

Celebrate Canada with a road trip down its Highway to Haven

By Jagdeesh Mann
Special to The Post

For more than 800 kilometers, the Crownsnest Highway ribbons along British Columbia's border with Washington, Idaho, and Montana. This mostly-single lane highway which is today popular with RVs and summer travellers is the modern incarnation of the Dewdney Trail built by the British during the mid-1800's gold rush.

The pack road was intended to secure sovereignty over the mythic Gold Mountain, the Chinese name for B.C. But it never quite became a yellow-bricked road to riches. In a few short years, the gold rush was over, the miners went pick-axing their way to the next mother lode in the Yukon.

The Pacific Northwest on the frontier, was once the last stop dividing civilisation from the truly feral north. Corrugated by four mountain ranges – the Monashees, Selkirk, Purcells, and Rockies – Southeast B.C.'s remote and verdant valleys made prime destinations for a variety of refugees, rebels, recluses, and other non-conformists seeking isolation from the world.

And so over the past 150 years, the Crownsnest has been an unofficial 'Highway to Haven' for numerous groups including Russian Doukhobors, American draft dodgers, persecuted Sikhs, Japanese Canadians, polygamists, marijuana black marketers, camera-shy sasquatches, and most recently, Vancouver couples fleeing the city's cruel real estate prices.

While my wife and I were not in search of a sanctuary, we were rounding into the final trimester as a child-free couple. It was time for our 'sendoff vacation' into parenthood. As our new start was to set to coincide with Canada's looming sesquicentennial it seemed the right

time to re-connect with our province.

A road trip along the Crownsnest was an easy choice given its minimal distance between stops, at least by Canadian standards. We would drive through Osoyoos and B.C.'s wine country, onward to Nelson, and over the Continental Divide and on to Calgary to drop off the one-way rental and catch our return flight home to Vancouver.

My wife and I had grown up as part of Canada's first 'multiculturalism' generation – discovering how other newcomers had made their mark seemed, to us anyway, as aptly Canadian as a weekend ski getaway.

West Crownsnest: Saint-soldier farmers and warrior vintners

In the Okanagan language, 'Keremeos' means 'the meeting of the winds'. Temperatures here in the fruit stand capital of Canada, can rise to more than 40 degrees Celsius, comparable to Vegas in July. The winds blowing through the orchards bring relief from the heat searing the valley floor.

They also bring fortune, as when in the early 90's a 'chance seedling' sprouted into the world's first ambrosia apple tree. That windfall became a windfall: ambrosias have supplanted other varieties in orchards to feed growing demand across the country.

At the Mariposa Fruit Stand, we stop and purchase two bags. Resistant to browning, ambrosias are ideal for slicing and their sweetness complements the spice in that other great Keremeos

snack: the samosa.

When the first ambrosial apple tree was taking root in the Similkameen Valley, so too were Punjabi Sikh farmers. These immigrants began filling the void left by a previous generation of European family farmers retiring from their fields.

chief, Clarence Louie. A young upstart, Louie had a vision for economic prosperity. If his leadership quest was a moonshot, Louie's mission to create full employment was a Hail Mary for Pluto.

Twenty-five years later, Louie is still Chief and

opportunity to chat with the on-site sommeliers.

"The band really encourages education. I had no experience in wine-making but the leadership believed in me," explained Justin Hall, the Assistant Winemaker, now 13 years into his trade. "They even sent me to New Zealand to learn viticulture."

For decades, Canada's residential schools strived to beat the 'Indian out of the Indian'. In a remarkable act of re-appropriation, the Osoyoos Band is using education to restore their language, win awards for gold standard Merlots,

and most crucially, raise a new generation of Justin Halls.

East Crownsnest: Refugees, Rebels, and Recluses

An hour east of Osoyoos is Greenwood, a copper rush town from the late 19th century. This quirky city is Canada's smallest municipality, has obscenely clean tap water, and looks like a set from a spaghetti western. We stop for selfies by the false front and parapet-crowned Green-

wood Saloon Inn.

The town, however, hasn't always had such a postcard image. It was the first WWII internment camp for Canadians of Japanese descent – more than 1200 citizens were re-located to the town's empty hotels.

There remains little physical evidence from this dark era, but existence of the internment was indirectly memorialised by the Hollywood film, *Snow Falling on Cedars*. It was shot in Greenwood because of the mixed heritage look of the townspeople who served as extras. In a strange twist, this prison town became a home for many of the interned Japanese who ended up staying and raising families here after the war.

The history of other refugee communities in this region, such as the Doukhobors, however, is far more visible in the region's fossil record.

Persecuted in Russia, this sect of pacifist vegetarians, who rejected materialism and lived communally, emigrated to Canada. After expulsion from Saskatchewan a century ago, they came west to southeastern B.C.

As with the samosas from Keremeos – which lasted as far as Greenwood – Russian food is ubiquitous in Grand Forks, 50 kilometers from Greenwood. At the Borscht Bowl café, we lurch on two bowls of the cabbage borscht and take away cottage cheese pyrahis.



A South Asian farmer in the Thompson Okanagan. Photo: Okanagan Tourism Association

India's most recognisable minority, turban-clad Sikhs emigrated en masse in the late 1980's when they became targets of persecution.

Renowned for fighting and farming, these 'saint-soldiers', have extended the life of the family farm in this valley. And so cumin, fenugreek, and coriander have entered the local food chain through samosas, chutneys, and pakoras sold across fruit stands in Keremeos.

But in this tale of magical apple seeds, and saintly farmers, there is another underdog who has ascended on these winds of change – a community of warrior vintners who transformed their desert lands into a travelers' oasis.

