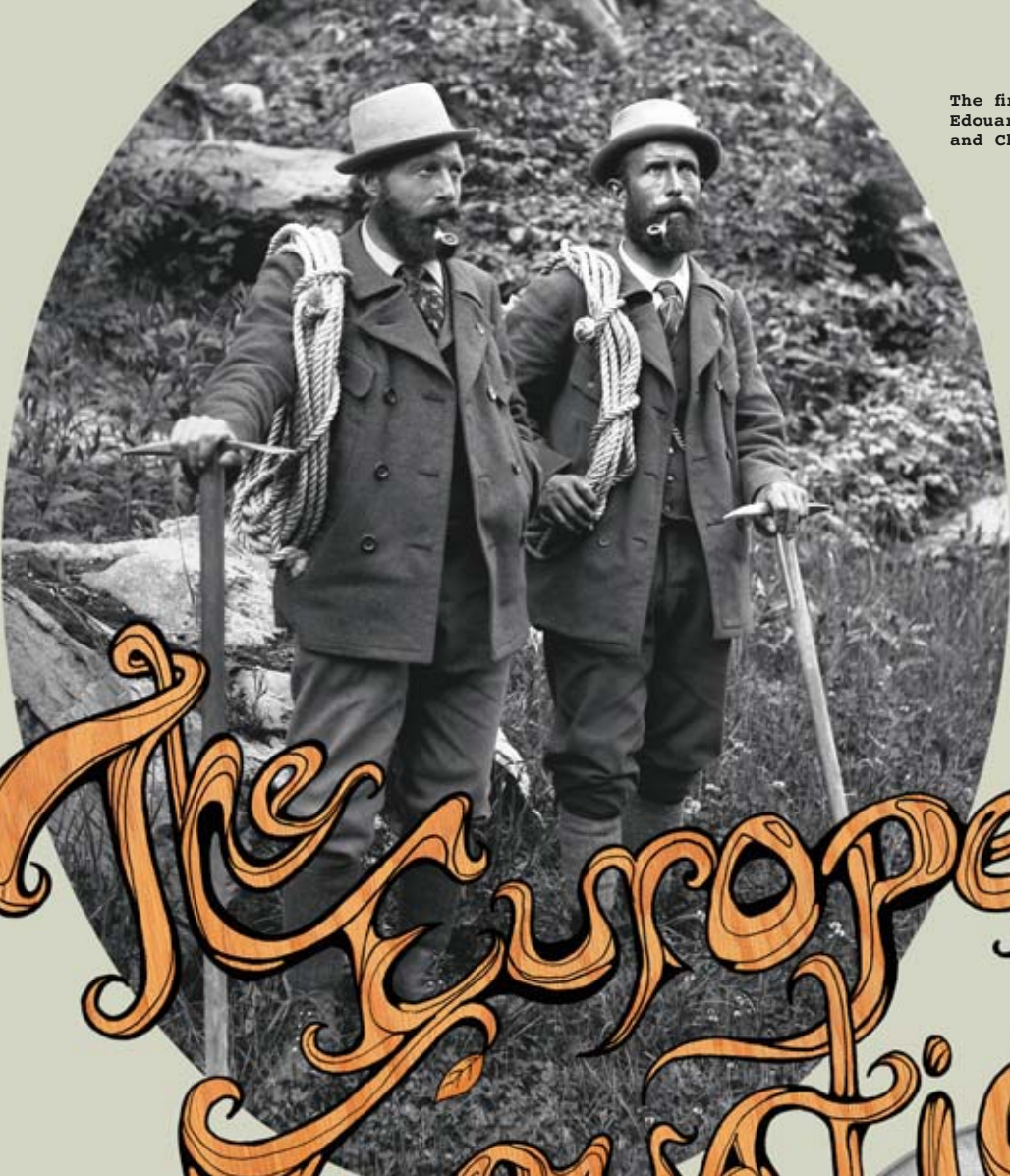


The first Swiss guides, Edouard Feuz Sr. (left) and Christian Hasler, 1899



# The European Equation

They came and they embraced. How adventurous Old World souls shaped the mountain culture milieu of the Kootenays

BY DAVE QUINN



David Douglas, 1886

KOOTENAY PEOPLE SHARE one commonality: we are all from somewhere else. With the exception of the Sinixt and Ktunaxa First Nations, whose veins pulse with mountain-steeped blood, our origins remain far-flung. Most of us look to the sunrise for our roots. We gaze over the craggy shadows that bind our little mountain enclave, across the prairies to the eastern provinces and states, but these origins can be traced farther, across the Atlantic to Europe.

