

Canada's winter wonderland heaven

Following on from her story in yesterday's edition of **Saturday Travel**, **SUZANNE MORPHET** continues her RV trip

A storm is on the way. A big one. "We're likely going to get stranded," says my husband, looking at the weather radar map on his phone. A swirling blob of blue and pink moves from the Pacific Ocean across northern Washington State.

We're on a road trip in the Pacific Northwest, a region that gets monumental amounts of snow inland and in the mountains. The US National Weather Service is forecasting 20cm in the next 12 hours and winds as high as nearly 90km/h.

It's also issued a storm warning for Stevens Pass, where we're headed to ski in a couple days. "Travel could be very difficult over Stevens Pass," reads the online advisory.

"If you must travel, keep an extra flashlight, food, and water in your vehicle in case of an emergency."

The funny thing is, we're not worried. In fact, we're looking forward to snow — the more, the merrier — and we couldn't be better prepared.

We've got enough food and water to last a few days. And our vehicle — a recreational vehicle (RV) that we picked up in Vancouver, Canada, from a company called CanaDream — has a propane furnace, stove and microwave, hot running water, insulated wall and chains for the tyres in case we get stuck.

Where we are now — in the North Cascade mountains a couple of hours south of the Canada/US border — the sky is clear and we're about to enjoy some cross-country skiing.

Cradled by mountains, and with two rivers running through it, the exceptionally scenic Methow Valley was once in danger of becoming another Aspen or Jackson Hole, with rampant real estate development.

Fearful of that scenario, a few locals concocted a plan to connect a patchwork of cross-country ski trails. Somehow, they convinced 175 private property owners to allow the trails to cross their land. They also persuaded the State to purchase Big Valley Ranch, considered the crown jewel of the valley.

Today, a non-profit organisation operates the biggest network of Nordic trails in North America, with more than 200km of groomed



The RV at Leavenworth Pine Village KOA. Inset, a friendly deer at Pine Near RV Park.

trails. After working up a sweat on a flat section along the Methow River, we drive to Pine Near RV Park in Winthrop, which looks like a town out of a Hollywood western.

In 1970, with a new highway coming through, locals decided this was their chance to attract tourists, explains campground manager David Hodgins. "The sidewalks were all torn out and

replaced by boardwalks," he says, and businesses adopted a western theme.

It wasn't a stretch, as the oldest legal saloon in Washington State — Three Finger Jacks — is here, as well as a family-owned bank that's been in business for more than a century. "Safest bank in the country," Hodgins quips.

A few hours south of Winthrop, the town of Leavenworth also rebranded itself to entice visitors. Instead of a logging and sawmill town in decline, it's now a thriving Bavarian village from the Old World.

"Willkommen" say the road signs as we drive in. Buildings and trees sparkle with lights, restaurants serve German beer and brats, and shops sell everything from cuckoo clocks to candles.

When we wake up the next morning at Pine Village KOA Holiday campground, we're greeted with something even better than Bavaria — fresh snow! The winter storm we were warned about has delivered the last of its bounty and the highway to Stevens Pass Ski Resort has been ploughed and sanded.

When we arrive, the place is buzzing with skiers and boarders pumped for another "pow" day, the third in a row. "It was a madhouse up here on Saturday," one of the workers tell us. "The parking lot was full before we even started loading chairs."

With an average annual



snowfall of 12m, the resort is a local favourite, with many skiers driving from Seattle for the day.

We could overnight in the dedicated RV parking lot, which offers 30-amp electric hook-ups, but we return to Leavenworth to enjoy the quiet of our campground and the wonderful Nordic spa next door.

The next morning, my husband fills our propane tank while I look for the wild turkeys that I've heard about. I run into maintenance worker Michael Nelson, who tells me they often roost high up in the trees at night.

"One morning I was getting ready to walk the dogs and I kept hearing this slamming on the ground."



The office of Pine Near RV Park in Winthrop, Washington. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

in a luxury van



Raven Lodge at Mt Baker was built in the local Cascading style with logs and shakes. Below, on the highway to Glacier from Stevens Pass, Tall trees laden with freshly fallen snow make for a picturesque winter road trip.



“Thought it was big chunks of snow coming down. Looked out the window and it was turkeys landing,” he chuckles.

Alas, the turkeys are nowhere to be seen this morning, and soon we’re on the road again. Climbing up and over Stevens Pass, the mountainsides shimmer under a bright blue sky.

That night we camp at an RV park in Glacier, the closest one to Mt Baker, the last ski resort we’ll visit. In the morning, I’m peeling an orange when I look out the window.

Snow fell overnight, softening the landscape to a dreamy white. And now I see something else — a couple, kissing. Their embrace is fleeting, but seeing it in this winter wonderland feels fortuitous, like catching a shooting star.

And at Mt Baker, we do get lucky. On our first chairlift we meet local ski bum Angelo Zopolos, who happily shows us

around. “There’s probably two or three Olympians here today,” he tells us, pointing out the race chute for the upcoming 2025 Legendary Banked Slalom. “It’s the longest continuous running snowboard race in the world.”

