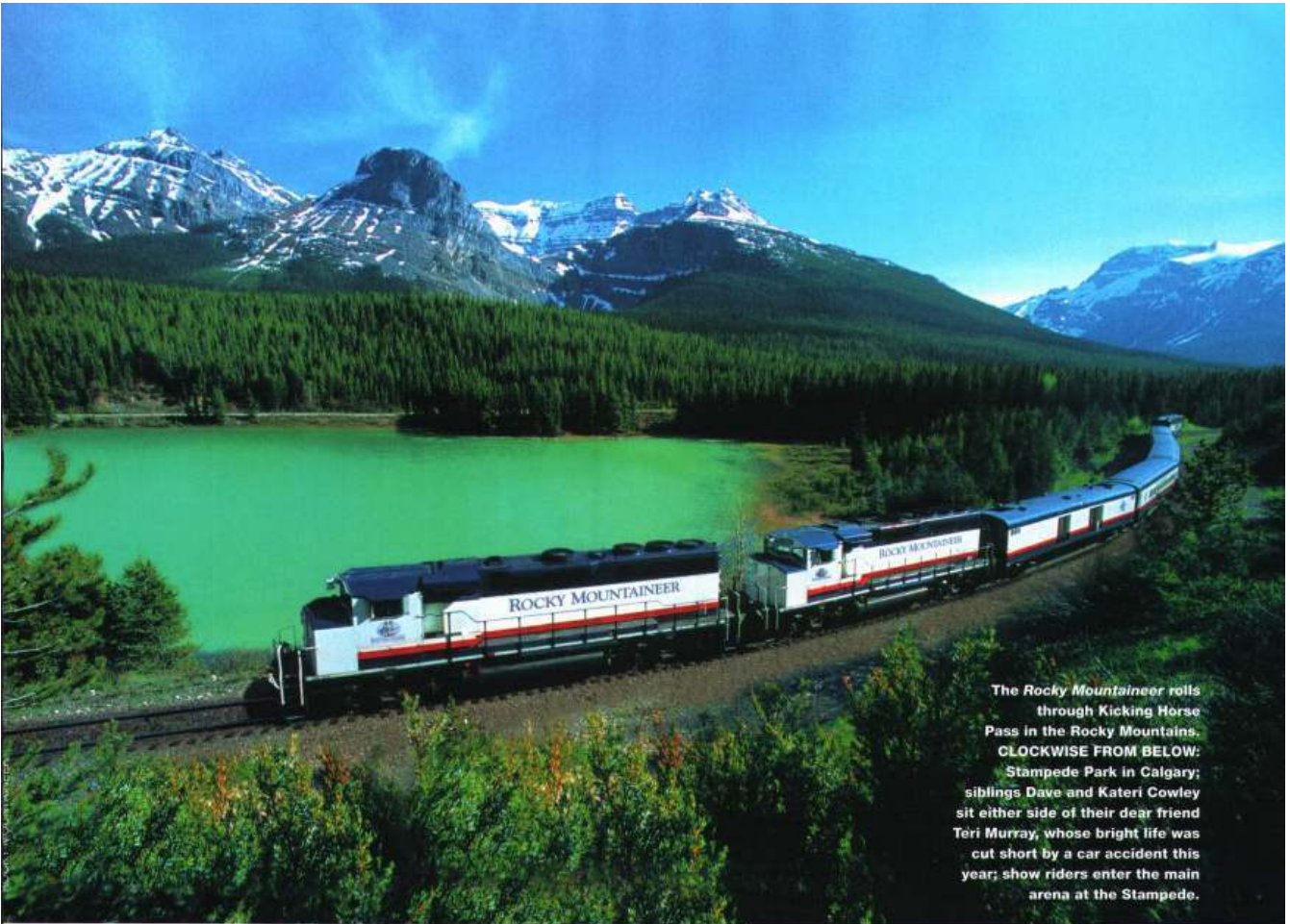
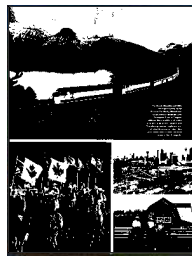
It is a fair haul to get to Canada from Australia, although thankfully Air Canada now flies directly from Sydney to Vancouver. This negates the tedium of passing through US Customs, and shortens the trip by several hours. But once in Vancouver, what's an Aussie intent on seeing the Stampede to do? You can, of course, jump on another plane and fly straight to Calgary, but, if you've got the time, there is the lure of one of the world's most spectacular train rides, aboard the *Rocky Mountaineer*.

