

FERNIE: CINDERELLA OF THE KOOTENAYS

A 19th century coal mining town sheds a curse and becomes an international resort centre. By Luisa Rino



TOP LEFT: Fernie in 1899. Photo: Fernie & District Historical Society. Double spread: Henrik Westling telemarking in Fernie backcountry, a century later. Photo: Henry Georgi.

They are now calling me “Miss Fernie” around the office. That’s because I was born there—in Fernie, in southeastern British Columbia’s Elk Valley. And because last winter, I went back. I went back to discover what has turned this Kootenay Mountain mining town into a destination resort, a magnet for skiers and sports followers in every season.

Start at the beginning: Fernie, home to slightly more than 5,000 people, was originally called Coal Creek and dubbed the “Pittsburgh of the West.” It took its present name from its scurrilous founder, William Fernie, who ditched his bride, stole the secrets of the coal seams and left the town with a curse. But more on that later. After I left Fernie, my mother kept me

updated by sending the local paper. One week the *Elk Valley Miner* headline declared “Fernie Gets Traffic Light.” Needless to say, my UBC dormmates did not let me live it down. And now, even bigger changes have taken place. My hometown has acquired a few more traffic lights, ATMs (also worthy of front page headlines) and we can even buy Starbucks coffee on the hill. Ah... the sweet progress of latte.

I knew things were really turning around when, during a Christmas trip home, my father announced that he’d just met the Prince of Norway. Now *that’s* a headline. At the centre of my father’s introduction to the Crown Prince was Mike Delich, who is also the person at the centre of the immense development that has taken place in Fernie. Another catalyst for the frenzy of activity in

town and on the hill was Charlie Locke’s buy-out of Fernie Alpine Resort in 1996. Skier visits went from 165,000 when Locke bought the resort to a projected 330,000 for 2000/01. On the flip side, the new attention has caused some rifts. Remember, this is an old mining community. It isn’t that the people don’t appreciate change, but they feel a strong sense of proprietorship of their town.

Something happening blocks away (like the implementation of a new four-way stop) affects the locals as if it were in their own back yard (which, relatively speaking, it usually is). This is good, this is what real community is about, and it is what distinguishes Fernie from other vacation destinations—people care, the community is present, the town has a soul.

It seems fitting then that the person behind the majority of the development in Fernie is a local. Councillor Randall Macnair believes “much of the benefit to the local economy is coming from the construction and development industry.” Delich’s Fernie Vacation Properties alone provide a healthy list: Timberline Lodge, Kerrin Lee-Gartner’s Snow Creek Lodge and Cabins, Bear Paw Lodges, Polar Peak Lodges, Fernie Golf Estates and the Fernie General Store, along with some clandestine makeovers of main street buildings. I spent a morning with Mike touring the various properties and he was reluctant to let me in on his master plan, but I managed to get a discreet insight into his philosophy.

Because of his longtime involvement in ski racing (Mike is an accredited International FIS race official, has officiated World Cup and Continental Cup ski races, was Chief of Race for downhill events at the 1998 Olympics, and has two daughters, Julia and Jennifer, who have been on Canadian and National Ski Teams respectively) he has seen many resorts and been able to bring the knowledge back with him. “The market is going toward an experience economy. At first we had to deliver a product, then the product had to come with a service, and now people want an experience along with it.”

His two newest projects, Bear Paw Lodges and the Kerrin Lee-Gartner Snow Creek Lodge and Cabins, provide the total package: luxury, service, experience. “In Fernie,” says Mike, “you must be a pioneer, a leader. People go to places like Whistler and Vail and expect the same here.”

Marmie Laird, designer for the Bear Paw project, describes the units: “This is fine architecture but it is still warm.” During my tour we dropped in on the Interior Design Team, which inevitably led to Mike sitting down with pencil and paper to outline the key concepts to surround the design of these new units. Mike pays close attention to the most minute details of his projects—“We have an array of properties and we say we are unique, but then we have to walk it.” With iron bowl basin sinks, waterfall faucets, stone counters, timber frame ceilings, lantern windows that cantilever the viewer outside and the outside in, turret windows, views from all angles, and units that range from 1,600 to 2,400 square feet, it seems safe for Mike to claim that “these are the highest-end mountain units outside of the Intrawest resorts.” Bear Paw Lodges attached homes

will sell for just under one million dollars.

