



Calgary makes for

# THE PERFECT VACATION DESTINATION FOR TEXANS

By Nath Pizzolatto

Alberta, in some ways, is considered the Texas of Canada. It's not hard to see why: Both the American state and the Canadian province have several major cities, surrounded by wide expanses of nature; both thrive on the oil business and are steeped in the cowboy culture. The similarities between them make for an easy transition for the vacationer, with assurances of some familiar sights and sounds, while the differences provide the pleasures that make a vacation a respite from the ordinary.

Direct flights from Houston to Calgary are frequent and cheap. In addition, the exchange rate between the U.S. and Canada is very favorable right now for Americans; combine those factors, include the lack of a provincial sales tax in Alberta, and Calgary is a destination that can make your vacation dollar go a long way.

Fans of the Houston Rodeo and Livestock Show will be pleased to know that Calgary has its own equivalent, the Calgary Stampede, each July. July might be the best time for a Texan to visit Calgary, with its sunny weather warming up to ideal temperatures.

That said, I spent several days in Calgary recently, and it's a nice place to be in May, as well.

**Downtown and Nightlife**

I stayed at the Hotel Arts, a modern, elegant hotel located in the heart of downtown. The central location made it an ideal place from which to explore the city, and many of the restaurants and bars I visited were within walking distance.

Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the hotel itself: The rooms are very well-appointed in terms of decor, comfort, furniture, and appliances. (My favorite touch: The TV built into the bathroom mirror.) I must also praise the terrific breakfast menu at the Yellow Door, one of the in-house restaurants. In addition, Hotel Arts has a lineup of cruiser bikes they make available to their guests. It's more than just a pleasant touch, as Calgary's commitment to bike

lanes and paths makes them a viable method of transportation. I was able to tour part of the city on one, which I'll cover later.

Most of all, though, Hotel Arts stands out for the level of service. The staff members regularly recognized me and asked about my previous outings in the city, and were always available to lend a hand.

I took some time to explore downtown on foot when I could, quite the convenience from Hotel Arts' location. For Wednesday's happy hour, I dropped by National on 8th. They have plenty of beers on tap and a nice selection of spirits and cocktails, but my primary interest was the rooftop patio: I wanted to see the view of downtown Calgary. It did not disappoint; the buildings by and large aren't as tall as they are in Houston, so it's much easier to see not only the distant view, but to appreciate the variety of architecture that makes up downtown. The cocktail scene is thriving downtown as well, and the live music scene is very active, particularly in the Inglewood area.

**Food and Drink**

One of my favorite trends in dining (and in beverage-making) recently has been an increased emphasis on local sourcing and in-house preparation. I was able to eat at several places in downtown Calgary that focused on this aspect of the dining experience.

My first night in, I ate a meal at CHARCUT roast house, run by chefs John Jackson and Connie DeSousa. DeSousa was a finalist on Top Chef Canada season 1 and returned to guest judge the season 3 finale, and the restaurant lives up to the reputation that would suggest.

As you might expect from the name, CHARCUT primarily focuses on meats. Jackson and DeSousa sources their ingredients locally and prepares all their meats in-house. That includes smoking meats in their own smoker, chicken brined for 48 hours in-house and their own hand-made mortadella that's aged for ten hours inside a pig's head.

The mortadella was superb, without reservation the best I've had, delicate and flavorful. Of course this was only the beginning; other highlights include the burger, made from house-ground pork sausage, and topped with a fried egg; the chicken, brined to be unbelievably tender, and the rest of the charcuterie plate beyond the mortadella, which included back bacon, aged cheddar, and sticks of lonzino, cured and dried to resemble jerky. Dessert was impressive as well; my favorite was the cookie butter bar, made from graham crackers and shortbread, topped with a chocolate ganache.

My final dinner of the visit took place at a relatively young restaurant downtown, PARC Café and brasserie. General Manager Guillaume Frelot met me for a chat and introduced me to the bartender, Matt Laroqyue. Matt served me well and provided good company; he recommended most of my dishes, and mixed up some cocktails in the medicinal, bitter fashion I like and requested. (His "Meat Hook", a variation on the Red Hook made with rum instead of whiskey, was a particular favorite of mine.)

