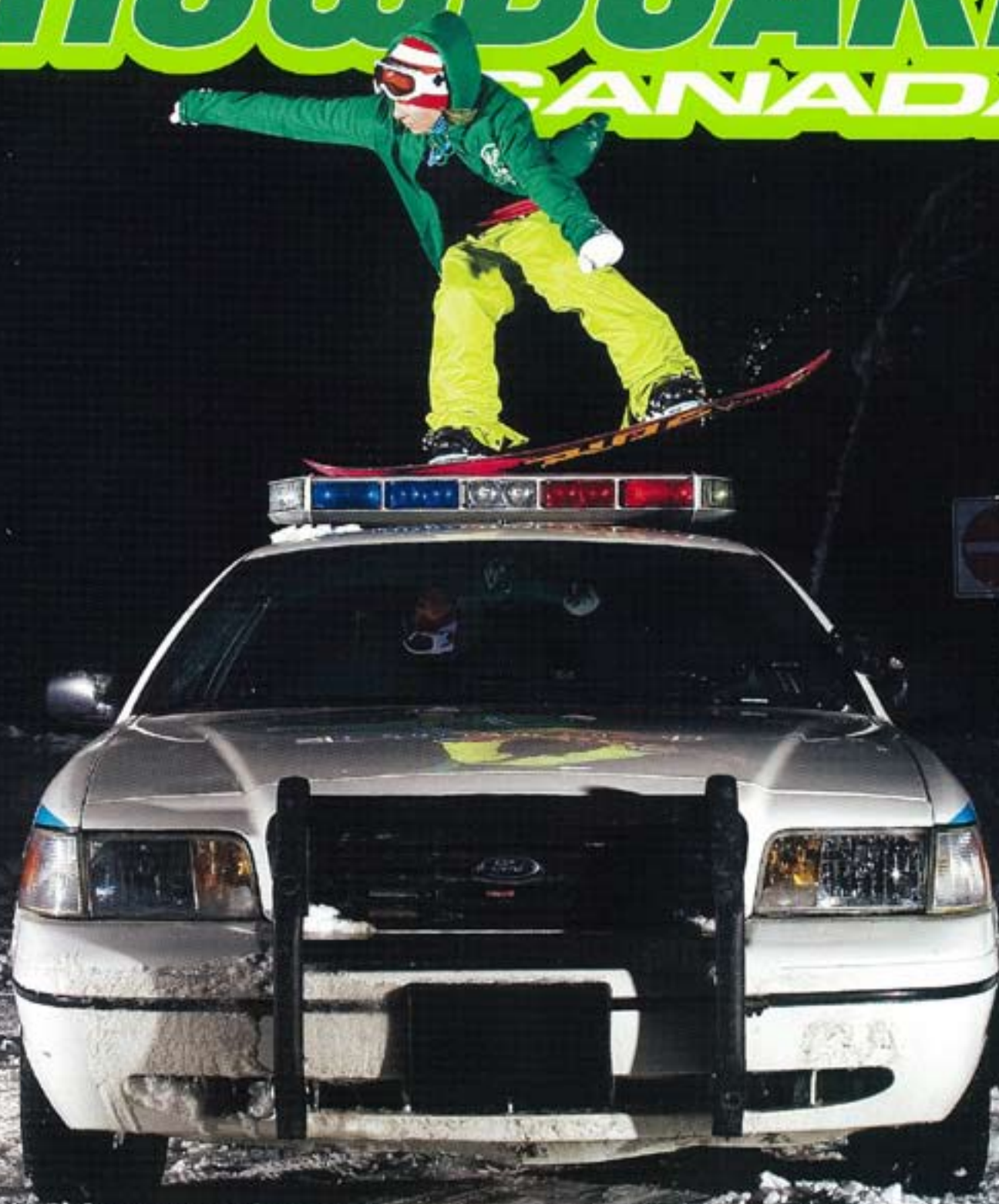


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BOOM OR BUST?
REVELSTOKE, BC'S
NEW DIRECTION



