

STREETS UNDER SHADOWS

The story of the mountain town, as told by seven local yokels



The Mountain Town. What is it? From Kathmandu to Jackson Hole, Banff to Verbier, Rossland to Fernie. In between exists a world of diversity. Yet there are parallels, themes that run through these settlements that, for whatever reason, find themselves tucked under the shadows of rocks and glaciers and forests that stretch upwards out of sight. Like the farm town, or the steel town, mountain towns have a sensibility all their own. They are difficult to define. On the surface they can look a world apart, but underneath there are indisputable commonalities.

In the Kootenays we're fortunate to have a collection of diverse settlements. Like buoys of light and comfort in an ocean of otherwise inhospitable wilderness, they are the human manifestation of life here in the mountains. And they are funky. From Golden to Nelson and the snow-covered Main Streets in between, we asked seven local writers to try and capture the essence of their place. This is what they found.



photo: Peter Moynnes

FERNIE

population: 5,040

My seminal Fernie moment came a few summers ago on a bridge over the Elk River one hot evening as the sun was going down behind the mountains. It's another lazy summer night on my bike, enjoying life in this sleepy little southern Rockies town. Suddenly, a dust cloud appears on the horizon, approaching fast. Piloting this mini-maelstrom is a local Fernie youth in an old VW Rabbit. Standing on the roof of the VW are two mullet-clad teenagers, Bud Lites firmly in hand. As the dust cloud approaches the bridge, I hear their voices above the snarl of the VW's four cylinders:

"Get ready!"
"No freakin' way!"
"Do it!"
"No way!"
"Now!"
"No!"
"Do it!"
"HOLY SHIT!!!!"

In a flash of arms and mullets and skin, the two jump from the moving car and are soaring through the air, 10 metres above the water, moving vertically at three metres/per second squared, horizontally at 50 km/h, through life at the dizzying speed of youth. They hit the water with a loud—LOUD—thwack, disappearing under the murky blue waters of the Elk River.

The hesitant one comes up first, releasing a howl reminiscent of a wounded bush animal. He makes his way to shore, slowly and gingerly. As he crawls out of the water his right side reveals a bright red hue of skin generally reserved for burn wards and Florida beaches.

"Asshole!"
"I told you to jump. Whydja wait so long?"
"It really hurts, man."
"You deserved it, dumbass."

The phrase, "Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore," comes to mind as I continue to pedal down the road, chuckling silently to myself. I could live 20 lifetimes and never see something that surreal in the Toronto I left behind a decade ago. No one will mistake Fernie for Nelson, that's for sure. The mullets, rodeos, gun racks, demolition derbies, coal miners and loggers are here to stay, and they are as integral to the Fernie quilt as the hippies, ski bums and condo owners. Often, they are one and the same: witness my friend Jay, who can be spotted driving his pickup around town wearing yoga pants, an elephant-print batik shirt, and a John Deere hat.

Years ago when I first moved to Fernie, big-city prejudices in tow, I had a pretty good notion what kind of people rednecks were: ignorant, uneducated and bigoted. Then I started noticing a few things: like the only people who picked me up hitchhiking were rednecks, and the guys wearing J. Smith and Sons Trucking hats would always say hello when I walked down the street. Gradually, my opinions changed. Soon enough, I found myself sharing beers with them.

As the condominiums devour more farmland every summer, the SUVs and Humvees roll into town, the latte-drinking, Bogner-wearing crowds keep multiplying, and house prices start inching into Whistler territory: one thing's for sure: the rednecks will keep drinking Bud Lite and car surfing by the Elk River in the late evening sun. And it's a beautiful thing.

—Mike Brcic



GOLDEN

population: 4,373

I'm in a country store on the outskirts of Golden, British Columbia, looking at the magazine rack, passing time while my friend buys some snacks, when a pre-pubescent, scratchy voice snaps at me from behind, "All the porno mags are behind the counter."

I look up and see a boy about 11-years-old. He's standing in front of the video rental rack, ball cap jauntily pushed up on his head. He's grinning. I grin back, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Dude, they take all of the porno mags and put them behind the counter," he says. "The lady sorts through them all. She grabbed one right out of my hands, all like, 'You don't need to be looking at that!'" I straighten my face, all grownup like. "Look kid, you have your whole life to corrupt yourself. Don't rush it." The kid doesn't miss a beat. "Awwwwww, thanks!"

