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Photo: Amanda Follett

Why wouldn't you want to live here?
Skier Chris Rubens migrates to the epic
snows of Terrace, BC. Photo: Ian Coble

The North Heats Up

Once just a place for hearty locals, British Columbia's northern hinterland is now coveted by a new demographic of lifestyle refugees

By Amanda Follett

Prince George is roughly eight driving hours from any major centre: Calgary, Vancouver, Edmonton and the Okanagan. Travel another four hours northwest from Prince George and you'll reach Prince Rupert. The relative remoteness of Prince George and Prince Rupert hasn't stopped these communities, or towns in between them like Smithers and Terrace, from receiving unprecedented attention in recent years. Attracted by work, lifestyle and the relatively low housing costs, people are moving to the north, causing in-migration and real estate prices to rise at a dizzying rate. But unlike in years past, when people moved to the north for high-paying jobs in the lumber and mining industries, this ground swell is altogether different. Today people aren't just moving for employment but rather the quiet pace and nature-infused lifestyle intrinsic to BC's true hinterland.

It's hardly the sonic boom of the south, this rumbling felt across northern British Columbia. It's more of a tremor, really—shock-

waves reverberating from afar. But it's quite evident that a new demographic is moving in, and it's having profound effects on the cultural milieu of the north's isolated, working-class communities.

It's most evident in the noticeable, albeit subtle, shifts in the region's real estate landscape. In Smithers, dead centre between Prince George and Prince Rupert, homes under the \$100,000 mark have all but evaporated from the listings, and there has been unprecedented interest in small acreages. "Imagine," locals shake their heads in disbelief, "paying \$250,000 for five acres with a mobile home!" The discussion invariably comes around to the conversation-ending consensus: "Well, it can't possibly go up any more."

Smithers Mayor Jim Davidson has seen a great deal of change in his hometown in 75 years. As a boy, he raised cattle on Second Avenue, where a modest house now lists at \$150,000. Today, from the 1,000 acres he farms with his sons, Paul and John, he gazes




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**IN MAYOR DAVIDSON'S OPINION, THE EXPANSION
COULD BRING IMBALANCE TO THE COMMUNITY.
HE WORRIES ABOUT ADVENTURE-SEEKING CITY FOLK
WITH ROMANTIC NOTIONS ABOUT COUNTRY LIFE.
"THIS IS NOT VANCOUVER. IT HAS WINTER... YOU CAN'T
BE HERE AND NOT HAVE A MEANS OF SUPPORT."**

Lifestyle refugees Damian and Tristan Jones living the good life in Smithers, BC. Photos: Amanda Follett (left), Steve Ogle (right)

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across the valley to stunning Hudson Bay Mountain and the ski runs that cascade from its eastern slopes.

Neighbouring small acreages are selling in the hundreds of thousands, most often to out-of-towners looking for a quieter existence. While recent interest in the area may bode well for property owners, it brings challenges to industries like farming, as land values increase exponentially.

"We need employment and people that want to be here should have the opportunity. The trick is going to be retaining what we have and for me that's the total package. It's not just the environment, it's the diversity of opportunity," says the mayor, who eyes a proposed ski hill expansion with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Purchased two years ago by Vancouver-based developer 20/20 Properties, Ski Smithers is waiting on approval by the provincial government for a 6,000-bed condominium complex and nearly a dozen additional lifts for the resort, which currently boasts two T-bars, a chairlift and about 100 rustic chalets. If approved, the expansion would take place incrementally, says mountain operations director Jamie Cox, with the market dictating how fast the resort develops.

In the past five years, Ski Smithers has seen 41 per cent growth. Recent funding approval for a \$5.5 million runway expansion at Smithers Airport is unlikely to slow that trend. If the resort gets the green light, there may be a second chairlift in operation this season and cabin-style condos on the market by spring.

In Mayor Davidson's opinion, the expansion could bring imbalance to the community. He worries about adventure-seeking city folk with romantic notions about country life. "This is not Vancouver.

It has winter... You can't be here and not have a means of support." Along with enduring long, cold winters far from the city, flights from the north are usually pricey and notoriously unreliable, often requiring a last-minute jaunt to the nearest airport a few hours down the highway for more favourable flying conditions.

Which begs the question: who would move to Smithers? A thriving arts community has earned Smithers an unofficial "Nelson of the North" tag line. An area that has traditionally attracted back-to-the-landers, it boasts a strong social consciousness and environmental activism that's a force to be reckoned with. Pity the Calgary-based oil company currently looking to explore for coalbed methane in the area.