Whistler resident Justin Van Der Polen a.k.a. VDP stopped by for a visit and wasn't disappointed. Dalby photo



FROM GRIT TO GOLD

BOOM OR BUST IN REVELSTOKE'S NEW ECONOMY

BY DANKOSTRZEWSKI

A 200-pound stripper is like a car crash on the Trans-Canada: No matter how much you don't want to see, you still stare. It was our first night on the Revelstoke, BC, town and we found cultural collision at an even stranger intersection. The mix was odd inside the peeler bar: heli skiers lodged at the adjacent Regent Inn, blue-collar locs just off their mill shifts, and a few Alberta slednecks not afraid to get in close.

This scene occurred in 2004, and four of us were fresh from a week-long avy course on Rogers Pass. After passing our last CAA test at the Glacier Park Lodge, we'd walked across to the info centre and signed out a permit to tour into one small sector of Glacier National Park. We traversed one of the park's glaciers, bunked in a tin shed

lashed to bare rock and ripped a five-grand return though a mushroomed pillow field, then shuffled out the Asulkan Valley. Now we were celebrating with a tour of the working town down Highway 1. And after a scenic loop to the hot springs, the gear shop and the Regent's pub, this was the last stop.

We were just passing though, but it was obvious that truck traffic in this river city was an even split between allegiance to either Arc'teryx or Ski-Doo. With only one lift to nowhere, the shred scene was all backcountry access, but heritage houses were five-digit cheap, the Selkirks were sick beyond description, and the deep, light snow was a sweet BC hybrid. For riders already here, this community was a shred utopia. But paradise is fleeting, and Revy was about to boom. ➤



Born and bred in Revelstoke, Keith Martin has hit most of what the town has to offer. Dano photo



The remnants of Revelstoke's first economic boom take a backseat to its new one. Gibbon photo

OLD REVELSTOKE

Revelstoke has a history of riding the economic wave. Miners and loggers came first, but when the Canadian Pacific Railway pushed through Rogers Pass in 1885, the city grew into place by the rail yards. A spot at the transcontinental crossroads made the newly incorporated city a centre of commerce while also bringing big-city amenities and early tourism.

Touring these travelers into the glaciated Selkirk peaks, imported Swiss guides introduced mountaineering to North America in 1899 on Rogers Pass. The next Euro influx was Scandinavian and led to North America's first ski jump just outside town in 1915, where Nordic huckers set world records for going huge on the shaped kicker over the next two decades.

As rail lost ground to road, Revelstoke became isolated until the 1960s, when the Trans-Canada Highway brought the next boon as windshield tourists streamed through. Massive rail and hydro projects revved up through the '80s, resulting in the Connaught Tunnel through Rogers Pass and the Revelstoke Dam on the Columbia River. The end of big construction and a major sawmill closure brought back the bust with unemployment hitting 25 percent, but the next resource was already being tapped.

Hans Gmoser's Canadian Mountain Holi-

days brought heli runs to the neighbouring Monashees in 1971. Selkirk-Tangiers followed suit, the two splitting 4,000 square kilometers of prime tenure to the north, south, east and west. The touring crowd made Rogers Pass its zone due to instant roadside access, parks protection and light, sweet snow. Two-stroke visits also climbed, and winter tourism began driving the economy. In 1991, even the Canadian Avalanche Association set up its headquarters in a town with no shortage of slides, snowfall or exposure.

The first shred migration came for the same deep reason. Taylor Pearcey, the late Greg Todds and Scott Newsome rallied east for photo shoots starting in 1995, taking advantage of a family discount at Cat Powder, an outfit owned by Newsome's uncle Clyde. In 1999, both Newsome and Todds relocated from Whistler, drawn by quality of life and shred. Taylor Pearcey and Cholo Burns followed, and the crew started hitting Rogers Pass, scoring cheap drops on Mount MacPherson and tandeming lines on Boulder and Sale.