The craggy bastions of the West were first cracked by the Canadian Pacific Railway a little more than a century ago. As the ensuing technological imports of the civilized world were chugging into the Columbia River Valley, including the completion of the Trans-Canada Highway in the 60s, Golden was finding its place on the map. It is, however, the recent destination resort-style development that is truly exposing the rail town to the world beyond the Rocky Mountain Trench.

While more city people are coming to Golden to spend money and buy vacation property, and more young folk are moving here in search of mountain lifestyle, it is the railroad and lumber mill that keep this town afloat. Muddy pick-up trucks carrying slip tanks stop at the only traffic light. The timber-frame tidiness of Banff and Whistler are still a world away. To the reader in an airport magazine stall, the outdoor lifestyle media depict this dichotomy as the inevitable cliché of loggers versus ski bums, or some other equally hackneyed half-truth.

In reality, the transitional state of Golden—this mix of toques and trucks—is the very thing that makes it special. Golden is a long-simmering stew of rugged BC Interior sensibilities: resource-based economies and outdoor cultural roots seasoned by the salt of the earth. Throw in the ready hedonism of ski-town living, with fresh flavours like snow sports, climbing, kayaking, biking, and paragliding, and Golden tastes like rural Canadian comfort food. This is why the bulk of Golden's new immigrants have come from places like Whistler and Banff, fleeing the trappings of Disney-on-skis for somewhere a little more real. It's a place where they can still afford to buy their own homes (for now), where the best socializing is done around a firepit, and where the first snowfall in town is accompanied by the sound of snowmobiles burning down back alleys. Only a few people work too much.

Like my new buddy in the store, Golden is home to a motley cadre of irrepressible, grass-stained, glimpse-of-porno, play-with-fire, jump-the-bike, steal-dad's-beer, husky kids. They are almost incapable of taking themselves too seriously, yet remain serious about doing their own thing. And, if you don't dig it for what it is, or think you're too good for its little scene, Goldenites are honest and forthright enough to remind you you're free to leave anytime. That is, if you can.

—Thomas Chalmers



INVERMERE

population: 3,140

"You need me! Come back! Don't leave me alone." These are the last words I hear. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, crackly blue nothingness outlines the word "Intermission" on the screen, snapping my attention from the storyline of a forgettable Hollywood release. Immediately, dozens of kids, fuelled by chocolate bar cravings, storm out of the auditorium. Their rush and bustle mixes weirdly with cheesy carnival music seeping through old speakers.

I'm in Invermere at the Toby Theatre, which, intermission and all, makes quite an impression on those who enter. The Toby Theatre is Invermere. Built in 1952, it's the type of small-town movie house that should have gone out of business long ago; like a parking lot in the old Joni Mitchell ballad. Not so, however. The Toby lives.

No megaplex movie mall in the most cultured urban environment has anything on the Toby. The old theatre exudes two traits not found in those generic giants: character and charm. As I sit in the lobby observing my surroundings, I'm struck by how comfortable the place feels. The Toby smells like your grandparents' basement. Wood panelling and orange carpet line the walls. Perched way up high, a small disco ball illuminates a constellation of large red stars made of old carpet. A fish tank with three goldfish decorates one wall. Another wall is accented with a pair of horns, like the ones Boss Hogg mounted on the hood of his Caddy. Plush red vinyl is everywhere.

The smell of fresh popcorn fills my nostrils. This appealing scent mingles with the musty odour of a library containing hundreds of old VHS tapes. Back in the 80s, when VCRs were new and people stopped coming to the theatre, preferring the novelty of home video, the Toby diversified. For 15 years, the owners bought into the VHS craze full bore, renting tapes out of the theatre to make ends meet. Now the hundreds of movies sit on display, like the theatre itself it seems, a vestige of a time not so long ago.

Back inside the auditorium, 42 model warplanes hang in formation from the ceiling, ready to protect moviegoers from any threatening on-screen baddies. The movie starts up again and I settle into my seat. A strip of red carpet, installed during one of the Toby's many "upgrades" separates my body from the surprisingly comfortable wooden chair back. I grab a handful of well-buttered popcorn and study the screen, ready to resume my trip. Just like that: I leave one fantasyland and jump right back into another.

—Adrian Bergles

photos left: Peter Moynes right: Adrian Bergles



NELSON

population: 9,784



KIMBERLEY

population: 6,927

Ten years ago, I was a disillusioned vagabond sporting a university degree of questionable value and more pairs of skis than underwear. I was looking for a cheap spot to live; someplace where a “day off” meant coming in from the backcountry to do laundry and buy food.

