

Calgary Herald

Talus Lodge article

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Anne Danson of Calgary navigates over the rocks while on a day hike from Talus Lodge.

Photograph by: Krista Edwards, For The Calgary Herald

Spotlight: Talus Lodge is open for summer stays until Sept. 30, and can be booked as a self-guided retreat or a catered personal or corporate hiking retreat. Prices start at \$1,100 per person for three nights as a self-guided group to \$2,150 per person for a weeklong guided stay (250-342-9358; taluslodge.com).

"It's just too big to take in." Where Keith Strimple comes from, people say everything is bigger and better. But the larger-than-life Texan was dumbstruck whenever he looked up on our hikes high in the Rockies, as we spent three days walking among a sublime array of rugged peaks, snowfields, cascade waterfalls and tarns near Talus Lodge.

We were just over an hour's drive from Calgary -- plus a 15-minute ride from either Canmore or the Mount Shark helipad in southern Kananaskis in a six-seat 407 Bell helicopter run by Alpine Helicopters.

Whisking us over forested valleys, mineral-rich lakes shimmering in the sun and rocky peaks, the helicopter reduced a long day-hike up to the lodge to a rush of exciting views usually reserved for eagles.

Then it left us in a land of tranquillity. Talus Lodge, perched on a small plateau at treeline (2,350 metres), is surrounded by jagged peaks, a glacial cirque and a 300-metre cliff. The two-storey wooden lodge straddles Banff National Park and Kananaskis Country, and has provided a mixture of luxury and outdoor living since it was built in 2003. Beside the lodge and a nearby "honeymoon cabin" is an outbuilding with pit toilets, a woodstove-

heated dry sauna, a few shower stalls and two wash sinks. There is running water, but showers are rustic (fill a watering can with hot water from a pail on the gas stove and mix with cold water. Then clip the can to a rope-pulley, pull it above you, tie it off and tip it over yourself).

The area's peaceful atmosphere is fostered by lodge owner Chris Espinel -- who at age 62 is still as spry as a mountain goat -- and his staff. At the lodge, Espinel was one part naturalist, one part storyteller and one part environmentalist. Each day, he and assistant guide Martina Halik tailored the hiking distance and pace to the fitness and desires of the guests. Evenings brought a chance to share stories and debate issues around the lodge's big kitchen table, or just relax in the living room with a good book.

During my visit, the fully booked lodge's 10 guests were primarily Calgary couples in their 40s and 50s who appreciated the chance to disconnect from busy lives and enjoy some untouched wilderness.

"This is my detox from my daily life," said Calgarian Anne Danson.

Each morning, we headed in a different direction, soon learning that just about every rock outcropping in the area offered an inspiring view, whether it be of distant peaks or a delicate flower. Almost everywhere we went, the shark-fin tip of the Talon -- a 2,710-metre peak with a hook-topped shape -- could be seen high above.

You have better odds of seeing a grizzly bear up here than you do of seeing a hiker who didn't sleep at Talus the night before. We didn't see either, but Espinel proved his claims of seeing a grizzly bear snuffling around the lodge two weeks earlier by pointing out a deep hole the bear had dug behind the lodge's back deck.

From the front deck one evening, I spotted a pair of mountain goats silhouetted on a ridge. The next night, I came within a metre of a white-tailed buck with velvet antlers as I stepped out of the door to the pit toilets. On hikes, we often saw Richardson's ground squirrels and an inquisitive hoary marmot.

"We're totally in pristine wilderness," said Espinel.

Along with outstanding wildlife viewing, we were in wildflower heaven. Dozens of flowering species grow here on solid rock, forming a carpet in many areas that made every footfall a choose-your-own-guilt-trip adventure. (Do I step on the white-flowered heather, the blue forget-me-nots or the purple leather saxifrage?)

The area is also a geologist's dream vacation. The many layers of rock that surround the lodge come from ancient sedimentary formations, some of which have metamorphosed into new kinds of rock after millions of years through heat and pressure. And fossils such as crinoids and stromatolites, both creatures that lived hundreds of millions of years ago when the sediments were part of a great inland sea, can be found on the rocky slopes above Talus Lodge.

We hiked from four to 10.5 kilometres each day, gaining and losing 200 to 600 metres of elevation and taking between three and seven hours. All that hopping over wildflowers and streams, and climbing up slopes -- and I still gained a few pounds.

I blame Gina Chivers, the lodge caterer and assistant guide, who dished up feasts such as barbecued salmon with rice pilaf and vegetables, and chicken enchiladas with homemade salsa, plus vegetarian special requests. Even her breakfasts had appetizers -- fresh fruit, yogourt and muesli -- to go with such entrees as eggs Benedict and seasoned potatoes. Hikers packed their own brown-bag lunches, and I couldn't help loading up on sandwiches, fresh Okanagan fruit and home-baked sweets.

Such are the dangers of a stay at Talus Lodge. Distracted by all that grandeur and mountain air, you might let your appetite get as big as the views.

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