

Bembridge leads us through the forest of sub-alpine fir and Englemann spruce. The trail is easy and wide, like an earthen sidewalk. As we walk, he points out a 500-year-old tree here and a chrysalis there, explaining local ecology in a slow, singsong voice not unlike that of a Native elder.

I wouldn't notice things like Deadman's Fingers if Bembridge didn't point them out. The tiny black digits poking through the earth are part of a vast mushroom, 99 percent of which grows underground, he says.

We pass the Beehive, a gigantic dome of quartzite carved by glaciers, and see our first larches, at 1,830 m (6,000 ft). Larches turn gold in fall and they're the only conifers that lose their needles. Stunted and feathery, they remind me of the cartoon trees in Dr. Seuss's *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!* High above us, silvery Bridal Falls look like tinsel streaming over the rocks. I must be delirious from hunger.

The Lake Agnes teahouse is a sight for sore thighs. It's lunchtime and hikers are hot on our trail, but we still manage to snag a picnic table, with stumps for chairs on the wraparound balcony. The day is as glorious as the Rockies are grand, and all around are the sounds of chirping birds, squeaking chipmunks and the contented sighs of tea sippers.

The chalkboard menu lists dozens of loose-leaf teas served in proper brown pots, from Irish breakfast to Darjeeling. I go for Lap-sang Souchong, a choice that elicits warnings from one server and a look of horror from another. When it arrives, the strong brew smells like a campfire and tastes like hickory smoke, just how I like it. But I'm touched by the staff's concern.



Norbert Woehrl

Lake Agnes teahouse

At the mountainside teahouse, the chalkboard lists dozens of loose-leaf teas served in proper pots

Our twentysomething waitress with pink cheeks and a true smile is a refreshing change from the jaded workers in some tourist hubs. Turns out she's the daughter of the teahouse's former manager. It's obvious this place runs on love.

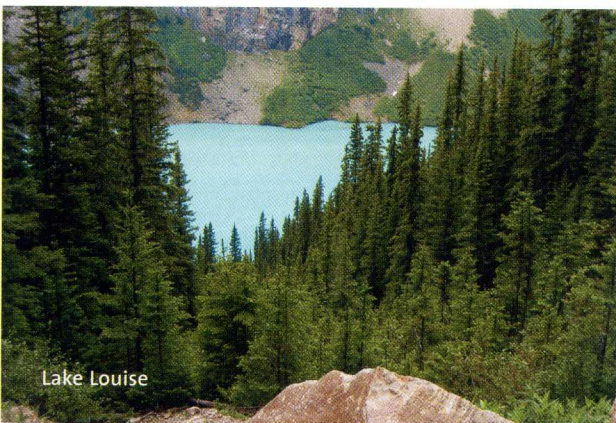
Balancing a tray loaded with goodies, she pauses to answer questions about the stone-and-timber structure, originally built by the Canadian Pacific Railway around 1900, at the urging of Swiss mountaineers.

The staff camp up here for four days at a stretch and start baking the day's bread at 5 am. Ingredients are delivered by helicopter, the same vehicle that services the "honeypot" out back. The teahouse is closed in winter because of snow, but most years it stays open long enough to cook up a storm for Canadian Thanksgiving in October. From the look of the wood stove and flagstone floor inside, it's a cozy spot to warm up on a rainy day.

Time to sample the goods. The moist, cake-like oat bread on my tuna-salad sandwich elevates simple ingredients to scrumptious heights. Our guide is seemingly addicted to the lemon loaf, but it's the date squares — gooey, chewy and not too sweet — that make me tip my sunhat to the youth who baked them.

I can't help thinking that if this were some other national park, the victuals, if any, would be delivered from industrial kitchens. 'Twould be a dreadful pity, since good food tastes even better in crisp mountain air.

To book a half-day or full-day hike with Bruce Bembridge and other guides, call the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise at 403-522-3511. **jw**



Janet Albe

Lake Louise