

B.C. GETAWAYS

AS GOOD AS GOLDEN

Explore the natural beauty of the Rockies without the crowds, writes *Jane Mundy*.

Cradled in the Canadian Rockies, Golden is often bypassed for Banff, but it, too, offers access to six national parks, has great dining and a variety of activities — without the crowds.

Those who do visit often come for the adrenalin-packed adventures such as whitewater rafting the Kicking Horse River, but these three days were all about kicking back and relaxing.

We booked a “home away from home” with Lush Mountain Accommodations, which offers several homes near downtown Golden, including Stags’ Hollow Chalet, set on five acres with mountain views, a private pond and not one neighbour in site.

The only problem was getting an early night. We had shuffleboard and a pool table in the expansive living room, a fully-equipped kitchen and barbecue, hot tub and outside fire pit all to ourselves. (If you’re arriving late or prefer to have dinner and fall into bed, make arrangements with Lush to have your fridge stocked — the lasagna and salad is decent.)

DAY 1

We started the day at the Bluebird Café — go for the breakfast burrito with handmade tortillas and massive bowls of berry-yogurt parfait — then grabbed pre-ordered brown bag lunches and headed to the Columbia Wetlands Adventure Outpost (kayak

and canoe rentals) to meet ecologist Maggie Romuld.

The Columbia River is ideal for leisurely paddling. And birding. It meanders through the Columbia Wetlands, one of the longest protected wetlands in North America (more than 180 kilometres), which is home to about 250 species of birds and other wildlife.

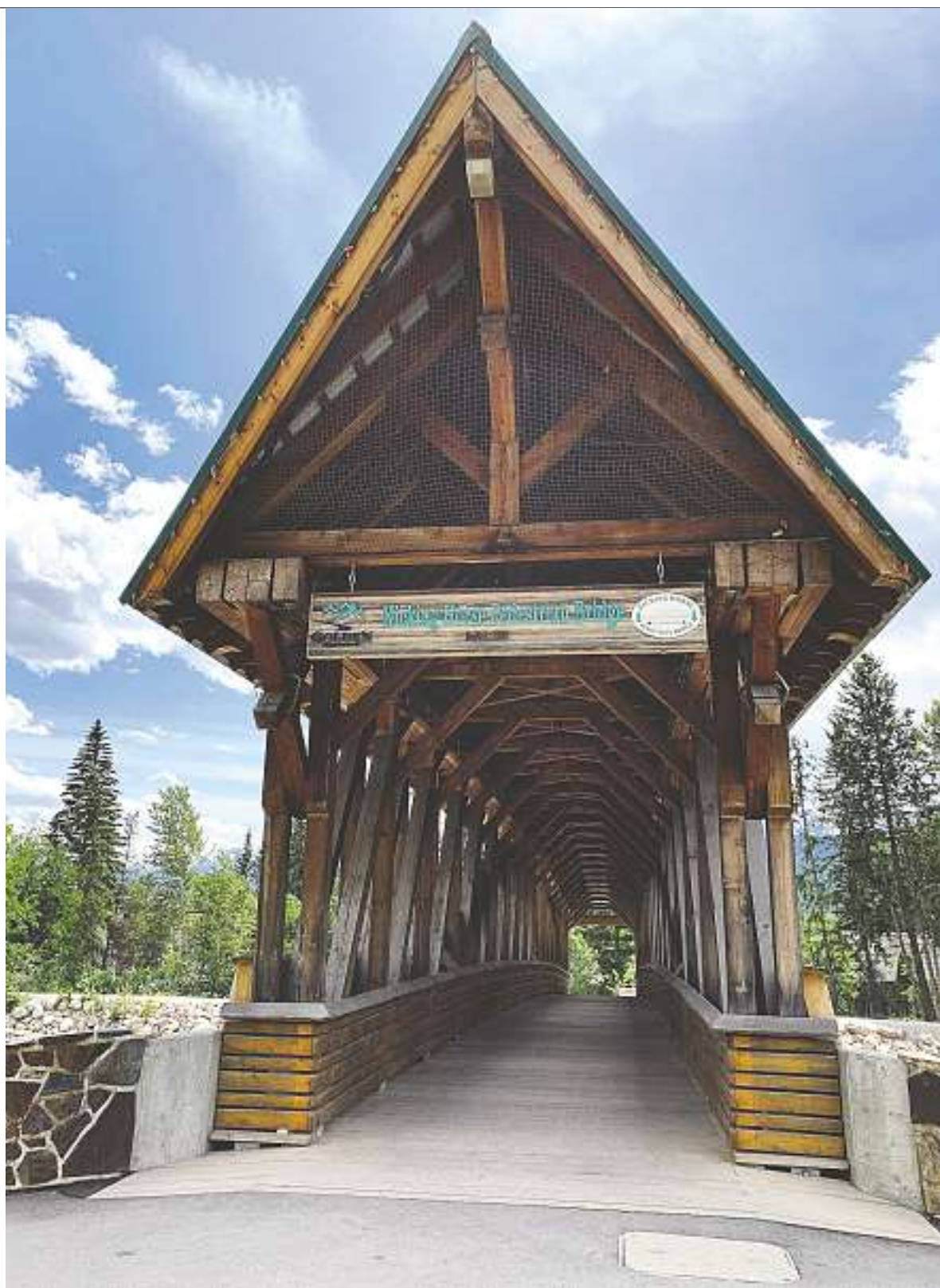
After a short woodland stroll, we crossed a suspension bridge to the dock, and a trail flanked by 15-metre-high Aspens led to a meadow of equisetum (horsetail) and a hidden oasis where birds rest and nest.

