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Lake O'Hara

Spend this winter planning a trip to the golden heart of the Rockies.

It would be impossible to experience all the natural wonders of western North America in a human lifetime, and maybe even harder to pick the most scenic spot on the left side of the continent (is there another side?).

A backpacking trip to the bottom of the Grand Canyon will take you through a dozen different climate and vegetation zones, each one more spectacular than the next. You haven't lived until you've seen the spring wildflower blooms transform the somber floor of Death Valley, or seen the northern lights dancing over a vast plain of fiery-red tundra at Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska.

But if I had to pick one place for plain old jaw-dropping scenery, it would have to be Lake O'Hara, a cobalt-blue tarn lying at the feet of 10,000 foot vertical peaks in Canada's Yoho National Park, deep in the heart of the northern Rockies.

Fall is the time to make the pilgrimage to this Mecca of alpine scenery, when glistening snow-capped peaks are framed by the fluorescent golden glow of the larch forest.

The larch is the most contrary of the class *Coniferae*. Unlike its cousins, who remain boring green pyramids year round, the larch changes from iridescent lime to a shimmering yellow-gold before losing its leaves during the long winter months. This color change is among the most spectacular in nature, and Lake O'Hara is hands-down the best larch turn in the world.

No one who makes the long trip to O'Hara will be disappointed, but it is a LONG drive from Eugene — just about 15 hours. To get there, drive I-5 north into Canada, and pick up the Trans-Canada Highway (Canada Hwy. 1) heading east.

A bus takes visitors to Lake O'Hara from a parking lot found on Hwy. 1 about 15 kilometers east of the small town of Field. (Every other house in Field is a charming bed and breakfast with rooms for around \$100 a night Canadian.) Access to a campground at the lake is restricted and you will need to make reservations for the bus (\$15) and for a camping spot (\$9 a night) by calling (250) 343-6433. The campground has several warming huts and the Lake O'Hara Trails Club oper-

ates *Le Relais Day Shelter*, where you can warm up and buy a hot drink or snack.

The bus to the campground typically runs from the middle of June to the first week of October, and the larch is usually at its peak towards the end of September.

If you can only spend one day at O'Hara, make it count by hiking the Alpine Circuit, one of the most famous day hikes in the world. Walk up the road towards the lake from the campground. Head clockwise around the lakeshore. Just under a half a kilometer from a small bridge over the lake's outlet, turn uphill (left) onto the Wiwaxy Gap trail.

This trail is *steep*, climbing more than 500 meters in less than a kilometer and a half. The good news is that the trail remains relatively level as you wind your way around the rim of a spectacular alpine basin.

From 2,500 meter Wiwaxy Gap, descend southeast across ledges and talus slopes for 1.7 kilometers to emerald-green Lake Oesa, a miniature Lake O'Hara resting in the shadow of enormous snow-capped peaks.

From Oesa, pick up the 2.2 km Yukness Ledge Alpine Route. As the name suggests, you will pick your way across a rough boulder-strewn ledge beneath Mt. Yukness. You can fall a long ways from here, but a greater danger is cardiac arrest from the spectacular views of Lake O'Hara and the jagged peaks to the west.

After the long ledge traverse you drop to Opabin Basin, a maze of trails that weaves through stunning larch forest and myriad small pools and streams. It is common to come within spitting distance of mountain goats on this section of the trail.

After exploring Opabin for a few hours, pick up the 1.9-kilometer All Souls Route heading west. There's a steady climb past the Hanging Garden of Babylon (return in the spring for the flowers) to another fantastic overlook at the foot of Mount Schäffer. From here you descend sharply and take a right turn onto the Big Larches trail, which contains some of the most magnificent larch forest in the valley. The Big Larches Trail drops back down to the lake, completing the circuit.

But hopefully not the end of your adventures in the golden heart of the Rockies. **ew**