"I got some money together, and the first thing I did was buy a truck and a sled. It was pretty hard to live here without one," Pearcey says. "The mountains here are way different from Whistler, and the snow was just too

deep to ski—you had to be on a snowboard. The snowmobile access is endless. There are logging roads everywhere, and if you have a good sense of the backcountry, you can just rip awesome, endless tree runs."

The snow report attracted others searching out an undiscovered spot, including Andre Cadieux, Magee Tabah, Greg Hill and filmer Frank Derossier. Pro shreds such as Jonas Guinn, Kelly Schovanek and Jonaven Moore became regular surfers on Pearcey's couch. The local scene was far away from the media limelight, but in a tight-knit working town, longtime residents noticed the new arrivals.

"They stopped on all corners and stared. And then their jaws dropped when I told them I left Whistler and moved here," Pearcey says. "I could never dream of owning my own home in Whistler, and that was one of the big things. I already knew the powder was awesome. So the shredding wasn't a question. It was neat to move to a small town where everyone knew me within six months of moving here. It was pretty different than living in Whistler."

For shreds searching for a community with stacked peaks but no destination flair, discovering this Victorian city at the crossroads was a rare find. But the tumbleweed atmosphere was about to change in the blink of an eye. ➔

FROM ONE TO MANY

Fast-forward four years, and I'm back to a radical shift. Now, instead of making glacial progress in the park, my semi-pro crew is being whisked up Mount Mackenzie in a sparkling-new Poma gondola with a panoramic view of town. Since opening for the Christmas 2007 holiday, the \$22 million Revelation gondola and the Stoke chair—its companion high-speed quad—have made Revelstoke Mountain Resort the hottest lift ticket in Canada. More drop than Whistler Blackcomb, more snow than Snowbird, and a glowing media buzz got word out fast that this budding resort was sick.

And sick it is, as we discover on run one down Snow Rodeo, a triple-espresso wake-up straight down the fall line. Tarek Husevold and Matt Edgers, two Baker riders who came north to see if the reports were true, are quickly up to speed. It takes my wax time to adjust, but eventually my 64 is running wide open to keep Stu Smith—a night groomer, full-time shred and our wholly stoked guide—in sight. Five grand of rip later, I'm back at the gondola, my lungs needing a breather and my legs needing a rest.

We load up the Revelation again in our own private cabin, cat-track over to the

Stoke and slide through an empty corral to reload the brand-new high-speed chair, which Smith had a hand in making a reality. Pouring concrete, raising towers and stringing cables for Poma was his summer job, and for a steady paycheck his crew helped get this fun machine spinning four days before its grand opening Dec. 22.

"It was truly overwhelming, just the sheer size of the project. The chair itself and the gondola were both big projects on their own," Smith says. "There was a point in the summer where none of us knew, since it was such a tight deadline, if we were going to get through this thing. I finished with Poma and I had three or four days off, then I started with the grooming guys. They just tossed me the keys to a snowcat. It was awesome."

On the ride down, we rip between rollers Smith has given extra lip. Then we load up again, dive down Vertigo ridge, track back for another and duck the rope into lower North Bowl for a taste of different aspect. We catch a single track back in-bounds and reenter next to a field of hoar crystals the size of corn chips, where we meet Smith's girlfriend, Sabina, on patrol checking the boundary rope.

THE GOLD RUSH IS FULL ON, AND AS A RESULT, REVELSTOKE HAS CLEANED UP ITS ACT. FACADES HAVE NEW FACELIFTS, THE BEEHIVE BURNER STOPPED SPEWING POLLUTION, AND SLED TRAILERS FROM THE PRAIRIES NO LONGER HOLD EXCLUSIVE COURT AT THE MOTELS.

After stops in Nelson, Whistler and Golden, Smith and Sabina bought a house here in 2004, when the town was skeptical Revelstoke Mountain Resort would become reality and real estate was still dirt cheap. Smith scored shift work at the mill, Sabina earned an avy 2 certification, and the pair toured in the four corners of the Selkirks and Monashees. The town was quiet, but rumours spread and prices started to rise.

"We won the ski bum lottery," Smith says, as we hike back up a cat road. "It was just affordability that brought us to this town, and the irony of that right now is pretty thick."

