

Indigenous Experiences in **Banff**, Alberta

Two unique and unforgettable ways to learn more about Indigenous culture in Canada

By Melody Wren

Banff Gondola

Plant Medicine Walk

Under a clear blue sky, we drive to Cascade Ponds to meet Jordan Ede, an Indigenous guide from local tour company Mahikan Trails, to go on an Indigenous Medicine Walk. First, Jordan warns us of the rare possibility of seeing grizzly bears, specifically a local 1000-pound bear called "Split Lip," but he assures us he is well-equipped to deal with bears should any appear.

Jordan tells us that many people only see trees in the woods, but he sees a hardware store, pharmacy and grocery store, based on the properties of different plants. This knowledge has let his Nakoda people survive and thrive for generations in the wild. We walk through Bow Valley, originally an East-West trading route for the Nakoda and Cree, and as we set out, Jordan leaves a gift of tobacco for the spirits to repay them for the gift of knowledge we are taking from the land. Hunters also leave gifts as thanks for the bounty of food that the land provides them, and

to acknowledge that we will return to the earth.

Indigenous groups have inhabited the area in and around present-day Banff for more than 10,000 years. Bows made from Douglas Fir trees that grew along the river banks gave Bow River its name—water was "life" and of great importance. In 1885 the Canadian Pacific Railway brought other people to the area, at the same time Banff National Park was created, making it older than the province of Alberta.

As we walk, Jordan explains that Indigenous cultures hold all trees as sacred, each having a purpose that has long helped their society thrive, but especially tobacco, sage, cedar and sweetgrass. Wild rosehips are dried and ground and made into tea, new spruce needles and inner bark are both edible and sap is chewed for sore throats or put on wounds to prevent scarring. This memorable walk showed us how to live in the land not just on it.

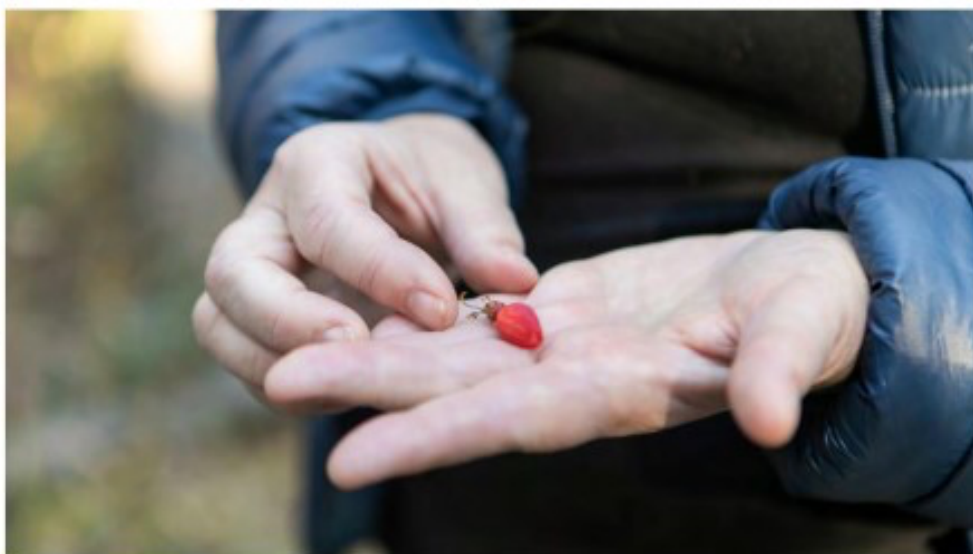
Nightrise at the Banff Gondola

This unforgettable gondola ride stems from a partnership between Montreal-based multimedia studio Moment Factory and the Stoney Nakoda Nation, and the immersive, interactive multimedia experience honours the sacred mountain. It starts out feeling like a combination of my two worst fears, heights and darkness, but within moments, the magic gently unfolds as we ascend 7,400 ear-popping feet. The gentle reassuring voice of a recorded Nakoda narrator reminds us to "Listen to the mountains. It is the end of another beautiful day. Wasn't it majestic? Around us was the day and it ended. Night is no longer upon us. It is time to slow down, let go and embrace all possibilities." These calming words added so much to the gondola ride that I didn't want it to end. Even though it was cloudy with obscured views, there were changing colored lights amid the darkness.

Once in the mountaintop observatory, there were interactive displays, my favourite of which was simple twinkling stars with the same narrator asking, "how many eyes have gazed into infinity?" There were stations with a variety of projected images and beating drums, bringing me to tears over and over again. "Listen to the ones who move things. Dance to the sculptures in the sky, how many suns have looked at the ancient faces? The night is rising and she's waiting for us."

On one of the floors a short movie plays featuring heart-thumping footage of majestic, sweeping scenes of Canada. A different narrator asks us to always treat the land with respect and reminds us, "Wherever life takes you, the valley will always be waiting for us."

The effects of the interactive multimedia experience were eerie, magical and surreal all at once. It was incredible and magical for all the senses, and one I repeated the next night thinking it couldn't be that magical again. But I was wrong.



Nightrise Banff Gondola



Cascade Ponds