

Thrills and spills await Wills and Kate at a century-old rodeo in Canada's Calgary

by Sarah Merson

EVERY head is covered in a cowboy hat; most people are clad in full regalia. I would expect nothing less at Calgary Stampede. It's all about Western spirit.

It's intoxicating, too. In no time, our children are sporting stetsons, and our eldest, eight-year-old Louis, is practising his bow-legged swagger. He's always wanted to be a cowboy.

For ten days every July, the whole of Calgary immerse themselves in Stampede fever.

It began in the early 19th century as an agricultural fair. Over the years, it's grown to be a celebration of the West — the old West, the Wild West and more recently the new West. Prince William and Kate's visit at the end of this week will do no harm to morale either.

Like all cowboys, we're up with the rooster and off to Stampede Park.

When it comes to the rodeo, I'm sceptical that it might all be a lot of North American hype and another claim to be the 'Greatest', the 'Biggest', the 'Best', but top-class rodeo riders travel from all over the world to compete.

There are six major events: bucking broncs, saddle and bareback, bull riding, tie-down calf roping, steer wrestling and barrel racing.

The arena is alive with horses, calves, bulls and cowboys, and the dust is flying everywhere.

Our youngest — Jude, two — stamps and claps as a 1,500lb bull is released from the chute. The sound of the metal vibrates across the stadium as the gate is flung open and the mighty beast throws itself from back legs to front, contorting in almost vertical positions.



Crazy carriages: Chuckwagon racing in Calgary, and (below inset) the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, who will attend on Friday

ROYAL STAMPEDE!

ALMOST immediately, the cowboy is remorselessly flung from his seat. The children all yell for more as he hits the ground.

The roughest, toughest riders can win the daily prize money of \$10,000, but is there more to the cowboy mentality?

Well, they all have ranching and rodeo in their blood. 'We're born to do this stuff,' one tells us with a wry smile. Their teenage sons, who compete next to them in the steer-riding event, have inherited the same hunger for adrenaline.

The evening chuckwagon races make the heart pound. After pivoting around the barrels, 32 race-bred thoroughbreds and their four wagons storm, four-abreast, around the track. With nine heats and 128 thundering hooves roaring past 17,000 spectators, we're on our feet cheering as if our lives depend on it.

The myth behind the madness is that after a long day riding the range, cowboys retired to the chuckwagon to relax, eat and tell stories. At the end of the week they'd race into town, and the last cowboy in would buy the drinks. Packing up and storm-

ing out became an art that's continued here.

As for the cowboy mentality, your horse is your best friend as well as your business partner.

From the rodeo to the Rockies, we opt for a three-day hiking trip with CMH Summer Adventures — one that uses a helicopter to take you to where even experienced mountaineers have rarely been. Prince William would approve.

While my husband graciously agrees to stay with our two youngest children, Lone Ranger Louis and I are whisked to a remote mountain lodge just outside Bugaboo Provincial Park.

Here, the glacier sits at the top of the valley, immense in its retreat but a snowdrift compared to the monsters that must have carved the scenery around it.

Our fellow heli-hikers are a curious mix: a super-fit iron man, an overweight businessman, a recently widowed woman and an 84-year-old great-grandfather. Louis is the youngest.

Assured that no previous experience is necessary, we're split into groups according to ability or interest and given a helicopter

safety briefing. Then the Bell 212, our ticket to the high country, gently lifts off the ground.

It takes just a few minutes to reach Grizzly Ridge. We land and the signal comes from our guide to jump out. Shingle scatters like miniature missiles, then the helicopter lifts up and disappears over the ridge.

The shingle settles and we're left standing in silence, absorbing the beauty about us: snow-tipped peaks as far as the eye can see and a sea of cloud hiding the deep valleys below.

We spend the next three days hiking along game trails made by the 'locals' — mountain goats, bears and caribou.

We walk with the sun on our backs, until a rocky mountain rainstorm hits. Louis reminds me that it's only water and we might still spot a bear (there are many grizzlies and black bears in the Bugaboo region). After coming across

savagely shredded craters in the ground where they've been digging for ground squirrels — one of their main sources of protein — I am hopeful that we won't.

On the last day, the helicopter takes us to the back side of the Howser Towers: three granite spires, the highest reaching 11,150ft, looming like nature's skyscrapers. Louis whispers: 'Mum, it's just like a James Bond film.'

Our hiking is rewarded with glorious views and a helicopter to whisk us back to the lodge luxuries. As one of our fellow hikers said: 'We might be on the same planet, but this is a different world.'

TRAVEL FACTS

AIR Canada flies from Heathrow direct to Calgary daily from £494 return, 0871 220 1111, aircanada.com. The Calgary Stampede tickets start from £35, calgarystampede.com. CMH Summer Adventures start from £1,620 per adult for a three-night stay, including meals, snacks and two-and-a-half days of heli-hiking, cmhsummer.com. For more information, see myalbertaadventure.com.



Late deals



GLORIOUS GAMBIA, FROM £982pp

IT MIGHT be the smallest country on mainland Africa, but the beaches are exceptional, the villages lively and the wildlife impressive. The boutique Ngala Lodge is a former colonial mansion with tropical gardens and a magnificent cliff-top setting. Stay a week from £982pp including B&B, return flights, transfers and a free upgrade, saving £133pp, during December 2-23, 0845 330 2087, gambia.co.uk.

JAM ALONG TO JAMAICA, FROM £1,999pp

WAR bought Ian Fleming to Jamaica, but the beauty of the country led him to set up a retreat there. His former home GoldenEye references old-fashioned charm, celebrates luxury and hints at adventure — this is where James Bond was born. Today the stylish retreat attracts the rich and famous with its aqua lagoons and white-sand beaches. Black Tomato is offering seven nights for the price of six from £1,999pp (saving £750pp), including international flights, accommodation, transfers and a bottle of Blackwell Rum to take home, 020 7426 9888, blacktomato.co.uk.

WHY? Hong Kong is as slick and service-oriented as an oligarch's Knightsbridge penthouse. It offers all the comforts (and more) of a Western city, with traditional markets, tea houses and shops interwoven with the increasingly glossy landscape. But this is a city in flux. Go soon to experience Chinese charm before it's replaced by Michelin-starred restaurants, Italian boutiques and Swiss watch houses.

GETTING AROUND: While you can walk virtually everywhere, the tube (the MTR) is clean, reliable, air-conditioned and cheap.

WHAT TO SEE: The Peak, which affords views of the whole island. Explore the Ladies' Market and observe traditional bartering techniques for clothes, caged birds and flowers. Stretch your legs in Hong Kong Park



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and look in on the terrapins and butterflies. For the equivalent of £7, take a taxi to the town of Stanley for the beach and a trip to the temple.

WHERE TO EAT: For lunch with the locals, China Tee Club has the best wan ton soup noodles in town, chinateeclub.com.hk. For a special treat, nothing beats the people-watching, cocktails and city views at Café Gray, cafegrayhk.com.

WHERE TO STAY: Splash out at the W Hong Kong, which has one of the highest rooftop pools in the world and a harbour view from the restaurants. Double rooms from £264, whotels.com/hongkong.

HOW TO GET THERE: BA flies to Hong Kong from £617 return, 0844 493 0787, ba.com.

ANNAH GOULD