After a few more rips, we hike to the repeater atop North Bowl and take in the valley view. As opposed to clear-cut runs or dense trees below, the bowls off this high line are open Selkirk alpine. Lines stack to Mackenzie's north and south, with the proposed 21-lift, 100-trail map set to tap whole zones such as Montana and Kokanee bowls. Gated access is wide open with gnarly backsides to the Trans-Canada already ticked. The city grid sits off in the distance, but it was a municipal push that made the lifts spin.

As forestry slumped and tourism became British Columbia's holy grail, Revelstoke looked to spark a renaissance with a pro-development stance. Wary of selling their soul for a shiny new village, most communities fight developers and master plans bog down for decades. But Mayor Mark McKee backed the bid and earth moved quickly once the plan was approved in 2005.

"I have to remind everyone that it was the City of Revelstoke that drove this whole process," says Paul Skelton, president, trail map architect and chief promoter of Revelstoke Mountain Resort. "Long story short is RMR won the right to work with the government to develop the property. So the city was on board, and they drove the process."

We taste progress as we drop in for fresh in the bowl. Next season, a new North Bowl chair will allow 2,000 feet of bonus tracks through old-growth trees, but for now we exit early to save a posthole home. Roads will rise, brush will thin, and the gondola will run to a Phase 1 village with 59 residential units, commercial tenants and a 1,000-car parking lot. Revelstoke Mountain Resort will drop another \$40 million next season, but the real cost of today's high-speed access is growth. ➔

For obvious reasons the Rome crew spent a lot of time in the area. Jesse Fox sends it into the champagne pow, which has made the area so sought after. Lehl photo

CONCENTRIC SCENES

We start Day 2 with a drive though protected real estate to Rogers Pass, which until this season served as the locals' hill. Winding through 60 clicks of snow sheds and no-stopping zones, we strain to see the exposure dropping directly to the highway. The gas station and Best Western share a lot at 4,360 feet, while a road depot, park warden barracks and avalanche control operation sit across the street. Tours of Grizzly Shoulder start out back, but we pull in for the Rogers Pass Centre next door.

The unique design of this building is to inform and educate. Maps, profiles and a relief of the range aid decision-making, while the avalanche advisory is posted in red, orange, yellow or green. At the desk is the friendly face of Chris Fuoco, who has given advice and consent to the backcountry community for 20 years. We check closures, pay for a permit and get some good-natured grief about our late start. Then we pick our zone and fill out the safety registration in case our plans go bad.

Rogers Pass is not Whistler side-country, and fatalities, from 62 rail workers killed in 1910 to seven schoolchildren tragically taken in 2003, are part of the story here. Complex terrain requires sharp skills but also delivers the goods in good stability. As a result, this rest stop has become a centre of the touring universe with international status and peak days in excess of 300 users, including a quarter skinning in splitboard mode.

During our shuffle toward the Asulkan triangle we stay one stop ahead of a Swedish crew with eyes on the same pillow line. We beat them to the drop, snake down a line too steep to see, and cycle back to hit the fingers, nubs and knuckles in one playground of a huge zone. We exit in fading light and drop our return ticket off at the centre. Then, as guests check in for the skier's special and a foreign party plots their next big day, we recover with bottled beers in the lodge's Grizzly Lounge.

Back by the grizzlies downtown, we find ourselves in an alternate universe in a different centre. The 1910 brick building that now serves as the Discovery Centre was a cornerstone of old Revelstoke, financing an early economy as the Molsons Bank. The bank folded into its competition, and the Revelstoke Review eventually moved in. More recently, Mica Creek Heli promoted its launch from inside, but newer tenants have found a synergy of money, media and tourism in what is now Sotheby's real estate office.