For my meal, I started with the champignons, followed by escargot in a pastry, topped with some light greens and encircled by pesto sauce. The Mercredi special was a Marseilles bouillabaisse; being the son of the Gulf Coast that I am, I couldn't pass up an opportunity for a seafood stew, and it was delightful.



If you like beer, Calgary has multiple craft breweries in the city (with more elsewhere in Alberta). Of course, many major cities these days have a thriving craft beer scene, but one major advantage Calgary has over other cities is Alberta barley. Alberta is a very hospitable climate to barley, and not only does it produce major amounts of the grain, it's one of the most sought-after grains in the world by brewers and distillers.

I was able to tour several breweries, including the veteran of the Calgary craft brewing scene, Wild Rose brewery, operational since 1996. We were led on

a tour by brewer Mark Kerrigan, with a sampling of their beers. The Wrasp Berry Ale, exactly what it sounds like, was a treat, light and tasty with the right hints of raspberry. The Barracks Brown, one of its oldest beers, is tasty and well-balanced while still remaining light enough to enjoy easily.

Village Brewing, operational since late 2011, is a smaller brewery than Wild Rose, but one with a unique and focused mission statement: "It takes a village to raise a beer." The brewery is very community-oriented, particularly the artistic community. Village Brewing is committed to returning a minimum of 10% of its profits back into the local arts community, and frequently commissions local artists for label designs and artwork to display at the brewery.

**The Outdoors**

The town of Banff and the national park of the same name are just an hour west of Calgary, but Calgary itself has many outdoor attractions.

Two rivers flow through the city, the Bow River, and its smaller offshoot, the Elbow River. The Bow River is lined with paths and bike trails, and I spent Tuesday morning on a bike tour of the river. Along the stretch of the river we toured are a war memorial, multiple parks, and the magnificent Peace Bridge. We made it to the Kensington area of town, well known for its friendliness to pedestrians and cyclists. (Hotel Arts has a sister hotel there, the Kensington Riverside Inn, a boutique with only 19 rooms.)

Should you want something more removed from city life and more engaged with nature, might I recommend fly fishing? I went on a fly-fishing expedition along the river with Josh Nugent, owner of Out Fly Fishing Outfitters. I'd never fly-fished before, but he was friendly and patient in explaining it to me. The Bow is well-stocked with trout; only catch-and-release fishing is allowed, but the fish are particularly sizeable. The river itself is so tranquil, it's very easy to forget you're still within a city of a million people.

**Conclusion**

No matter what your particular interests, Calgary has something for you as a vacation spot. If you're a connoisseur of food and drink culture and are interested in culinary tourism, Calgary will suit you well. If you want to spend some time outdoors, the Bow River through town and Banff National Park an hour to the west offer such opportunities. For a longtime resident of Houston such as myself, Calgary offers enough of a touch of home to be comfortable, with the right amount of variety and vibrancy to be an enticing, invigorating vacation.



CHARCUT



**WHERE TO STAY**

**Hotel Arts**  
119 – 12th Avenue SW  
403-266-4611  
www.HotelArts.ca  
Hotel Arts, Downtown Calgary



**WHERE TO EAT**

**CHARCUT Roast House**  
101, 899 Centre Street SW  
403-984-2180  
www.charcut.com  
**Parc Café Brasserie**  
818 16 Ave SW  
403-619-3345  
www.parccalgary.com

**PLACES TO GO**

**Proof Cocktails & Curiosities**  
1302 1st St. SW  
403-246-2414  
www.proofyyyc.com



**Cilantro Restaurant**  
338 17th Ave SW  
403.775.7783  
www.crmr.com/cilantro  
**Craft Beer Market**  
345 10th Ave SW  
403-514-2337  
www.calgary.craftbeermarket.ca

**Village Brewery**  
5000 12A Street SE  
403-243-3327  
www.villagebrewery.com  
**Wild Rose Brewery**  
AF23, 2 - 4580 Quesnay Wood Dr. SW  
403-720-2733 101  
www.wildrosebrewery.com  
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Bowrivercanada.com  
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403-750-2392  
1-800-661-1678 (toll-free)