

A first timer's guide to Canada's national parks

There's something for everyone, from adventurous hikers to *Anne of Green Gables* fans.



By Shayla Martin Jan 28, 2025 • 5 minutes read



Lake Moraine in Banff National Park.

Image: Viktorus/Getty Images

I fantasize on a weekly basis about moving to Canada for a plethora of reasons, but at the top of the list is regular access to the country's rugged wilderness. There's something about the snow-dusted lodgepole pines, fiery yellow larch trees, and sparkling glacier-fed lakes that soothes my city-dwelling soul. For now, I've settled for being a frequent visitor, spending the majority of my travel time in Canada's glorious national parks for a fresh-air fix.

With 37 national parks and 11 national park reserves to choose from (the latter being an area managed like a national park but subject to one or more Indigenous land claims), it can be difficult to know where to start. Here are five Canadian national parks perfect for first timers.

Don't forget: All of Canada's national parks require a pass for entry. The unlimited admission [Parks Canada Discovery Pass](#) is the best way to see as many as you'd like within a 12-month period.

Banff National Park

Alberta



Banff National Park in early spring.

Image: Oleh_Slobodeniuk/Getty Images

Canada's first national park is an all-season stunner. Snow-capped Canadian Rockies? Check. Vibrant glacial lakes? Check. Casual moose and black bear sightings? Check (but give them their space). There are over 1,000 miles of hiking and horseback riding trails and more than 1,000 glaciers and dozens of lakes too cold to swim in. To see all [Banff](#) has to offer, bunk down at the [Fairmont Banff Springs](#) where you can join a hotel guide for a forest bathing session or book a hot stone massage at the spa.

Getting here:

You can grab an [Alpine Air Adventures](#) shuttle from Calgary International Airport, but to maximize your time, we suggest renting a car (the drive is an easy 90 minutes on the TransCanada Highway). In the park, [Roam Public Transit](#) can take you to the popular spots like [Lake Louise](#) and the [Banff Gondola](#).

Can't miss:

- Yes, you may have to elbow fellow tourists, but the majesty of [Lake Louise](#) has to be seen to be believed. Splurge on a cute red canoe from the [boathouse](#) to get crowd-free photos.
- Even in the depths of winter (or perhaps, especially) a dip in the [Banff Upper Hot Springs](#) is a good idea. Open since 1886, the pools overlook Mount Rundle and Cascade Mountain.
- For a stomach-dropping adventure, climb cliffside ladders and cross suspension bridges the [Via Ferrata assisted climb on Mount Norquay](#).

Tip: If you rented a car, hop on the 144-mile [Icefields Parkway](#). Known as one of the most scenic drives in the world, there are plenty of spots to pull over for a quick hike or to dip your toes in places like [Bow](#) and [Peyto Lakes](#). Bonus: the drive ends in [Jasper National Park](#).

[Gros Morne National Park](#)

Newfoundland



The Tablelands in Gros Morne National Park.

Image: Patrick Donovan/Getty Images

You don't have to fly to Scandinavia to see fjords. In [Newfoundland](#), you can see magnificent glacier-carved, landlocked fjords up close from the freshwaters of [Western Pond Brook](#). Afterward, trade your views of lush blues and greens for the otherworldly orange landscape of the [Tablelands](#), an exposed portion of the earth's mantle.

Getting here:

[Deer Lake Regional Airport](#) is a 30-minute drive from the park and is served by direct daily flights from Montreal (May–October), Toronto, Halifax, and St. John's. If you decide to drive from the Canadian mainland, hop on the ferry between North Sydney, Nova Scotia, and Port aux Basques, Newfoundland. From Port aux Basques, the park is a four-hour drive.

Can't miss:

- The 2.5-mile [Tablelands Trail](#) is an accessible roadbed-turned-trail that follows the base of Gros Morne Mountain. It's a fun and gentle stroll, especially if you're traveling with little ones.
- If you decide to camp overnight, look up. The park is applying for designation as a [Dark Sky Preserve](#), as its super-dark skies make for epic stargazing.

- Come summer, the [Gros Morne Theater Festival](#) is one of the best places to catch live, community theater performances in all of Canada. Produced by [Theatre Newfoundland Labrador](#), the original plays are all created by Newfoundland-based writers.

[Kootenay National Park](#)

British Columbia



Ram sighting in Kootenay National Park.