Slick brochures push the presale on the Tangiers and the Nelson Lodge—starting in the low 600s—while a scale model paints a pleasant picture of life on vacation. For better or worse, the village will look a lot like the Whistler model—essentially another base, too—with condo clusters, a celebrity golf course and revenue capture. The grand vision is heli pads for alpha dads, 5,500 units and an experience that will be “a portion Yellowstone

Tarek Husevold slashes under the Revelation gondola—part of the \$22-million first phase of development.
Jmieff photo

THE GRAND VISION IS HELI PADS FOR ALPHA DADS, 5,500 UNITS AND AN EXPERIENCE THAT WILL BE “A PORTION YELLOWSTONE CLUB, ASPEN AND CIRQUE DU SOLEIL.”

Club, Aspen and Cirque du Soleil,” according to chief operating officer Rod Kessler.

All eyes are on a scale rendering of Revelstoke Mountain Resort in full spread. Destination visitors circle in awe while publicists chat with a national journalist returning his all-access media pass. With no such credentials, I find not one Sotheby's agent willing to even take my card for a return call. It suddenly hits that my kind is nowhere in the artist's renderings and this display is not meant for me.

During the startup phase, shreds like us have enjoyed the fruits of initial investment with not one condo or corral wait, but each new chair is prefaced on selling real estate. “Sometimes you have to spur real estate sales by building lifts,” RMR president and former Whistler mountain manager Skelton says. “Right now we've built lifts to spur real estate sales.”

Demand for the next great place has skyrocketed but so has speculation. As prices have superheated, the resulting grab has everyone from Seattle ER docs to Alberta oilmen snapping up properties simply to flip them for a profit. The landed worth of normal shreds has gone from 109 to 450, from 87 to 587 and from six to seven digits in less than four years. If you haven't bought in, it's likely you're out of luck.

The gold rush is full on, and as a result, Revelstoke has cleaned up its act. Facades have new facelifts, the beehive burner stopped spewing pollution, and sled trailers from the Prairies no longer hold exclusive court at

the motels. Million-dollar homes went up on \$20,000 lots, developers looked to level trailer parks, and many retired residents cashed in their chip and moved to Smithers, Kelowna or Williams Lake. Even town leaders—including the fire chief, planning director and newspaper editor—have moved on.

A housing crisis hit hard with tenant evictions, a Renters Voice organization and a new Affordable Housing Society. Revelstoke Mountain Resort has promised 500 employee units—in some future phase—but with ambition to rival Whistler, Vail or Jackson, even this will house only a fraction of the incoming service class.

Studies have been done and land set aside, but no action plan is in place. “We'd love to be the first community that had a major resort development and yet still was seen as a cute, quaint place that you didn't have to be a millionaire to visit,” says Alan Mason, director of community economic development. “But the trick is, can we pull it off?”

With a dose of déjà vu, we see New Revelstoke in full glory back at the peeler bar. This time the stage show at Stokers is less offensive and the coed crowd talks of only two topics: Shaun White and real estate. White was shooting pool on this table just weeks before, but that superstar sighting is nothing compared to the newly minted value of personal worth. Revelstoke has jumped from Junior B to the NHL virtually overnight, and this rise has stirred a demographic shift both in and out. ➔

THE GREAT MIGRATION

It was a boozy night, and I left my tab open at the bar. The next morning I'm retrieving my credit card in the Regent swarmed by a powder panic. It is fresh and blue, causing a mad rush among a clientele anxious to get pow for their euros, pounds and dollars. On the lobby's wall, daily rosters keep an individual tally of runs needed for the million-foot one-piece. This exclusive market is the target Sotheby's, and RMR has it in its crosshairs.

As an integral part of its vision, Revelstoke Mountain Resort purchased Selkirk-Tangiers Heli Skiing and Cat Powder, two mechanized operations with prime tenure bordering Mount Mackenzie. This upcoming season, visitors will swipe one magic pass—at drastically different rates—for lift,

heli or cat. Groomed cat skiing, single-family heli pads and a boutique experience that will compete with CMH, but get the whole family into an appreciating property, are all possible in this hybrid model.

"You may choose on any given day that you'll ride the lift to the top of South Bowl, tour across the ridge, hook up with a cat, ski on the backside, and we'll pick you up in a heli and fly you out," says Kessler, who came west from Stowe for the new challenge of growing RMR.