A town of 5,000 residents, Osoyoos is located at the northern tip of the Sonoran Desert. It is part of B.C.'s flourishing wine-growing region, also known as Napa Valley North.

But in 1991, the Osoyoos Indian Band and its 32,000 acres of prime land was insolvent when members voted in a new

the band has become the standard of good governance for First Nations reserves. It generates millions in profit annually, dollars which are ploughed back into education and investments such as NK Mip Cellars, the first Aboriginal-owned winery in North America.

After two days basking by Osoyoos Lake, we drove to the winery. The patio provides unobstructed views of vineyards corn-rowed into the baked hillsides. While the wine tour provides an

WHERE TO STAY

Osoyoos

Located on the edge of Osoyoos Lake, at the end of the town's high street, the Watermark Hotel is literally the centre of Osoyoos. This lakefront retreat offers a range of suites from studios all the way to 3 bedroom units, and even townhouses. Each comes equipped with full kitchen facilities, dishwasher, washer and dryer, and private balconies with views of the lake or desert landscape. Complete with a large outdoor pool, this four-story hotel is an ideal spot for families. The Restaurant at The Watermark also provides a fine-dining experience for the evenings or brunch-on-the-patio to start the day.

Nelson

The Hume Hotel is the oldest and most storied hotel in Nelson. Dating back to 1898, this now refurbished hotel features rooms with colourful names like the Minnie, Rapunzel, and the Rattenbury Suite – each with a story linked to the personality it is named after. The Library Lounge jazz bar on main floor is a throwback to an earlier BC era. In a spot where shares in gold mines were once regularly swapped over drinks, today instead you can share gold rush cocktails and swap tales with your fellow travelers. The hotel is conveniently located off Baker Street in the centre of Nelson.



Osoyoos may be the official desert of Canada, but is on the shores of a beautiful lake. Photo: Wikipedia

If cemetery tourism isn't too morbid, a visit to Verigin's Tomb in Castlegar is worth a quick detour off the beaten path. Typical of Russian mystics, Peter Verigin, the Doukhobor leader, died under mysterious circumstances – his tomb is located in an immaculately landscaped garden overlooking the Kootenay River.

Next to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa, Verigin's Tomb could be the most tended to gravesite in the country. Its manicured flower beds reveal there are still those who follow the old ways. That message makes for a sharp contrast when we reach Nelson an hour later. This cultural centre of the Kootenay centre levitates on the New Age edge.

Originally a silver-rush town, Nelson has gone through multiple incar-

nations. Its latest is as Canada's Hippieville – if Burning Man was a permanent settlement with property taxes, and a 'Bear Aware' program, it would be Nelson. Walking along Baker Street, the town's high street that is notably absent of brand name outlets, I counted three didgeridoos and a similar ratio of dreadlocks per capita as on my last visit to Varanasi, India.

Nestled in the protective shadow of the Selkirk Mountains, the town is a natural asylum. American draft dodgers fleeing the Vietnam War arrived in the 70's and never left. At the same time, cannabis growers found a welcome home in this safe harbour from where they perfected B.C. bud.

And now comes the latest group of refugees, working professionals fleeing Vancouver's real

estate market. They are migrating 700 kilometres to buy a detached house or cash out for a cubicle-free lifestyle.

With this influx of outsider wealth squeezing the local housing market and with cannabis legalization looming, Nelson again is at a crossroads.

The city's future makes for popular table conversation at spots like the Library Lounge in The Hume Hotel. We walk by one of the didgeridoo buskers outside who is taking a pot break and settle in for a night of live jazz beneath caryatid pillars and draped ceilings that make one feel they are in colonial club. Gin and tonics seem appropriate.

Ryan Martin's family has owned The Hume for over four decades. He is undeterred about Nelson's next evolutionary leap.



Nk'Mip translates to "Bottomland" in English, being located at the southern end of the Osoyoos reservation.

"I see Nelson growing but never in a traditional sense," he said. "It is attracting a lot of business-savvy people with special skill sets that allow them to find their niche."

For Martin, the town stands as a 'Small is Beautiful' alternative in a world headlong for scale.

From Nelson, it is four hours to the Continental Divide and the Crowsnest Pass from where the highway takes its name. We pass through Creston, a hotbed for Mormon polygamists, and through settlements like Yahk, and Moyie, tiny settlements radiating a Twin Peaks-like mystique. Alas there is no Log Lady anywhere to be seen.

Nor is there a Sasquatch, the Crowsnest's most famous recluse, refugee, and rebel, all-in-one.

We pull over at the Continental Divide. If B.C.'s

Yeti resides anywhere, it must be here. It's a long-shot but no luck today.

The highway fades into the rear-view mirror as we pull away.

Sights along the way

CHRISTINA LAKE

Had Christina McDonald died instead of 'almost died', this glacial lake west of Grand Forks would be a pilgrimage site for accountants around the world. Christina was the daughter of Angus McDonald, Chief Trader of the Hudson's Bay Fur Trading Company. In June 1870, she dove into the water to save her father's financial records (she was his bookkeeper). The lake was re-named for her bravery, and earned her family fishing rights for perpetuity.

GREENWOOD SLAG

At the western entrance to Greenwood, a 120-foot copper smelter stack stands like an obelisk to the late 19th century copper rush. In front of it is a rampart of black slag that serves as a moon-scaped monument to environmental degradation.

AINSWORTH SPA

These hot springs are located 50 kilometres from Nelson along Kootenay Lake. Walk through a horseshoe cave of 42 degrees Celsius mineral-enriched waters. Your skin will thank you later. Located across the lake from Yasodhara Ashram.

This article was first published in *The Vancouver Sun*.



The historic Greenwood Saloon. Photo: Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association