

COVER Region emerging as go-to destination for golf, skiing – but also for jobs and low-cost homes

West Kootenays

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The West Kootenays, once bedrocked on coal mining, is being transformed into an all-season playground for golfing, skiing and fishing enthusiasts. While not yet rivalling the East Kootenays for resort facilities, locals say their combination of lower land prices, lake and rivers and re-emergence of the resource industry is paying dividends.

Australian-born developer **Robert Felsch** is among the outsiders who believe they have found the promised land in the West Kootenays. From a casual visit a decade ago, Felsch has emerged as one of the area's largest real estate developers.

"It is so much easier to get things done here," said Felsch as he toured a visitor through the old nine-hole Rossland Golf Course, which Felsch bought last year, along with 500 acres surrounding it from **Tech Cominco**, for his new **Redstone Resort**. Already, Redstone has received all environmental clearances, an 80 per cent positive referendum vote from the community for its project, and sold more than 60 building lots.

Felsch and partner Cary Fisher are transforming the site into an 18-hole Les Furber-designed golf course ringed with scores of new homes.

With prices from \$120,000 to \$170,000, the first phase of 88 building lots overlooking the course have virtually sold out – buyers have two years to build – and Felsch is thinking of fast-tracking other phases that include estate-sized lots and townhomes. "The response has been overwhelming," he said.

When complete, the multi-tiered greens at Redstone resort will represent the premier golf destination in the West Kootenays, which is dotted with at least eight fine courses, all of which have green fees under \$50.

Felsch is also building new custom homes at nearby Red Mountain Ski Resort, where building lots are selling from \$239,000 to well over \$300,000. Red Mountain, the oldest and perhaps the most challenging ski hill in Western Canada, is now under the control of



Robert Felsch (L) and Cary Fisher are developing the Redstone Resort around the former Rossland Golf Course.

U.S. businessman **Howard Katkov**. Katkov bought the Red Mountain property in 2004 and the following year added the Rossland Springs Hotel project to his holdings.

Now, with a billion-dollar plan and 15-year timeline, Katkov is making good on his vision to reinvigorate the Rossland resort's alpine base area to create a major ski resort and downhill biking destination. Slalom Creek, a 67-unit condo project that registered as the largest single residential development ever built in Rossland, is typical of the dramatic changes Katkov is making. Similarly expansive condo developments are either planned or underway.

Alberta buyers

A visit to the West Kootenays gives evidence that the area is now seeing the level of investment and arrivals that have characterized the East Kootenays over the past five years. The area is about an eight-hour drive from Vancouver, but regular air flights into Trail cut the travel time to under an hour from both the Lower Mainland and Calgary.

According to a study by **Landcor Data Corp.** of New Westminster, nearly a quarter of the 4,430 B.C. properties bought by Albertans

last year were in the Kootenays. The influx, primarily by Calgarians, has pushed prices of recreational land sky high. A waterfront lot on Lake Windermere, the first big lake west of Calgary, now tops \$1.2 million. The area is thought to have the highest lakefront prices in B.C.

In the West Kootenays, the influx is coming from both Alberta – including a large number of buyers from Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie – and Greater Vancouver.



Lifestyle draw

It was not surprising to see eight U-Hauls arriving in Castlegar from the Lower Mainland during any week this summer, according to **Mike's RV Ranch**, the Castlegar U-Haul dealer.

The **Castlegar and District Chamber of Commerce** said staff at the Chamber's visitor centre had received more than 5,000 visitors in the second quarter of this year, 1,500 in June alone. Many of the visitors are asking as much about jobs, relocation and investment as they are about golf, the staff confirms.

Locals say a number of the new arrivals are young families seeking lower cost housing, as well as better employment and lifestyle. The **Kootenay Real Estate Board** confirms that MLS sales were running about 11 per cent ahead of 2005 this summer, one of the few boards in the province reporting a sales increase.

The East Kootenays are composed of a number of small towns. Trail, with the Tech Cominco smelter that employs 1,300 and celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, is the region's economic base.

Heritage-enhanced Nelson is the counter-culture mecca, while both Castlegar and Rossland rely on a mix of agriculture, tourism and forestry.

Nelson's widely reported anti-war stance (a statue of American draft dodgers was to be mounted in the town) has actually proven to be a draw, according to the town's economic development officer, **Roy Heuckendorff**. "We get a lot of information requests from young, educated Americans."

He added that a number of small high-tech



Roca Mines has begun work at its Max Molybdenum Mine, 60 kilometres south of Revelstoke in the East Kootenays.

companies have also set up in the town and that two new condominium projects are now underway.

Investors

A big lure is affordable housing. There are detached houses in Nelson and across the East Kootenays under \$150,000, and, with rising employment opportunities, the area is also becoming a magnet for investors.

The West Kootenays are not just about tourism and low-cost homes, however. The **British Columbia Major Projects Inventory** estimates that, as of the third quarter of 2005, construction had started on \$2 billion worth of projects in the Kootenays with another \$1.5 billion proposed.

The construction of a major hydroelectric project, the \$210 million 120-megawatt **Brilliant Expansion** project, has just finished three-years of construction on the Columbia River.

Planning for another major hydro construction project is underway. The \$600 million Waneta Expansion project will see the construction of a powerhouse just below the Waneta Dam, near Trail, on the Pend d'Oreille River. Construction of the project is scheduled to begin next year and be completed by 2011.

Much of the big private-sector projects, however, are centred in the East Kootenays, which has five coal mines and is the major resort destination for Albertans.

Quick facts



West Kootenays

Population 44,794

Average house price \$178,000

Land area 9.9 million sq. km

Top Industries Manufacturing, tourism, government

Median family income \$58,800

Mining

Meanwhile, mining has come back to life in the Kootenays as global metal prices rise.

Roca Mines began construction this summer of its Max Molybdenum Mine, located 60 kilometres south of Revelstoke. Max is a 'pure' molybdenum project that was the subject of significant exploration and engineering work conducted by **Newmont Mines Ltd.** and **Esso Minerals Canada Ltd.** in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"Roca is on track to become the first new primary molybdenum producer in Canada with production slated to commence prior to the end of 2006," said company spokesperson **Doug Fosbrooke**.

Molybdenum is used extensively as an alloy in stainless and specialty steels such as pipelines, automotive parts and mining equipment.

The price of molybdenum has risen over \$3US a pound this year, and is currently trading at around \$28US after peaking at \$40US last year.

Coal mining has also roared back to life, with the East Kootenays the centre of new mines and reopened mines.

Elk Valley Coal now operates five open pit mines in the Elkford and Sparwood areas, employing people from across the West and East Kootenays. ♦

Western INVESTOR
COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE, FRANCHISES & BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES
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