The European connection is written on road signs and business fronts across the Kootenays. Kimberley's Platzl and Old Bauernhaus Restaurant. The Old Salzburg in Invermere. Nelson's Alpine Motel. Little Italy in Trail. European roots sprawl across our ridgelines and top out on our peaks. Our transatlantic counterparts have injected the Kootenay sensibility with wisdom, wholehearted appreciation and an appetite for adventure.

What is it about the Kootenays that has lured so many Europeans over the past two centuries? Opportunity? Geography? Or was it simple fate that tempted European travellers to plant themselves permanently in this part of the world?

If one ponders these questions for a moment, it comes as no surprise that the Kootenays should appeal to Europeans. Our mountain ranges—the Rockies, Purcells and Selkirks—hold their own against the Alps, Urals, Pyrenees and Cambrians, and for those used to a temperate mountain lifestyle, the unpopulated ranges of interior British Columbia, with more wildlife than humans, must have seemed an Eden, indeed.

The most obvious lines connecting Europe to the Kootenays were drawn by colonization and settlement patterns. Starting with David Thompson's quest for furs across Howse Pass, north of modern-day Golden in 1807, the first wave of Europeans came in search of new resources, new wealth and new lands to call home. In the employ of either the French or British colonial powers, these were stalwart souls who carried stories of the wonders they found in the Kootenays back home. Their resiliency and sense of adventure still informs the psyche of today's Kootenays.

A second wave of European settlement occurred in the mid- to late-1800s, as Europeans fled their homelands by the millions. The Irish Potato Famine, political unrest in Italy, religious persecution in eastern Europe and conflicts, like the 1848 German revolution, all drove people from mainland Europe and the yet-to-be United Kingdom to North America. Those who eventually settled in the rugged British Columbia Interior embraced the shelter, security and strength these mountains offered, creating a legacy of deep respect and appreciation for the landscape and for the political freedom we still enjoy.

The snow-capped spires of the Kootenays began to ignite the imaginations of European mountaineers during this period, as well. David Douglas, a famous botanist whose name lives on in the flora of the region and on a prominent peak in the Rockies, was the first European mountaineer in the region, scaling Mount Brown near Athabasca Pass in 1827, optimistically estimating its summit at 5,000 metres. When the adrenaline and embellishment settled, it was discovered to be a more modest 2,799 metres. Other mountain monikers honour European climbers who helped draw the world's attention to the Selkirk and Rocky Mountains: Mounts Collie, Whympier, Vaux, Edward, Rudolph and Kain all pay tribute to these summit-drawn mountain men.

The late 1800s and early 1900s saw a third European influx, this time with both barrels focused squarely on the Kootenays. Gold was discovered in

Wildhorse Creek near present-day Fort Steele in 1865. Thousands of miners descended on the Kootenays, most of whom arrived with the boom and blew away in the dust of the bust. However, a few stayed to search out new claims and eventually found major strikes. The Bluebell Mine in Riondel, Invermere's Paradise Mine and the legendary Sullivan mine in Kimberley all helped lay the foundations of today's Kootenay towns.

THE LAST EUROPEAN INFLUX began with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway during the late 1880s. The CPR was among the first to view the Kootenay backcountry and its sea of unscaled, unnamed peaks and untouched valleys as a product to sell to a mountain-hungry European market. In an effort to increase business and address their guests' safety, the CPR imported Swiss guides Edouard Feuz Sr. and Christian Haesler in the late 1890s to jump-start what has become one of the Kootenays marquee industries: backcountry tourism. These guides blazed the trails for CPR guests and laid the groundwork for an industry that would be unrecognizable to them today.