Former University of Northern British Columbia professor Ray Chipeniuk has been studying amenity migration to the Bulkley Valley since 2003. Roughly defined, amenity migration is migration based on lifestyle choices, and Chipeniuk says 40 per cent of new residents, often in their twenties or thirties, are attracted to the area for its natural and cultural benefits, rather than for economic reasons. That's equally balanced with 40 per cent who come for jobs, like forestry and mining. Many migrants bring businesses with them or create them upon arrival. But as increased demand drives up real estate values, the prices cause the same demographic to become less interested in moving northward, making the trend self-regulating.

Damian and Tristan Jones slide perfectly into the category Professor Chipeniuk terms "environmental refugees", having given up their Canmore, Alberta, home in favour of a remote locale that is blissfully hard to get to. In 2001, the couple was in their thirties when they bought 144 acres for under \$200,000 near Smithers. "We

photos: Bryan Ralph

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BUT UNLIKE IN YEARS PAST, WHEN PEOPLE MOVED TO THE NORTH FOR HIGH-PAYING JOBS IN THE LUMBER AND MINING INDUSTRIES, THIS GROUND SWELL IS ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT. TODAY PEOPLE AREN'T JUST MOVING FOR EMPLOYMENT BUT RATHER THE QUIET PACE AND NATURE-INFUSED LIFESTYLE INTRINSIC TO BC'S TRUE HINTERLAND.

Whether you're dropping in or logging out, the north has everything you need to get your red on. Photos: Amanda Follett (left), Peter Moynes (right)

knew we wanted a piece of property, and we knew we could never afford it in the front ranges of the Rockies," says Tristan, who runs a furniture-building business with her husband. "There was no way we could live in Canmore and sell furniture for what we sell it for. The cost of land is too high."

A quick inventory of their current neighbours along the Telkwa High Road reveals many fit a similar bill: an artist and a filmmaker, people who could live anywhere but choose Smithers. The couple estimates well over half of their friends are new to the Bulkley Valley in the last decade. "There's that feeling of coming home here. There's something ethereal. You visit here and you're like, 'Yeah, I could live here. This could be my home,'" Tristan says. "It seems like it's a community where who you are is more important than what you have."

Then there's the gossip—rumours that make long-time Smithers realtor Peter Lund chuckle and bite his tongue. There is talk about David Letterman and Tom Brokaw jetting into the local airport to check out property. As Lund points out, "affordable" is a relative term. For some, a million-dollar property on one of the world's best steel-head-fishing rivers is a bargain. For others, it's ridiculously overpriced.

Which brings us back to the mobile-for-a-quarter-million-dollars question: can prices go up any more? Across the north, residential homes are selling at 20 per cent more than last year, averaging \$202,985 compared with \$167,116 in 2006.

In Smithers, total sales for the first half of 2007 jumped by 50 per cent, from \$21 million to \$31 million compared to a year earlier. Similar increases were reported for Terrace and Prince George. In Prince Rupert, total sales nearly doubled last year, increasing from

\$14.3 million in the first half of 2006 to \$23.7 million in the first half of 2007.

Much of the land surrounding these communities exists within the province's agricultural land reserve, tying up most private property in large parcels. For the foreseeable future, subdivisions within current zoning bylaws is next to impossible, meaning small-acreage supply is bound to dwindle. In Smithers, it's still possible to find plots under 10 acres in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range, but perhaps not for long.

"As far as rural development for five-acre lots, the supply is now minimal. In the short run, it will drive up the prices for rural properties because there's no supply to meet demand," Lund says. With the mineral resource industry booming, expect even more pressure on supply: "If one of these mines opens up, we're going to be panicking."

Lifestyle-seekers will be competing, in part, with almost half of the population moving north for work, as resource extraction and oil and gas companies increasingly eye the area for future projects. There may not be another region richer in natural resources.

In the end, real estate in northern BC is still a pittance compared to other areas of the province. As the scramble for recreational properties continues in other parts of Western Canada, it seems interest will increasingly turn to the north. Add to that stunning landscapes, endless outdoor adventure and the wide-open spaces that are rapidly dwindling in the more accessible tourist destinations of the south, and the region is bound to attract lifestyle-seekers in search of a quieter existence. Inevitably, it marks a significant change in direction for the once isolated communities and their long-time residents. □