The luxury of a place like Snow Creek or Bear Paw goes beyond the details. You will find fine dining, hot tubs, pools, gyms, spas, fireplaces and impeccable service. Guests can ski down from the patio door to the Elk Chair up to the high speed quad. Skiers go from the door to the top of the mountain in fifteen minutes. And there is more.

Fernie is a community with roots, set down in the late 19th century, when coal was discovered during the building of the Crow’s Nest Pass Railway. Ken van Heyningen, area manager at Fernie Alpine Resort, boasts “there aren’t many mountains that can claim to have staff that has been with them for 20 years.” Delich concurs. Not only does he pull his resources from the Kootenay region and use local artisans, the tradespeople have been with him since the beginning, 10 years ago. (One being my father, the one-man painting machine.)

You can get untracked powder anywhere here, and even when there are 4,000 people up, you don’t feel a crowd.



ABOVE: Coal Creek miners in the 1890s. **Photo:** Fernie & District Historical Society. **CENTRE, CLOCKWISE:** Trinity Mountain; bikers on Polar Peak Trail; fly fishing on Silver Springs Lake, Elk Valley; backcountry snowboarders; legendary powder. **Photos:** Fernie Tourism, Henry Georgi, Mark Gallup, Judy McMahon.



Delich believes this “gives quality assurance, continuity and a good working environment.” A well-rooted indigenous population imbues Fernie with a unique authenticity. Yes, the mountains are breathtaking, but they also carry rich folklore that animates these enormous formations of rock.

The Three Sisters (or Trinity Mountain) are a perfect example. Local legend tells a tale of three Indian princesses, one Indian prince and a disastrous scenario of unrequited love. Needless to say the princesses and their prince (Mt. Proctor) stand as an eternal testament to the sin of indecision. This is only one of numerous legends that have a profound effect on the type of experience available in Fernie. A hike up the mountains in Fernie is not a hike up an anonymous place. The place holds a story, a past, a feeling.

The feeling was so profound for Kerrin Lee-Gartner that it revitalized her love of skiing. “When I was travelling and doing it as work, I lost a lot of the passion as a racer, but when I came here four years ago and skied, it brought something back to me.”

Lee-Gartner was the Downhill Olympic Champion in 1992 in Albertville and is now a resident of Fernie and partner with Mike Delich on the project that bears her name. She has known Mike since she was five. He was her first ski racing coach. She speaks of him with great fondness. “Mike has been here the longest, his buildings have lasted, they are high-end, he has proven himself in the community—his name brings a standard of quality with it. It was a big plus that Mike was from Fernie—he wanted to be proud of what stood here.”

Mike could not have chosen a more affable spokesperson to represent the lodge and the future cabins. A three-time Olympian, Kerrin says winning the gold has given her opportunities. Beside the time she takes to speak with fans that spot her on the hill, and her involvement in the lodge and the cabins, she is a ski analyst for CBC Television Sports. Given Kerrin’s experience on many a hill, the question of how Fernie ranks must be asked. Her response: “Fernie is a natural experience, different from a lot of areas in that there is no mass snow-making here—there aren’t snow guns on every run that cause you to lose the feeling of being in the mountains. Fernie is quiet. The only guns are at the base—the rest is all natural—a serene beauty.”

Kerrin talked about the new parts of the hill and how they were developed: “There are three bowls that fill with snow, and the way the runs were developed, you can ski all day



TOP LEFT: Fernie main street in 2000, Fernie Alpine Resort in background. RIGHT: The Fernie Brothers, William (seated) and Peter. Photo: Fernie & District Historical Society. CENTRE: Kerrin Lee-Gartner and daughters. BOTTOM: Snow Creek Lodge interior. Photos top, left and bottom: Henry Georgi.



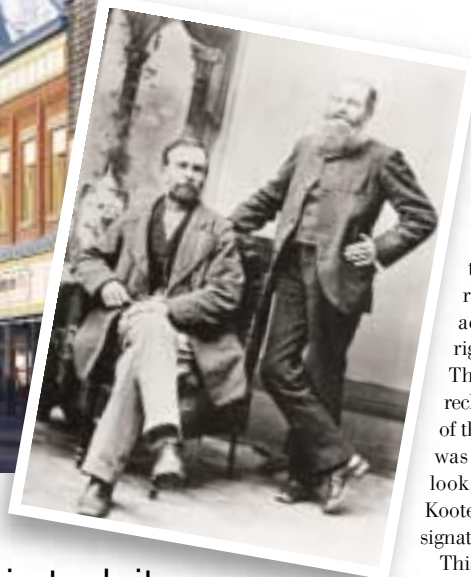
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and not ski the same run. You can get untracked powder anywhere here, and even when there are 4,000 people up there, you don't feel the people."