This will take you all the way to Calgary, via the Columbia Mountains in British Columbia and across the Rockies into Alberta. It is a two-day journey, with an overnight stop in the mountain town of Kamloops (after all, why would you want to sleep through such awesome scenery?) The *Mountaineer's* Gold Leaf carriages have large, plush seats, big windows with glass curving overhead, and a comfortable, well-appointed dining car in which beautiful meals are served by friendly, knowledgeable staff. You know that the staff do this trip day in and day out. It is a credit to both the wonder of the subject matter and the calibre of the people that their patter, while well-rehearsed, never sounds trite or dull.

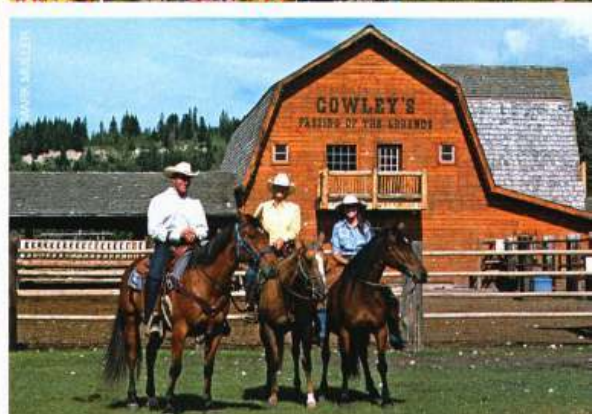
Despite all of the on-board comfort, travellers seem drawn time and again to the open viewing platforms at the end of the carriages. There you can hang over the side of the train like a dog on the back of a ute to feel and smell the rushing air, the rattle of the tracks and share more elementally in one spectacular view after another.

For Shepparton's Cheryl Hunter, who once managed the Australian junior showjumping team, and set up one of the first R.M.Williams franchises when she opened Hunter's Saddleworld in Shepparton, Vic, this trip is an integral part of her journey to the Stampede. "It's not the sort of thing that you're likely to do more than once in your life," she says, as the wind between the carriages fails to buffet the wide grin off her face. "There's a group of us who have come over for the Stampede and we just knew the best way for us to get there was on this train. It gives us the chance to soak up some of the landscape – to get a feel for the country before we get into the thick of it in Calgary."





The Rocky Mountaineer rolls through Kicking Horse Pass in the Rocky Mountains. **CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW:** Stampede Park in Calgary; siblings Dave and Kateri Cowley sit either side of their dear friend Teri Murray, whose bright life was cut short by a car accident this year; show riders enter the main arena at the Stampede.






Helicopter tours offer a chance to grasp the vast scale and majesty of the Rocky Mountains.

And this notion is the key – were you to drop in and out of Canada only having attended the Stampede, you’d be doing yourself something of a disservice. The chance is there to get a bit of a feel for the country, for Canadians, and for a landscape that cannot help but inform who they are.

To extend on this, travellers have the opportunity to get off the train in Banff. This mountain village – riddled with young Australians on working-holiday visas – is a legend among snow lovers and those pursuing summertime alpine adventures. To spend a couple of nights in Banff, and to get out into the Banff and Jasper national parks, is to feel yourself held in the roof of the world. Stay, if you can. Get a vehicle and drive north on the Icefields Parkway towards Jasper. All along this great road are the mountains, glacier-fed lakes and snow-capped peaks that become an indelible backdrop to a growing sense of space and freedom.

To truly get a feel for the scope and grandeur of these mountains, get in a chopper. On a turnoff on the Icefield Parkway, about half way between Banff and Jasper, Ralph Sliger operates Icefield Helicopter Tours out of a small stone and wood hut. From here you can fly out and over the mountains, drop in on isolated lakes and hike, heli-fish or even – if you’re so inclined – practice yoga on an incline. “It’s all part of sharing what we’ve got here,” Ralph grins through his salt-and-pepper beard. “I truly believe it’s one of the most beautiful places on earth, and to be able to call it my office, well, I’m a happy, lucky man.”

This is a sentiment repeated again and again on the journey from Vancouver to Calgary – aboard the *Mountaineer*, in Banff, over the icefields, on Rafter Six and culminating with the raw excitement of the Stampede itself. Happy people who regard themselves as very lucky indeed. After a trip like this, you’ll be one of them. 



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TRAVELLING IN CANADA

There is a wealth of information available online for those travelling to Canada. Alternatively, agents such as Trevor Crosby's AF Travel can arrange the whole thing for you.

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