In the inner circles of professional wanderers, names like Banff, Fernie, and Nelson are whispered with awe, conjuring images of ski bum Nirvana where one would be nuts to settle anywhere else. So the clueless rebel in me chose to buy a cheap house in Kimberley. By doing so, I have unwittingly become a part of a community that defines the very notion of real.

There is no scene in Kimberley, no buzz. In fact, when friends from Nelson, Banff or Fernie pass through town, the question they ask most is, “Where is everybody?” It’s true, the “Bavarian City of the Rockies” that’s actually in the Purcells, passes itself off as a sleepy little mountain town. If you stroll in the Platzl (or “Pretzl” as the locals call the quaint downtown) on a midsummer Friday night, you can hear dismayed conversation if Kimberley Alpine Resort had a lift line that day. It’s enough excitement to keep the coffee shops abuzz for weeks.

So the question stands: Where is everybody?

The answer is simple. Everybody is out *there*, in the mountains that make us who we are. We’re not sitting in chic coffee bars wearing down jackets, designer shades and a toque on a hot summer day. We’re not gyrating wildly to the newest beats in a trendy club. We are out in the mountains that drew us here: picking huckleberries, skinning up a ski line we’ve drooled at for years, or simply walking in the Kimberley Nature Park admiring the natural jewels of the Purcells. And at the end of the day, you won’t find us downtown (to the chagrin of most local business owners). Instead you’ll find us on a back porch or in a living room, with a beer in our hand and good food in our bellies, sharing tales and solving the problems of the world.

Like most of my friends here, I moved to Kimberley for a single ski season over a decade ago. Now this sleepy, gorgeous little town will be home for the rest of my life. Most Kimberlites, like the bejeweled gravel deposits responsible for our namesake, are diamonds in the rough, and we like it that way. Kimberley is like a mystical treasure trove. One needs the right attitude and an open mind to see it. So if you come to Kimberley to check us out, leave your fancy accoutrements at home. Just bring your smile, a case of beer, and a desire to keep this town the way it always has been. Real.

—Dave Quinn

photos: left: Dave Quinn right: Dave Heath

“You’re from Nelson? I just bought a house there!”

That was a park ranger I met while hiking in Utah. Seems everyone I meet during my travels wants to move to Nelson (or just did). Nelson has developed an aura of mythic proportions: one large dose of mountains, and one small town with yogic tastes, century-old architecture, great restaurants, and multitudinous chai-latte-sipping artists.

When you actually live here it all seems so normal, but others point out the quirks. One friend notes he can walk downtown wearing an outlandish fedora and nobody bats an eye. Another loves the hippy senior citizens, with long grey locks and circa 70s Birkenstocks, doing their banking. The population of fit, mogul-and-mountain-bike-toned bodies artistically inspires a visiting sculptor. My mother-in-law loves how mountains surround the town, making urban sprawl virtually impossible. In summer, the young folks in dreads congregate here in colourful flocks. In winter, Nelson’s snowy downtown streets, Victorian stone buildings, and heritage lampposts look like something out of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.

Those irresistibly snowy mountains originally drew me to Nelson, but what will keep me here is the community: the 70-year-olds you meet backcountry skiing who’ve been powder hounds for over half a century, the Tai Chi instructors who used to be Toronto investment bankers, the Italians, the Doukhobors, the waves of Americans seeking a kinder, gentler pace. The place attracts active eco-people who also care about healthy lifestyles, grassroots politics, community involvement, spiritual growth, heritage architecture, arts and good food.

Last year I joined one of Nelson’s choral groups. Singing brings together every faction of Nelson’s diverse society. Our group crowds onto the stage of the restored 1920s Capitol Theatre (funkiness incarnate), young and old, talented and merely enthusiastic, to offer a gift—a premiere performance of an original musical composition inspired by the mountains that surround Nelson. The commissioned piece is composed and conducted by one of the town’s homegrown musical artists whose career has gone global. My shaky alto contributes to this mass chorus. Our hearts full, singing from a place deep within, we celebrate what it means to live where the mountains are “close enough to hold, all in a single glance.” I feel blessed to live here, buoyed by Nelson’s strong voices, expressing with music what I’m having difficulty here putting into words. The packed house rises in a standing ovation. Magnificent music, mountains, and a creative, generous community that sings together in five-part harmony with orchestral accompaniment—that’s my kinda town.