Of these mountains of adventure, van Heyningen says: "Fernie is hands down the best powder skiing resort in western Canada. It feels like back country or helicopter skiing, but you get there with a lift." What is unique about this hill is that it is still somewhat "in the rough, the skier is not always under a chair lift." A real sense of escape.

None of this is news to the people in the Elk Valley or the Albertans who have been coming to Fernie for years. It was only after Locke bought the hill and made it part of the Resorts of the Canadian Rockies that the world discovered what was known for years as Snow Valley. As Darlene, a salt-of-the-earth type and co-owner of the Royal Hotel, puts it, "All hell broke loose. He invited the world but forgot to tell 'em there weren't enough restaurants or accommodations."

Darlene and Riel run the Royal Hotel that burned in both of Fernie's historic fires. (Only two of the major disasters to hit Fernie because of the curse.) Both fires razed the city, which



eventually led to all brick and stone buildings built post-1908. The Royal is just one of the historic sites in the restored town. In it you can find classic French cuisine with the ambience of a luxury restaurant of 1909, period accommodations and a pub right out of *Northern Exposure*. The new library has also reclaimed a heritage building, site of the former post office. (This too was painted by my father. If you look closely, you will see that the Kootenay Michelangelo has left his signature in a corner of the ceiling.)

This is all in keeping with Mike's philosophy of development (which could be called his master plan). Delich's General Store was designed by architect Harry Measure, who has a master's degree in Victorian mining town themes. The lighting fixtures, the wrought iron and wooden plank floors are all evidence of this. In it is an Italian deli where skiers can go for a quick après-ski meal or hikers can have a light lunch prepared for their excursion. The Ghost Rider Trading Company is filled with work by local artisans, from fine furniture to Fernie logo ware. At the back will be an outdoor outfitter, projected to open this spring. Down the street, just opened during my Christmas trip home, is the Cottage Restaurant. It offers a lunch, dinner and a late, late menu. Part-owner Robert Smith says that in the summer a breakfast menu will also become available. Delich also plans to open a mountain hut this year, something out of the Austrian or Swiss Alps, just outside of Snow Creek Lodge on the hill. It will serve a Rocky Mountain menu, fine wines and exquisite deserts. Already on the mountain is the Lizard Creek dining room, which boasts four-and-a-half star chef Gary Dayanandan. It looks like the restaurant scene is beginning to catch up with, as Riel put it, "the zillions of Australians" coming to Fernie. Aside from the luxury developments Mike has on the hill, Best Western recently opened the Fernie Mountain Lodge in town.

All this development is targeting a high-end market. And winter is just the beginning. Summer remains relatively untapped. The secret is out about winters in Fernie, but not many have realized that summer is just as good, if not better. John Birrell, president of Island Lake Lodge, has bookings two years in advance for the winters, but the summers still have much potential.



Ceremonial dance in 1964 to expunge the ancient curse on Mount Hosmer. Photo: Fernie & District Historical Society. Horse and rider shadow show ghosts still ride on Hosmer. Photo: Henry Georgi.

The appeal of Fernie's winter is obvious. At Island Lake, a snowcat takes a group of twelve with two certified guides to fields of fresh natural powder. At the tamarack log lodges, in themselves a glorious getaway, a four-star French chef prepares all the meals. In summer, the focus is on the wilderness experience. Hiking, fly-fishing, white water rafting, horseback riding and mountain biking (the Elk Quad chair lift runs all summer long at Fernie Alpine Resort and the resort will be host for the BC Cup and Canada Cup mountain biking events this summer) are all recreation options arranged through Island Lake and various outfitters in town. Ned Cooper of Rocky Mountain Vacations says "The fly-fishing is world class. This is the best native western cut-throat dry fly-fishing in North America." Elk River teems with a cut-throat population, said to be getting healthier each year.

The appeal of Island Lake is its seclusion in 7,000 acres of forest. When I asked John if he were a part of the 'experience economy' he answered "We're in the experience business—we provide a comfortable lodge away from the crowds. It just happens to be a wilderness experience." Note the absence of telephones, computer jacks and television sets in the guest rooms—complete disconnection. Birrell says the lodge attracts everyone from "upscale

people with private jets to snow boarders who scrape together their last pennies."

