

Hidden Gems: 'Sun Peaks is what Whistler Blackcomb was like 25 years ago'

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The village at Sun Peaks, in British Columbia. SUPPLIED / CALGARY HERALD



Quickly. Name the fastest growing municipality in British Columbia.



Unless you are already a happy denizen of the Sun Peaks community, whose population grew 66 per cent between 2011-2016, chances are that wasn't your guess. And this hidden gem of a four-season resort town — one of Canada's largest ski areas with 1,728 hectares across three skiable peaks (Tod, Sundance, and Morrisey) around an intimate, ski-in/ski-out village — is expected to continue growing. It has its own on-hill K-12 school, and just launched a \$3 million upgrade to on-hill food and day-lodge services.



Sun Peaks, with 615 full-time residents, is 56 kilometres from Kamloops in the Thompson-Okanagan region. Its mayor, Al Raine — husband of long-time resident and former Olympic skier Nancy Greene Raine (who still leads mountain peak hikes) — expects the number to grow to 1,000 by the next census. The population jumps to 4,000-plus during peak winter season, staying in 1,500 residential units (from ski chalets, townhomes, and condos) with 4,000 beds.



And its non-winter reputation is growing. There's the 3,500 to 4,000 visitors drawn to its annual Alpine Blossom Festival (July 28 to 30); mountain bikers getting 610 metres of lift-accessed vertical and 40 distinct trails; and golfers discovering the championship course (at 1,200 metres elevation, B.C.'s highest).

"From the moment you arrive in Sun Peaks, you park your car and are done," says Kyle Taylor of Tourism Sun Peaks. "Everything is walkable, accessible."

It is also multi-generational-friendly with all three mountains having beginner to expert runs from the tops.

"And we don't have the congestion (Vancouver's) Whistler/Blackcomb has. You never have to wait more than five minutes in a lift line," Taylor says.

For the first time in nearly a decade, the resort is adding 24 new, luxury residential units in the village centre, called Village Walk. Most of the buyers overall, says Liz Forster of Sotheby's Sun Peaks, have been from Canada, the large majority of those from B.C.

"A lot of people say Sun Peaks is what Whistler Blackcomb was like 25 years ago."

In the last year, 17 per cent of purchasers have been international buyers — half from the U.S. and others from Europe and Australia. Albertans make up about six per cent of Canadian buyers in the last year, and Walker says many are families living full time at Sun Peaks with one parent working in Alberta camps.

The overall Thompson-Okanagan region has long been a popular playground for Albertans, including warm lake and winery regions like Kelowna, Penticton and Osoyoos. Howard Grieve of the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association (TOTA) says despite Alberta's economic troubles, the region continues to see strong visitor numbers, particularly from Calgary.

"There are beaches, lakes, golf courses, wineries — those are really strong motivators."

In 2015, Alberta residents accounted for 27 per cent of the region's total domestic visits — its second largest market after the rest of B.C. In the Kamloops region alone there are 13 golf courses (eight championship including Sun Peaks'), with 79 courses (25 championship) in the Thompson-Okanagan. The Thompson-Okanagan has also long been the prime site for Albertans' vacation/retirement property purchases.

Brendon Ogmundson, economist with the B.C. Real Estate Board, says in 2014 the share of Alberta buyers in the Okanagan was about 18 per cent; that has declined to just over 10 per cent so far in 2017. The Alberta decline has been offset by an increase in activity from metro Vancouver buyers.

"Historically, Alberta buyers have accounted for an average of 15 per cent of sales in the Okanagan. We expect that as the Alberta economy improves, those buyers will return," Ogmundson says.

Five things to do:

1. Kettle Valley Rail Trail cycle tour (July 29 to Aug. 3) includes beginner/intermediate cycling, history, nature, with stops at restaurants and wineries. <http://www.monasheeadventuretours.com>
2. Combine exercise, beautiful Okanagan lakes, and wine sampling by kayaking to your destination. <http://www.hoodooadventures.adventureengine.com>
3. How about star-gazing, paddleboarding and yoga? Osoyoos' Watermark resort is offering a guided paddleboard tour Aug. 21. Lie on your board, enjoy the total solar eclipse, followed by beachside yoga. <http://www.watermarkbeachresort.com>
4. B.C.'s newest wine area is the Kamloops Wine Trail. There are four wineries and, if that's not enough, there are three craft breweries and cideries. <http://www.tourismkamloops.com/things-to-do>
5. Join 7,000 annual visitors at Lake Country ArtWalk showcasing more than 3,000 original works of art and live performances by more than 300 Okanagan Valley artists. Sept. 9 and 10. <http://www.lakecountryartwalk.ca>