



# The Stampede to Calgary

The annual ten-day Calgary Stampede gives Calgary the moniker "Stampede City", contributes to the city's informal nickname of "Cowtown" and names the football team the Stampeders. The Stampede signals the start of a city-wide celebration, full of chuck wagons, cowboys, and country music.

The outriders toss two tent poles and a barrel into the back of the wagon symbolising breaking camp, and the chuck wagons are off, thundering around the track. The outriders chase in their wake, their thoroughbred steeds snorting as they gallop. A thick layer of mud swiftly coats the spoked wheels of the wagons and mud globules

flick into the air with each rotation. The potential for collision is imminent, yet within minutes the wagons have crossed the finish line, the winning team circling the figure-of-eight track in a victory lap.

The most famous chuck wagon race in the world is held annually at the Calgary Stampede, where

the total prize money for the ten-day event exceeds C\$2 million (GBP1,297,340). But it hasn't always been that way. Back in 1912 when the Stampede was born, the total prize purse for all events was C\$20,000 (GBP12,970). Now the rodeo is the world's richest tournament-style rodeo and one of Canada's largest festivals.

It all started with one man, Guy Weadick, a famous working cowboy and vaudeville entertainer. Guy was a performer in the travelling Wild West shows popular in the early 1900s, but he wanted more. It took a few attempts, but eventually Guy's



vision was realised – to establish an event that more accurately represented the Wild West than the shows he was a part of. That's the Stampede in a nutshell.

For ten days in July (this year July 5-14), Calgary goes cowboy, celebrating all things rural. Billing itself as "The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth", the Calgary Stampede is, at its roots, a volunteer-supported, not-for-profit community organisation. The goal is to preserve and promote western heritage and values. The fun is in how they do it.

Visit Calgary any other time of year and you'll be lucky to find a Stetson in the city. Visit in July and you'll be lucky to find someone not sporting a cowboy hat. The support for the Stampede is stupendous – the city understands that the event might be non-profit, but the ensuing economic impact is immense.

The purpose-built Stampede Park welcomes millions of people each year and those visitors are cashed up. Expenditure is estimated at around C\$345 million (GBP224 million) within the province. That's a significant return. No wonder the volunteers welcoming visitors at the gates of the Stampede are smiling. Through those gates, a good old-fashioned fair style atmosphere pervades. The park is divided into sections that cover the best of the West, from country music concerts, to local produce.

Back in the 1900's, Alberta was an overwhelmingly rural province. Today, agricultural producers make up less than two percent of the province's population. Yet the Stampede exhibition remains. Half of all visitors attend the exhibition section, made up of 50 agricultural programmes organised by more than 1,000 exhibitors. The exhibition serves



to educate about Alberta's ranching and agricultural heritage. From a petting zoo, to a display of bored-looking longhorn steers, the exhibition fulfils the need to get to know your local livestock.

There are numerous competitions as part of the exhibition, including the World Championship Blacksmith Competition, stock dog trials, and team penning competitions. The American National Cutting Horse Association also sanctions a World Series of Cutting event, far less bloodthirsty than it sounds. Cutting is an equestrian event in the western riding style where a horse and rider team separate one beast away from a cattle herd and keep it away for a short period of time. It's not easy.

In the Stampede crowd you'll stand out without a cowboy hat, but you can find plenty at the Stampede Market. All 410,000 square feet of it. Don't get carried away. You might get away with chaps and spurs here, but they don't work so well walking down the street back home. Near the market, in true funfair style, the Midway houses a host of traditional rides and carnival games. Clowns dive haphazardly into small swimming pools, while visitors shoot tin cans for cheap prizes. Show rides lure the teens, as marching bands add musical flair.

For a cultural experience, head to the Indian Village. At each Stampede, the five nations of the Treaty 7 – the Tsuu T'ina, Piikani, Stoney, Kainai and Siksika – erect tepees, offer arts and crafts, and re-enact elements of their traditional lifestyle. The highlight is the pow wows, which include native dancing competitions. Watching the dancers swirl and stamp in their full regalia, feathers bobbing in the breeze, evokes a sense of wonder.

No Stampede experience is complete without checking out the rodeo. This is what separates the cowboys from the city slickers, as man versus horse, bull and steer. The Calgary Stampede Rodeo features some of the world's best rodeo athletes and the finest stock. Every afternoon the competitors face off in a furious, action-packed display of skill, machismo and grit that is strangely compelling to even the most hardened city worker.

The bareback riding is perhaps the most physically demanding rodeo event. The cowboy grips the rawhide handhold of the leather pad cinched around the horse's girth and hangs on for dear life. That one arm absorbs most of the horse's power, and there is no role for the other hand. If the rider touches anything – the animal or equipment – it's an immediate disqualification. So is hitting the dirt. Eight seconds of



exhilarating tension results in the rider being judged on how high and wild they ride. A slightly tamer version of bareback riding is the saddle bronc, where riders are permitted the relative luxury of a saddle and reins.

Another wild ride is guaranteed with the bull riding, requiring nerves of steel. A rope with a handhold is wrapped around the bull with a weighted cowbell hanging underneath. The rope is pulled tightly around the bull's girth and kept tight only by the strength of the cowboy's grip. That's going to be pretty tight. Staying on seems marginally less dangerous than falling off under the bulls prancing hooves.

Without the element of danger, steer wrestling would seem almost comedic. The steer wrestler starts behind a rope stretched across the front of the starting box. The steer trips the rope as it crosses the line giving it a head start. Then the





a barrel, but if they knock it over a five-second penalty is added to the total ride time.

Novice versions of these activities are provided for the almost cowboys, while the kidlets (ages 8 to 12) work in teams in the wild pony racing. The teams have to attempt to tame a wild pony long enough to get a rider aboard for a two jump ride. The team with the fastest time wins. Watching the chase you could be forgiven for wondering if parents enter their children as a form of family revenge.

The excitement doesn't end when the sun sinks. It's time for the big show to take over. The TransAlta Grandstand Show starts right after the chuck wagons cross the finish line. The stage is towed into place and elaborate song and dance

chase begins. The wrestler's horse bolts past the steer and in the blur of action, the steer wrestler grabs the steer's left horn, taking the right horn in the crook of his right elbow. As the wrestler slides to the ground, he skids both himself and the steer to a halt, but the wrestle has only just begun. Using his left hand under the steer's jaw and a whole lot of momentum, the wrestler rolls the steer to the ground. The steer has to be flat on its side with all four legs extended before the official time and the victory of man over beast is called.

Tie-down roping is similar, but with the aid of a lasso. The roper has to land the rope around the calf from the saddle, then rely on his horse to stop mid stride as he dismounts to reach the animal, and flank and tie three legs. The horse works independently to keep the rope taught. Time is called when the roper throws his hands into the air signalling he is the winner. This



sounds a little tough on the calf, but any unnecessary roughness results in disqualification, so the ropers ensure a smooth tie-down.

The rodeo separates the men from the boys...and from the women. Barrel racing is the only women's event at the Stampede. In the barrel racing competition, contestants circle three barrels in a clover-leaf pattern. The rider can touch or move

numbers, comedy, acrobatics, and music round out the event, with an impressive firework finale.

As the evening winds down into night, stop by the Coca Cola stage for some headline performers, or duck into the Nashville North party tent for country tunes, two step dancing, and a brew. If you've spent the whole day at the Stampede, you have earned it.