—Vivien Bowers



REVELSTOKE

population: 7,911

We have just completed a few exposed traverses en route to Sapphire Col and it is time for a rest. Finding a safe spot, we stop for some lunch and water. From our resting place, we have a stunning view of the surrounding peaks and those beyond. The Asulkan Cabin, our temporary home, is just a speck in the distance, much like ourselves; tiny dots of life in a vast winter landscape. In this moment I feel vital, fragile and fortunate to be alive in this place, with friends.

As all backcountry trips must end, it isn't long before I find myself back at work in Revelstoke. Curiously, the good vibes of this particular trip linger on. At first I think it is the alpenglow on Begbie, Mackenzie and Cartier that keeps the trip's moments so clear, but the more I think about it, the more I realize something larger is at play.

Life in a mountain town reminds me that I am fragile. During the winter, few towns see as much snow as Revelstoke; a fact that explains the popularity of the tin roof. Every house in town has one. A tin roof with enough pitch will shed snow before it crushes the house. At night, during a good snowfall, I can lie in bed and wait for the snowpack to build up, crack, and crash down to the ground. Even though I delight in this thunderous moment, there is this eerie parallel. Tomorrow, in the mountains, the same sequence of events could kill me.

For vitality, the quality of life in Revelstoke is second to none. A five-minute walk from my front door might find me hiking in a National Park, fishing the Columbia River, or sipping coffee in a local café. If the day is better suited for biking, there is a growing network of challenging trails. The climbing is spectacular. My wife and I have climbed as early as March at Shaketown, an exposed, south-facing collection of routes.

Regardless of what people do here, Revelstoke seems to attract those who find inspiration in the mountains: the treeplanter who ski-tours all winter, the French-Canadian woman who rock climbs whenever she can sneak away from her restaurant, the ski guide who plays flute in a funk band, and the firefighter who paints brilliant local mountainscapes. The aqua-blue water of the Columbia passes by our doorsteps. Mt. Begbie's glacier smiles down on our wide valley. The mountains and the town share a seamless interaction.

Then I think back to our backcountry trip and the rocky outcrop where we stopped for lunch. A small, safe, magnificent place. A special spot where nature makes you feel pleasantly small; the perfect place to share food with friends, have some fun and take in the view.

—Jeff Wilson



photos: left: Rob Buchanan right: Steve Ogle

ROSSLAND

population: 3,680

I'm renting a place in the "Rite of Passage" apartments where most newcomers to Rossland have lived at one point. My room is two stories up, located off the street that leads to Red Mountain. From my bedroom I can see the red light beckon from the top of the ski hill. When I wake up in winter, I've quickly learned my day is off to a good start if that red light is hidden by falling snow.

But this view comes with a price. I can't sleep in when the rumble of diesel trucks rattles my cheap window panes. Standing with coffee in hand, I watch the migration: a pilgrimage of powder-hungry people file underneath my window like a parade, too rushed to clean off the two feet of fresh from the top of their vehicles.

What strikes me are the kind of cars I see. I expect the archetypal Subarus and 4x4s, but the forgotten beaters like the Chevette are just as common, their bald rear tires spinning wildly as they inch closer to treasures just up the road. It's become this weird routine for me. I watch the parade and get my gear and attitude ready for the day, keeping my eye out for the car that lets me know today qualifies as epic: an old Dodge, weathered and beaten, but instilled with pride and purpose. Inside is a man, maybe 45, though it is tough to tell from the fogged windows.

After piling my gear into my own little beater, I head out to take in what I've moved here for. I pull into the parking lot and am forced to park farther away than ever before, finding a spot right beside that old Dodge. In the truck's front window there's a parking pass for Cominco, the local lead and zinc smelter that employs many Rossland and Trail residents. It's a Tuesday, definitely no holiday, but for locals any day you can't see your car in the driveway is a holiday. As I put my boots on, my attention is caught on the story behind this old Dodge. Then I get it.

Rossland is a sanctuary for all walks of life. Many of the locals are not truly local, but rather transplanted from other parts of the world to live and love in the mountains. Whether you're an Australian who skis away your winters or a Cominco worker from Trail who calls in sick on these epic days, Rossland is a mountain playground for the grounded person. There are no egos, no need for fancy cars; just an attitude that says get here, be here. No matter what it takes. The more blue collar, the better.

—Derek Frankowski