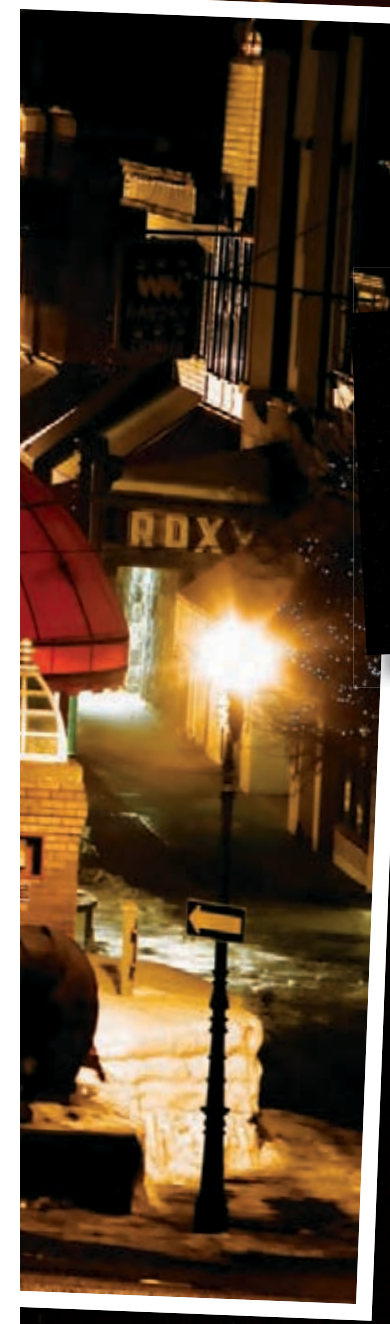
We have no golden ticket, so instead of a morning pickup we hike above and below North Bowl. We posthole up a Hollywood ridge, then gaze into a drainage that will be annexed to the network next season. Smith rips the rock-star chute to give it a test, and

then Husevold goes huge for the camera, and Edgers billy-goats into a sharky line to complete the sequence.

It may not be crowded yet, but the industry is already here, which is evident back at the staircase. At the top of the 'Stoke we bump into a French friend with a Chilean lodge, a writer in town for a three-day shred, and a crew from *Frequency* trailing four Calgary transplants who vibe us with new localism. Smith is still buzzed from showing Shaun White his lines, while Jake Burton is scheduled to make a trip out this spring.

We didn't buy in early and heli is not in our budget, but as consolation Smith shows us the White line. We drop through glade after glade and fight an overgrown entry to

The downtown of a soon-to-be-not-so-sleepy town.
Jmiff photo



REVELSTOKE IS GOING BIG, BUT THE BIG QUESTION IS, WILL THEY STICK THE LANDING? IN A PERFECT WORLD, REVELSTOKE WILL LEARN FROM THE MISTAKES OF BOOM TOWNS WHERE LOCALS WORK LONG HOURS AT LOW WAGES TO SCRATCH OUT A SEASONAL EXISTENCE.

Gribbon photo

emerge at cliffs on top of a pillowed field. We ride the stacks less clean than the A-team, but run it out through thick and thin to the base, where we tailgate overlooking the village site. The spotlight is on, and Revelstoke is ready for its moment.

And with fame comes the fortune of opportunity. Dollars are flowing in with the revival, jobs are easy to find, and RMR has been a good neighbour, spreading the wealth by hiring locally during the honeymoon phase. New enhancements like the aquatic centre have kept locals as optimistic as the press releases. The service sector is booming with everything from a new sushi spot and a new guide service to the Great White North at Boulder's base, where we head for dinner.

Formerly the antiquated Black Forest Inn, Jason Worby and his wife Natasha made the place feel like home when they moved from Whistler in 2005 with stools from the GLC, a moose head from Dusty's

and an imported feel for an après scene. Receipts have been up every month since, and the food-service contract at the hill also landed on their plate. On either end of town, they are feeding the boom.

