

West Kootenays Are Luring Buyers

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By Ozzie Jurock

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While the East Kootenays have become the playground for Albertans – 22% of the 4,430 B.C. properties purchased by Albertans last year were in the East Kootenays according to Landcor Data Corp (landcor.com) – the West Kootenays are being seen as the new destination for Greater Vancouver buyers.

And many of these buyers aren't coming to just ski and golf – though both are world-class in the region – but are young professionals and their families fleeing the Lower Mainland's high house prices.

On a single day in July for instance, eight large U-Haul moving trucks arrived full in Castlegar from Vancouver, according to Sherry Molnar Gray of Mike's RV Ranch, the Castlegar U-Haul dealer. In the previous three weeks, 10 large, 26-foot moving trucks had been dropped off in Castlegar after delivering new families to the area. Molnar Gray called the influx the largest she has seen in the last five years. And she adds that the majority of those trucks arrived with young families and most had come from the coast.

The Castlegar and District Chamber of Commerce said staff at the Chamber's visitor centre had received over 5,000 visitors in the second quarter of this year, 1,500 in June alone. Many of the visitors are asking about relocation and investment, including MLS listings.

The West Kootenays lure is understandable and the statistics confirm the housing action. Sales on MLS through the Kootenay and District Real Estate Board were up 11.3% in July, for instance, one of only three Boards in the province that posted an increase from July 2005.

Take a drive into Nelson (we recommended it 5 years ago), the trendy old town at the heart of the West Kootenays, and you are immediately struck by the youth in the city: young parents and their children and what appear to be many young singles. "We are actually a magnet for DINKS (dual income no kids)," (Ed. note: As opposed to Yaletown's DINS: dual income no sex.) explains Roy Heuckendorff (250-352-3433) economic development officer for the town of 10,000. These aren't hippy-looking young people: the patrons of packed coffee shops on the historic-style main street make it look more like Yaletown.

Nelson is the quintessential representation of what planners call a techno destination. The town has no big industry but is buzzing with high-tech and artistic entrepreneurs. The stage manager for Madonna lives here as do Star Wars movie designers, Microsoft programmers and scientists for a world-class genetic research lab. The town was named one of the top artists communities in North America last year and its anti-Bush, anti-war stance (the famous statue to war resisters is tucked in a backyard) drew the attention of the New York Times.

"We get a lot of information requests from young, educated Americans," said Heuckendorff. Nelson is the only Kootenay town without a McDonald's and with an annual Gay Pride parade. The town has a vibe. There are art school students, classical musicians, scientists, intellectuals, extreme mountain bikers, Rotarians, Doukhobors, and countless alternative health practitioners. There's a community college, two Tibetan Buddhist meditation centres, the Academy of Classical Oriental Sciences, the Canadian Legion, a Waldorf school, a co-op radio station, 30 restaurants, and an unknown numbers of marijuana grow-ops – and a Wal-Mart.

While real estate prices have shot up in Nelson, we had no trouble finding detached houses for under \$150,000, though less expensive houses in nearby Castlegar and Trail are more common.

The real deal here in Nelson is homes in the \$250,000-\$300,000 range, which translates into five-bedrooms on a full acre or nice homes with great views of the Kootenay River. Building lots have nearly doubled in value in the past year, to the \$130,000-\$150,000 range.

Nelson's waterfront is the site of at least three new developments, from condominiums to building lots. In town by the landmark orange bridge, only 9 of 38 waterfront condos are left in a pre-selling stick-frame project (Ross Lake at 250-354-8403) that completes next year. Prices start at \$225,000. Judging from local rents, it would be difficult for these to carry as an investment. Local rumours are that at least four other condo developments are being eyed for downtown Nelson.

Major Point: The West Kootenays represent a top real estate investment in B.C., drawing buyers from Calgary, Vancouver and Washington State. Outstanding golf and skiing (see www.redstoneresort.com) low real estate prices and a vibrant economy add up to a region where prices are just starting to move up quickly.