Romuld said it’s a major flyway, just as we saw two trumpeter swans glide by. A boardwalk led us to Adirondack chairs positioned to take full advantage of the view — a beaver dam to our left, a solitary heron to our right and the Purcell Mountains as backdrop. Even though the highway and railway are nearby, we only heard gentle lapping water and birdsong.

The Wetlands — about 20 km south of Golden — is recognized as one of the most undisturbed river sections in North America.

“Some birds are successful here but not so much ducks and ground nesters, as the water can rise a few feet,” Romuld said. “You’ll see more heron rookeries in both evergreens and cottonwood trees, eagles and osprey.

“The first time my husband and



Kicking Horse Pedestrian Bridge is the longest free-standing timber-frame bridge in Canada. *JANE MUNDY*

I kayaked here we were hooked on the Wetlands,” added Romuld. “An elk crashed out of the bush, crossed the channel in front of us and climbed back into the bushes. Most evenings we see beavers crossing the stream and sometimes river otters and muskrats.”

Down the road is the Organic Sports Ranch where for \$10 each,

you can play a game of 55-hole disc golf, beach volleyball, outdoor Ping-Pong and visit barnyard animals.

Infinity Solstice is owner, course manager and guide. As his name suggests, he’s a self-proclaimed hippie, but he also built on this 60-acre property a clay tennis court. It’s one of a few clay

courts in Western Canada and Infinity is a ranked senior player. Bring a picnic and bathing suit — at the bottom of the property you can take a dip in the river.

Back in town, we rubbed shoulders with the locals at White-tooth Brewing Company. The place was hopping (pun intended) at 4 p.m.

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Kick back and spend a gorgeous afternoon with just a few beavers at Columbia Wetlands near Golden, with a backdrop of magnificent mountain views. *JANE MUNDY*

The tasting room only seats 44 so arrive early. The duck shepherd's pie is one of Eleven22 restaurant's calling cards — a local favourite and now mine.

Another great dining spot is the Whitetooth Mountain Bistro, with a rooftop patio alongside the Kicking Horse River. Like Eleven22, the menu offers fresh and local ingredients and a good selection of Pacific Northwest wines.

DAY 2

Matt Nichol with Canadian Wild Tours picked us up at 5 a.m. (better chance of seeing wildlife) to tour the backcountry of Golden. Nichol guaranteed we would see a bear and true to his word, we did catch the tail end of a grizzly running down the logging road. Even if you don't spot a bear, Nichol's wildlife tales are reason alone to spend four hours in his van.

We slowed down to chat with a marmot ambling down the road. If you miss a bear or wolf sighting, Kicking Horse Mountain has Boo, its resident grizzly bear. Boo's custom-built, 20-acre refuge is the largest enclosed grizzly habitat in the world. And you can walk with the wolves (by appointment) at the Northern Lights Wolf Centre, which has promoted wolf conservation for years.

There are many hiking trails in the backcountry that don't see much traffic so Nichol advises everyone to take bear spray. It isn't needed for closer hikes (meaning off the highway) and one of the best hikes is six kilometres from the OB campground to Thompson Falls, which is easy to find on Golden's hiking map. These milky waters (turning brilliant blue by late summer with pure glacial meltwater) are so mighty that sitting on a rock with the falls way below, I felt cool spray on my face.

This writer was a guest with Tourism Golden, which neither read nor approved the article before publication. For more information and hiking maps, visit tourismgolden.com and HelloBC.com.



Waterfalls, wildlife and outdoor adventures abound.



Pristine lakes surround Golden, which offers access to six national parks.



Organic Sports Ranch features a 55-hole disc golf course. *JANE MUNDY*

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A boardwalk runs through the Columbia Wetlands, one of the most undisturbed river sections in North America.

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