

The truck raged west from Calgary, towards the Rocky mountains in the distance. Why we were in Alberta in the middle of November was lost on all of us, but we were there, and for some reason Banff had appeal. We rambled towards it on a bender from high altitudes, too much alcohol and a need to escape city walls. But what we found was...



SEARCHING FOR THE OPEN RANGE

BY ANDREW GILLIS AND GREG MCFARLANE

Andrew and I sat in the back, gazing silently out the window as the vague city boundaries of Calgary slowly turned into barren, brown foothills, and into bigger foothills, and finally into mountains. Brianne sat in the front, talking constantly to our driver. Back to nature. In a truck.

Andrew, Brianne, some guy with a camera and I went to Calgary to see the open range, the cowboy, and Alberta oil rigs reaching towards the open skies. We left disappointed. The only cowboys we saw in five days in the city were bouncers at a raunchy western dance club, and they were in uniform. Drunk, we stumbled in. Mortified, and a little disgusted (you can only take so much Garth Brooks), we stepped out.

This mecca of line dancing was a little more than we could handle. Above the entrance, a sign advised us that "the most beautiful women in Alberta enter through these doors". It turns out beautiful means loads of silicone and half a can of hairspray emptied into Dolly Parton coifs. I sarcastically pleaded to Andrew to hold me back.

Beautiful also entails leather chaps, cherry-red lipstick and sweaty line dancing to "The Tennessee Flat Top Box" by Roseanne Cash one minute, grinding to "Ghetto Superstar" by Pras the next, and something they

were calling "boot scootin'". By the seedy scene unfolding in front of us, I'm guessing beautiful also means five children, two divorces and a several monthly alimony cheques. These people were anomalies, the subjects of Waylon Jennings tunes, but still not that bad.

around Calgary — instead, the streets feel the weight of junior

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Few beat-up pick-up trucks raced around Calgary — instead, the streets felt the weight of junior executives guiding little Hyundais, Geos, Buicks and any other car you'd see in Halifax. And none of them have gun racks.

Where was the gun-toting lowlife of stereotypical lore? Was this trip about to prove the Nova Scotian image of Alberta wrong? Few beat-up pick-up trucks race

executives guiding little Hyundais, Geos, Buicks and any other car you'd see in Halifax. And none of them have gun racks. It's true Calgary is rich, but it seems that most of the people there are just trying to make it, figuring the southern Alberta city is their best bet.

But it's a lot bigger than Halifax — one thing not lost on the city is the western ideal of expansive ranges, sprawling grasslands and long, long freeways. Strange, in a city where all the free space was locked securely inside the city limits, neighbourhoods keep springing up farther and farther away from the city centre. What we saw was the blueprint for a megalopolis.

And it was too much, too fast. Hard living in Calgary's club scene even failed to bring intoxicated imagery of the emancipated west we were searching for. I felt America's presence creeping northward, culture removed by capitalism. We had to get out.

But Banff was really no different. No one named Tex or Cletus lives there, either. Instead,

with every faux-upscale merchant imaginable: Roots, Club Monaco, Benetton, and so on. It's a tourist's dream — you can leave your home and find familiar stuff somewhere else. But the shops are different — there's this commercialized, Swiss lodge feel to the town. I guess in a "foreign" setting you can justify spending ridiculous amounts of money on products you could easily get at home for cheaper.

After a quick drive through the town, we decided we'd come back later when commerce retired for the night.

We left the town and easily found the nature we were looking for. It was populated, and money was being made (always), but it's easy to forget about that when staring from mountain tops at a civilization below. Off in the distance glacial lakes formed the bottom of valleys and snow-covered trees climbing up mountainsides looked like aging hair growing from a grandfather's head (the bald peaks only enhanced the similarity). It was worthwhile here, even with the biting cold of hard winds sweeping through us. Standing there, we forgave the tourist traps in Banff below. They couldn't compete with more majestic aspects of the landscape.

Instead, they could only profit.

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neo-hippies named Muffy, Kip and Dakota, apparently too poor to buy shampoo, clambered into 4X4 Cherokees and Blazers, checking to make sure their skis were strapped tightly atop the vehicles' roofs. The reflective glare from their yellow Columbia vests obscured my already snow-bleached vision. But when I came to, nothing had changed, and I quickly realized a few things.

If you go to Banff, take your wallet. The town may be situated in the mountains, the last bastions of the rugged, untamed world, but if one thing's for sure, the almighty dollar rules.

Any illusions of nature should be squashed immediately. Aside from the large, hairy animals walking the streets and grazing on what was left of neighbourhood lawns in November, the only sign of nature is the Body Shop.

Instead, the streets are lined