Then I discovered the wilderness version of extreme sports: Total Outdoor Adventures. It offers everything from fly-fishing to mountain lion biology tours to big game hunting. Vince Cocciolo, co-owner and guide, says that 95 percent of his clientele is American and the rest is from Europe. "Italy is big for us," he says. Equipped with a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science, a Diploma in Renewable Resource Management and another in Fish and Wildlife Technology, Cocciolo emphasizes "the difference is that we are aware of proper wildlife management." These tours run from \$5,000—\$14,000 US per week.

This is all happening in and around Fernie, the town in which I was born and raised, and in which I spent a part of my adolescence without even a movie theatre. Mike says "we have to keep raising the bar." Few would have imagined that it would ever get as high as it is today.

Remember the curse I mentioned? Well, if the city's progress is any indication, we can assume that the curse-lifting ceremony in 1964 worked. If you want to know what happened, you'll have to pay a visit to Fernie. Just ask any local (could turn out to be my father) about the Ghost Rider whose shadow haunts Mt. Hosmer every night at dusk. ☘

Getting There

By Air:

- Air BC flies to Cranbrook Airport
- Most major airlines fly to Calgary International Airport
- Southwest, Delta and most major lines fly to Spokane International Airport

By Train:

- Amtrak travels to Whitefish, Montana

By Car:

- From Cranbrook, one hour
- From Calgary, three hours
- From Spokane, 4.5 hours
- From Whitefish, two hours

By Bus:

- Greyhound Bus Lines serve Fernie twice daily.

Shuttle Service:

- Dicken Bus Lines has daily airport transfers to and from Calgary and Cranbrook airports.
- Rocky Mountain Sky Shuttle runs four times daily from Calgary Airport to Fernie.

For live weather cameras and snow conditions at Fernie Alpine Resort, visit www.snowcreeklodge.com. A double encryption allows secure bookings online, or call 1-800-667-9911.



How Fernie Rates with Skiers

Skiing Magazine ranks Fernie as North America's third best area for powder and ninth best for backcountry skiing. Fernie is now the fourth largest ski resort in Canada. Some comparisons:

Area	Skiable Terrain	Summit Elevation	Base Elevation	Vertical Drop	Average Snowfall	Lift Cap.	Trails	Longest Run	Season
Fernie	2,504 acres	6,316 ft (1925 m)	3,500 ft (1068 m)	2,811 ft (857 m)	29.1 ft (875 cm)	13,716 skiers/hr	106	3.1 miles (5 km)	Early Dec. — mid-April
Blackcombe	3,414 acres	7,494 ft (2284 m)	2,140 ft (653 m)	5,280 ft (1609 m)	30.0 ft (914 cm)	29,112 skiers/hr	100	7.0 miles (11 km)	Mid Nov. — late April
Whistler	3,657 acres	7,160 ft (2182 m)	2,214 ft (653 m)	5,020 ft (1530 m)	30.0 ft (914 cm)	29,895 skiers/hr	100+	7.0 miles (11 km)	Late Nov. — mid-June
Big White	2,204 acres	7,606 ft (2319 m)	4,950 ft (1508 m)	2,550 ft (777 m)	24.5 ft (750 cm)	23,400 skiers/hr	105	4.5 miles (7.2 km)	Late Nov. — late April
Panorama	2,847 acres	7,800 ft (2380 m)	3,800 ft (1160 m)	4,000 ft (1220 m)	12.1 ft (347 cm)	7,000 skiers/hr	100	3.1 miles (5 km)	Nov. — late April
Sun Peaks	2,418 acres	6,824 ft (2,080 m)	3,930 ft (1198 m)	2,891 ft (881 m)	17.0 ft (527 cm)	7,263 skiers/hr	80	5.0 miles (8 km)	Nov. 20 — mid-April
Silverstar	3,065 acres	6,280 ft (1915 m)	3,780 ft (1155 m)	2,500 ft (760 m)	23.0 ft (701 cm)	13,800 skiers/hr	107	5.0 miles (8 km)	Nov. — mid-April
Lake Louise	4,200 acres	8,765 ft (2672 m)	5,450 ft (1662 m)	3,365 ft (1010 m)	11.7 ft (351 cm)	16,920 skiers/hr	105	5.0 miles (8 km)	Early Nov. — early May
Mt. Tremblant	610 acres	3,001 ft (915 m)	870 ft (250 m)	2,131 ft (649 m)	12.5 ft (382 cm)	25,130 skiers/hr	92	3.75 miles (6 km)	Mid-Nov. — late April

RESEARCH: MICHAEL ANGER