"There's been a huge migration," Worby says. "Just a steady stream of all these Whistler and Banff people from both sides here. It's not super-young kids; it's people who have had their big heyday in the big resorts but are looking to settle down in a place with a little more opportunity, where everything's not already sewn up."

Doors are opening everywhere for business, and friends tired of the circus are making recon trips. The euphoria of a great migration is easy to feel, but time will tell if the next wave will stake a nice claim or roll in one season too late. Right now the community is crossing its fingers, hoping it doesn't become Fernie West or Whistler East. ➤

THE COMMUNITY FABRIC

Six days in, we are back to local reality. The forecast looked grey, so half our crew headed home, but Edgers and I stick around for the weekend shred at Smith's place. In the bathroom is an archive of snowboard mags, and on the wall are topo maps that piece together the surrounding ranges. As the pellet stove cranks and Radio Paradise plays, we get a warm feel from this pre-existing scene.

In the morning we grab organic fair-trade coffee at the Modern Bakeshop and Café but find an accident, a slide or both has closed the Trans-Canada. So instead of a reprise on Rogers Pass, Smith and Sabina take us to their secret Monashee spot on the other side of the tracks. We gain ground though a clear-cut under hot sun until we switchback into the cover of tall timber.

"We were glad to get out of a resort town and move into a real community," Smith says. "That was something we were very conscious of when we moved to town here, and I hope that a lot of these people coming to town here—the young kids especially—that if they are leaving those places for those reasons, don't come here and turn this place into what they are running away from."

Breaking trail and gaining ground over rises committed to memory, we climb 4,500 feet and top out at heli flags marking CMH's 112 Chute. This is poaching tenure, but we are about to taste a connoisseur's line thanks to local hospitality. We've been welcomed to a special neighbourhood with the float of Monashee pow at our feet. Ripping our lane under the cover of ancient old growth, I hold out hope that both this sweet stash and this distinctive place will not be gutted by the new resource boom.

Usually, sledders and riders compete for terrain and the rivalry can get pretty heated. Working together, Cody Borchers and Scott Shaw come out safely and stoked. Patterson photo

Boom or bust. Jmieff photo



Revelstoke townsite.
Jmieff photo

CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Revelstoke is going big, but the big question is, Will they stick the landing? In a perfect world, Revelstoke will learn from the mistakes of boom towns where locals work long hours at low wages to scratch out a seasonal existence. Opportunity, advancement and tax revenue will outweigh stress on infrastructure, while above-average snowfall will keep spirits high and revenue higher. Separation between base and town will maintain heritage, preserve a working class and make space for soul. Rogers Pass will not suffer the traffic of Teton Pass, and dark windows will not haunt new development.

But anyone who has tried to make it work on the village margins knows the economy of reality. The 10-year progression to a company town with a transient population is entirely possible in Revelstoke, even if intentions are good and direct flights keep landing. Building community strength as lifts and condos rise is a paradox no locality has dialed, even one swelling with such local pride. The natural emotion is to root for the hometown, yet it's also rational to brace for an impact this town seems keen to feel.

"It'll be more like when I moved to Whistler,"

Pearcey says. "When I moved to Whistler, I wasn't thinking of buying a house, I was thinking about doing Late 180s and Backside 720s and Rodeo Flips. That's what the kids moving here are thinking about. If they want to buy, there is nothing to buy around here. But if you've got money, you're in. There are definitely people bitching about their taxes and that nobody is going to be able to afford to live in this town. But before it was just a little piss-ant town, and now there is something."

On Sunday, Edgers and I scrap for left-overs on Vertigo ridge and strike out south while comically falling for lack of legs. We grab one last Oso (a great local coffee) at the lodge, where every weekend seat is filled. With the dusting cleared and cars lined up out of eyeshot down the road, we don't feel guilty calling it at noon. As we change out of boots in the shadow of new construction, a young shred with Ontario plates and a car packed to the windows hints at what might come next. Fresh with optimism but short on cash, he asks to clip our media tickets, foreshadowing that the next chapter in Revelstoke may be a story we all know by heart.