Professional guides, including many Europeans, played a role in a number of first ascents of major British Columbian peaks, such as Austrian Conrad Kain who guided the first ascent of Mount Robson. Aware of the importance of guiding in Canada, Swiss mountaineer and Parks Canada Alpine Specialist Walter Perren suggested a formal association be created to foster a guiding examination process. In 1963, the highly esteemed Association of

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In the mid-1900s, modern European backcountry pioneers like Grillmair, Gmoser and Ruedi Beglinger opened the rugged backcountry of the Purcell and Selkirk Mountains to the world. With Grillmair's help, Gmoser founded Rocky Mountain Guides in 1957, which evolved into the largest helicopter skiing and hiking empire on the planet: Canadian Mountain Holidays, with over 15,000 square kilometres of summit-saturated terrain. Beglinger's Selkirk Mountain Experience evolved from his adventures as a child in the Swiss Alps and is world-famous for high-end ski touring and summer mountaineering, keeping in tact the spirit of the original European mountaineers. In the modern Kootenays, over 25 helicopter and cat-skiing operations, 10 ski resorts, and dozens of backcountry lodges cater to adventure seekers from across the globe. Today the industry supports many local residents, defines the region to the rest of the world, and is indeed so thirsty for employees that larger resorts are recruiting workers from places like Mexico and Argentina.

Photos from top: Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies/George Vaux Jr., BC Archives P000374



Clockwise from top: The second ACMG mountain guides exam in 1967. Back Row (l to r): Don Vockeroth, Othmar Setzer, Bob Geber, John Gow, Charlie Locke, Bernie Royle. Sitting: Leo Grillmair, Lloyd Gallagher, Hans Gmoser, Peter Fuhrmann, Hans Schwarz. Photographer unknown. Ruedi Beglinger, Durrand Glacier, BC, 2006. Photo: Ryan Creary. Hans Gmoser teaches winter ski mountaineering technique to park wardens in Jasper in the winter of 1956. Left to right Murray Dawson, Tom Ross and Hans Gmoser. Photo: Gmoser Family Archives

In 1963, the highly esteemed Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) was founded by a group of eight men, most of whom came from across the Atlantic and whose names are synonymous with mountain adventure: Peter Fuhrmann, Willi Pfisterer, Leo Grillmair and Hans Gmoser.

WHATEVER DREW EUROPEAN SETTLERS to the Kootenays was enough to hold an abundance of them. Today the modern Kootenay culturescape is an interesting melting pot of old world and new world traditions. While timberframe and log homes, flavourful feasts, and deep appreciation for mountain landscapes resonate with the undertones of their European origins, this is where the similarity ends in the modern Kootenays.

Many recent European immigrants moved here to satisfy their sense of adventure and thirst for a wildness no longer found in their native countries. Kootenay cordilleras still have large carnivores and ecological diversity that impart personality and aura, making a mountain more than a just a pretty pile of forested rock and ice. Not to denigrate the European ranges—they all have the inherent grandeur of some of the most impressive summits anywhere—but there's something to be said for lift access to remote summits, trains and tunnels on high peaks and settled valleys. The simple truth is that we trade these things for wildlife. We cannot have both. Grizzly, wolf, and lynx are gone from most of their former ranges in Europe, as are many of the wild European ibex and Eurasian markhor (wild goat).

A Swiss friend of mine, who calls himself "Grizzly Henry," exemplifies the connection and fascination that many Europeans have with Canadian wilderness. Henry came here to experience the challenge of wilderness and, quite simply, "because there are grizzlies here." The Swiss capital, Bern, is named after the bear. Sadly, that city's flag and coat of arms is one of the only places one can see a grizzly in modern-day Switzerland. Other than a lone bear that wandered into Switzerland in 2005, grizzly, along with wolf and lynx, have been extinct there for over 100 years. Recent lynx reintroductions aim to bring some of the wild back into the Swiss Alps.

The Kootenays are truly a product of their past. European refugees, explorers, fur traders, gold seekers and mountaineers all brought their culture with them and have helped shape the modern, mountain-framed face of the Kootenays. This region remains one of the world's most distinctive blends of new world optimism tempered with old world sensibility. So the next time you celebrate the spirit of the Kootenays, pass on a *danke, grazie, dziekuje, merci* and thanks to the Europeans whose dreams have helped make it what it is and to those who work to keep it that way. □

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