Image: Melissa Kopka/Getty Images

As far as Canada's national parks go, this UNESCO World Heritage site may have all others beat when it comes to landscape diversity. [Kootenay](#) has everything from snow-capped mountains, forests, valleys, waterfalls, canyons, grasslands, hot springs, and glaciers.

Getting here:

Highway 93 south cuts right through the park and can be accessed from Banff National Park to the east and the towns of [Golden](#) and [Cranbrook](#) to the north and south. Calgary and Vancouver are the closest major airports.

Can't miss:

- Go fossil hunting on a multi-hour guided hike of the [Burgess Shale](#), a 508-million-year-old fossil bed. The tour kicks off from [three different locations](#), but the starting point at [Stanley Glacier](#) is the least difficult.
- Speaking of Stanley, don't miss the 7-mile [Stanley Glacier hiking trail](#), which cuts through wildflower fields, alpine meadows, and several glacier-fed waterfalls before culminating in a great view of the massive glacier itself.

- Kootenay National Park is within the traditional lands of the Ktunaxa and Secwépemc Indigenous peoples. Just outside the park at the [Radium Hot Springs Visitor Centre](#) is an impressive, must-see exhibit about Ktunaxa Nation, including their creation story.

Tip: There is no cell coverage in the park, but there's an emergency phone at Kootenay Crossing.

[Prince Edward Island National Park](#)

Prince Edward Island



This boardwalk is part of the Greenwich Dunes Trail leading to the beach in Prince Edwards Islands National Park.

Image: Brytta/Getty Images

Large swaths of jagged coastline meet rust-colored cliffs and gently swaying grasslands in [this national park](#), where the coming-of-age story *Anne of Green Gables* takes place. Flat and paved trails throughout the park make for easy biking and hiking, while several beaches are picturesque and accessible—offering beach wheelchairs, ramps, and mobility mats.

Getting here:

The island is easy to reach by car, air, or water. From New Brunswick, head across the [Confederation Bridge](#), then it's a 50-minute drive to the park. From Nova Scotia, take a 75-minute ferry ride into Wood Islands, and the park is an hour's drive. Or, fly into the Charlottetown airport to get on the island, then the park is a 30-minute taxi ride away.

Can't miss:

- Fans of *Anne of Green Gables* can [tour](#) the original [Green Gables home](#), which served as the inspo for the novel's setting. It has been restored to match the descriptions in the book.

- Head to [Brackley](#) or [Cavendish](#) beach for the picture-perfect red cliffs and beach grass the region is known for. [Outside Expeditions](#) offers seasonal kayaking expeditions on the relatively calm Gulf of St. Lawrence.
- Grab a family photo by the darling [Covehead Lighthouse](#), a heritage lighthouse and one of the smallest on the island.

[Cape Breton Highlands National Park](#)

Nova Scotia



Scenic view from the path in Cape Breton Highlands National Park in Nova Scotia.

Image: Francois G/Tripadvisor

The sea is the star at this national park, located on a [Nova Scotian](#) plateau. With the Atlantic to the east, the Cabot Strait to the north, the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the west, you have an excellent chance to see marine wildlife like dolphins, pilot and humpback whales, and grey seals during the summer months.

Getting here:

The closest airport is in [Sydney, Nova Scotia](#), which offers direct flights from Toronto and Montreal and is about a two-hour drive from the park. (If you fly into the larger [Halifax](#) airport, it's a four-hour drive.) Route 19 will lead you to the [Chéticamp](#) entrance of the park, while the world-famous [Cabot Trail](#) leads drivers to the [Ingonish](#) entrance.

Can't miss:

- A drive along the scenic [Cabot Trail](#), an 185-mile loop that passes through quaint fishing villages to the northernmost portion of the park, is a must. Time your visit for the fall to catch gorgeous foliage.
- Nova Scotia is considered the lobster capital of Canada. Stop by [Main Street Restaurant](#) in Ingonish for lobster tacos or [Sea Gull](#) restaurant for a lobster BLT.

- There are no less than 26 Cape Breton hiking trails to choose from, and the majority offer sweeping coastal views. Try the kid-friendly, 1.1-mile [Buttereau Trail loop](#) overlooking the Chéticamp River, or the more difficult 5.9-mile [Salmon Pools Trail](#) past deep pools full of Atlantic salmon.

Tip: The park offers a wide variety of summer programming to help visitors understand the lands around them. Try the evening [Bat Walk](#) to spot the nocturnal mammals, or the [Lantern Walk Through Time](#) where costumed guides share the stories of the area's early Indigenous peoples, and Irish, Scottish and French settlers.