



A golden reward

Larch madness in Golden, BC

WORDS SUZANNE MORPHET

“I feel like Alice in Wonderland,” laughs Laura as we come to a golden meadow where we’re surrounded by them.

Approaching Golden, BC on the Trans-Canada Highway, we’re straining our necks to scan the surrounding mountainsides through the car windows. It’s late September and the start of the short season known as “larch madness.” That’s when people in the know partake in the western equivalent of leaf peeping. While eastern Canadians admire sugar maples with their stunning orange and red leaves, those of us in the mountainous parts of the west can savour larch trees that turn golden yellow.

In Banff National Park, larches create so much excitement every autumn that traffic backs up on highways, parking lots overflow and people ditch their cars wherever they can.

To cope with the onslaught of visitors, Parks Canada provides buses to shuttle people from Lake Louise to Moraine Lake, the most popular spot for viewing the trees in their golden glory.

“Almost every day we’re moving about 1,200 to 1,300 people,” lamented a Parks Canada manager to CBC Radio one year recently.

I dearly wanted to see larches, but not in a line like ants on a trail. After a bit of research, I decided to base myself in the BC town of Golden, where surrounding mountains have lots of larches, but there’s none of the “madness” of Lake Louise.

Golden is still a blue-collar town, with Canadian Pacific Railway and lumber companies the biggest employers, but adventure tourism has deep roots here too. This is where mountaineering began in Canada when CPR brought guides from Switzerland in the late 19th century. Their collection



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of chalets, called Edelweiss, still stands and descendants of those early guides still live here.

Having spent a few days in Golden one summer, I liked its authentic feel, its impressive range of good dining options and, of course, its easy access to wilderness. No fewer than six national parks are within a two-hour drive.

The window for larch viewing begins as early as the third week of September and can run into the second week of October. Arrive too early and the larches will look like any other evergreen. Arrive too late, warns my colleague Andy, who’s lived in Golden for 12 years, and they’ll look like dead trees.

The window for larch perfection is even smaller.

“If you can get the light dusting of snow on the larches, that’s like the unicorn jumping over the rainbow,” jokes Andy over dinner our first night.

But it seems my friend, Lise, and I might have arrived altogether too early when Andy tells us the larches haven’t yet turned in nearby Yoho National Park, where we planned to hike.

Then he whips out his phone. “What about this instead?”

We see an image of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of what look like pine trees gilded in gold leaf covering a mountain slope under a cloudless blue sky.

“Stunning,” says Lise as we nod our heads “yes” in unison.

Early the next morning we pile into Andy’s Toyota 4Runner along with local hiking guide Laura Crombeen and head south on Highway 95 towards Radium Hot Springs.

Mist rises from the Columbia River wetlands, the largest intact wetlands in North America, but there’s no time to stop. We have a six-hour hike ahead of us.

At the Diana Lake trailhead we begin climbing. After an hour we emerge from an evergreen forest into the subalpine level. Far

above, we see gold dots sprinkled among patches of solid green.

Finally, we come to our first larch tree. Its needles are unexpectedly soft, almost silky. I caress them in my hand and wonder how these trees survive the tough winters on the very edge of the tree line.

Larches are a biological oddity.

“If I asked you if a larch is a conifer or a deciduous tree, you would be correct to say it’s both,” Laura tells us, explaining that larches shed their needles.

Hiking on, larches soon outnumber other trees. “I feel like Alice in Wonderland,” laughs Laura as we come to a golden meadow where we’re surrounded by them.

Reaching Diana Lake, we celebrate more good luck. Even though it’s warm and sunny, there’s not another person here; we have this gorgeous alpine lake all to ourselves. Eating a picnic lunch on the shoreline, we admire the golden reflection of larches on the turquoise water.

Later, I scoop up handfuls of golden needles that have already fallen and recall the legend of Gold Mountain, a mythical mountain of gold that encouraged Chinese people to immigrate to North America during the Gold Rush era.

While theirs was just that—a myth—it feels like we’ve truly found a mountain of gold, as fleeting as it is beautiful. ⑩

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see.

Coinciding with the turning of the larches is the migration of spawning Kokanee. More than one-quarter million land-locked salmon swim up the Columbia River every autumn and into tributary rivers to spawn. The best place to see them around Golden is on the Blaeberry River, where several spots offer great viewing. Also of note, when the Kokanee are spawning, the big bull trout follow them for an easy meal and anglers routinely catch (and release) trout weighing over eight kilograms.

do.

After hiking amid the larches of Diana Lake, try another trail with a different focus. In Yoho Valley of Yoho National Park, for instance, you’ll discover numerous spectacular waterfalls. The biggest, Takakkaw, is just a five-minute walk from the parking lot. Our day-long hike there also included Laughing Falls and the magnificent Twin Falls. The historic tea house at Twin Falls is being restored and will re-open this year.

eat.

Locals love Eleven22 with its focus on modern comfort food. I wouldn’t typically order seafood in a small town in the interior, but the Dragon Boat seafood platter was beautifully presented and tasty. For a more casual dining experience, slide onto a banquette at Whitetooth Mountain Bistro, where the wide-ranging menu includes braised boar belly and seared tuna burgers. For breakfast, Bluebird Café offers specialty coffee and fresh baking. While you’re there, pick up a bagged lunch to go.

sleep.

Cedar House Chalets are just seven minutes from the town of Golden but are immersed in nature. Each chalet has a private deck with hot tub and barbecue, a fully equipped kitchen and luxury amenities, including terrycloth robes and linen duvets. We chose the Green Chalet, which also has a wood-burning stove and second-storey master bedroom with striking mountain views. Cedar House Restaurant offers farm-to-table cuisine.

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