

The Greatest Show on EARTH

Jane Robinson finds her inner cowgirl at Canada's Calgary Stampede

It's called "The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth", a proud boast for this friendly and down-to-earth country. However, as I was to find out, the Calgary Stampede really does live up to the billing. For ten days each July the city of Calgary in western Canada comes alive in a high octane, gladiatorial spectacle combined with a wonderful atmosphere of good-natured and easygoing camaraderie. Bankers, oil industry and office workers exchange their suits for jeans, their shoes for boots and don their stetsons to join the cowboys and farmers in the party atmosphere.

Since its inauguration in 1912, the Calgary Stampede has become the richest rodeo in North America, attracting the best cowboys from all over the continent. Each day the main arena hosts two thrilling events, the chuckwagon races and the rodeo. Each event has to be seen to be believed and after watching my first chuckwagon race I was left mesmerised by the speed, agility and skill of the competing teams. Hooves thunder, the crowd roars, mud flies, whips crack, around the first barrel they race and then it's a headlong dash round the circuit. Stakes are high and prizes are glorious which makes for thrilling and competitive racing.

Each evening, after the exhilaration of the racing, the audience is treated to a truly world-class stage show with performances by dancers, singers, stunt riders, comedians and an exceptionally talented youth chorus and dance group. The grand finale is a spectacular and uplifting fireworks display – possibly the best I have ever seen.

Of course, the nightlife continues after the fireworks, both in the Stampede Village at venues such as Nashville North and the Saddledome (both great for country music) and in the city centre. The Stampede Village is within walking distance of downtown Calgary, where you will find such perennial cowboy favourites as Ranchman's and Cowboys. These are the bars where the cowboys gather for a few beers after a gruelling day in the arena whilst being served by particularly charming and inevitably very attractive, cowgirls.



Chuckwagon racing



Calgary skyline

There is always so much to do here during Stampede that a stay of three or four nights is highly recommended. The city offers free pancake breakfasts each morning, served with lashings of maple syrup and cups of steaming hot coffee. The Stampede hosts a world-renowned livestock show including competitions for blacksmiths, cattle penning, working dogs and heavy horses. In addition to this there is the Indian Village and a large fairground so there's plenty for everyone including those less interested in the agricultural events.



Bull rider



For me the most thrilling event of the Stampede is the rodeo. Nobody can fail to be awed by the skill, speed, stamina and sheer guts of the young cowboys who compete in the bull-riding, bareback riding, saddle bronc, steer wrestling and tie-down roping. The crowd winces as, with a lurch from a bucking bull, a rider gets thrown to the ground, whilst enthusiastic cheers fill the stadium for a particularly good performance. The speed with which a rider hurls himself out of his saddle to wrestle a young steer to the ground and tie its legs has to be seen to be believed.

The rodeo draws to a close each evening with a stirring and heart-felt rendition of Canada's National Anthem – Oh Canada! – a fitting close to an event in which participants and spectators demonstrate their pride in this young, courageous and dignified nation. I felt privileged to have been a participant in the wonderfully friendly spirit of Stampede and eager to return again next year.

Jane Robinson
Canada Specialist

FACT FILE

A seven-night trip to the Calgary Stampede and Banff including return flights costs from £1,725 per person. This includes four nights in Calgary with Stampede tickets and three nights in Banff. We do have a limited allocation of tickets for the best grandstand seats for the 2008 Stampede, which takes place between 4th and 13th July. Please call Jane Robinson on 01993 838 707 for further details.



WIN A PAIR OF COWBOY BOOTS

Win a pair of beautiful hand-made leather cowboy boots, crafted to fit your feet 'like a glove'. The Alberta Boot Company is a family-run business based in Calgary who specialise in making boots for cowboys and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

To enter our competition, please send a limerick or poem about cowboy boots to us at Audley marked 'Boots Competition'. The closing date for entries is Friday 15th February.