With eight chair lifts and three day lodges, Mt Baker is bigger than it looks on paper. But the most impressive thing about it? It holds the world record for the most snowfall in a single season — 29m!

I would come back just for the Moroccan lentil soup at Raven Lodge, but reliable snow in an unreliable climate is also very appealing. So, too, is knowing that our RV is in the parking lot, warm and waiting for us.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of CanaDream, Kamppgrounds of America (KOA), State of Washington Tourism, Visit Bellingham and the ski resorts mentioned above. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.

fact file

- CanaDream has seven pick-up and drop-off locations across Canada. It's the only RV provider in Canada offering certified winter-ready RVs. The CanaDream Club app provides options and preferred rates for more than 1000 campgrounds, activities, tours and attractions.
- CanaDream.com
- KOA has more than 500 locations across the US and Canada with sites and amenities for every type of camping experience.
- KOA.com
- For Mt Baker, avoid weekends. 'Wicket Good Wednesdays' are quiet and affordable at US\$73 per adult per day. mtbaker.us



Tours with In & Beyond Bath showcase the lore and landscapes of the West Country. Pic: In & Beyond Bath

Delving into the West Country's unseen gems

STEVE MCKENNA savours slices of Somerset on a tantalising tour

We want to connect people with what they know and what they don't, the must-sees and the unseens, if you will.”

As he drives us through the rolling landscapes of England's West Country, Jules Mittra is explaining the philosophy of In & Beyond Bath, a company he founded to offer intimate, immersive tours of this delightfully photogenic region.

Like many involved in the tourism industry, this fledgling company was struck hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the shoots of recovery are as green as the fields rolling on the outskirts of Bath, where tours are offered on both a shared group and private basis, with year-round and seasonal options allowing guests to discover “authentic England like a local”.

Crafted by Jules and his team, itineraries showcase those “must-sees” — the likes of Stonehenge and the Cotswolds — along with a string of “unseens”. These are sights and places you'll probably have no clue about beforehand but will remember almost as much as, or maybe even more than, the globally renowned spots.

Take the old pub in the middle of nowhere — OK, somewhere in the Mendip Hills — where Jules, his colleague Sarah Moon and I pull over for a drink. An open fire flickers in the pub's stone-walled back room, where I sup a potent half-pint of Somerset's “scrumpy” cider next to a handful of locals mingling and chatting about the local football, flooding, rugby, festivals and more.

The vibe is easygoing and friendly and, if it wasn't for the wi-fi, you could imagine you'd been transported back a few decades.

While his other guides have their own methods and life experiences to draw on, Jules mines his previous career as a teacher (he specialised in history and politics) and also as a globetrotting traveller — he has ventured through Latin America and Africa, where he worked in schools.

Keen, genuine and enthusiastic, he brings the local history and heritage to life with narrative flair.

What helps keep his tours fresh and interesting, he says, is the diversity of his clientele. Sometimes it's a couple from the US blown away by the West Country's rustic scenery. Other times it has been multi-generational families from Australia.

Each tour is adapted to a degree to whoever's on it. “People's interests differ and it's up to us, as guides, to gauge that,” says Jules, who in December saw In & Beyond Bath win the international tourism award category at the Bristol Bath and Somerset Tourism Awards.

The company was lauded for providing “exceptional services to international visitors, promoting the region as a world-class destination through its carefully

crafted tours that go beyond the expected”.

Later, after a rabbit dashes across the road we're driving along, we reach another ancient pub, The George Inn in Norton St Philip, a village between Bath and Frome.

The inn dates from the 14th century, but has been revived as of Somerset's most special country retreats.

As well as nifty bedrooms, it has an acclaimed restaurant serving dishes with seasonal regional ingredients, and international wines and ales from its owner, a Bristol-born brewing company. There's a crackling fire in here too, as well as creaking floorboards, and barrels hanging from a ceiling propped up with wooden beams.

The toilets are accessible across the courtyard, where you'll also see a door with a sign saying “Dungeon”.

In between courses — chalk stream trout bathed in Cotswolds Distillery gin, venison haunch with some deliciously herbed vegetables — I listen as Jules relays tales of this pub and the local area. “I don't just want to take people out for dinner. I want to show the breadth of our region and give it context and meaning, because that's what makes it magical,” he says.

There's talk of marauding monks, devilish dukes, pitchfork rebellions, grisly executions, even secret Cold War bunkers.

It's fascinating stuff, and though I'm more than full after my meal, it leaves me hungry for more culinary adventures, sightseeing and exploring.

Dropped back in Bath after a lovely evening, I bid farewell to Sarah and Jules and, over peppermint tea in my hotel room, I flick through the brochure they gave me, promoting their tours.

I'm soon daydreaming about time-frozen medieval villages, tiny cathedral cities, stately homes and gardens, the castles of the Wye Valley, and a whole lot more.

It might not be long before my next trip back to this alluring pocket of Britain.



The George Inn offers the food and drink of England's West Country. Picture: Steve McKenna