

Road Trippin' Through the Kootenays

by KATE ROBERTSON

“Teck Trail is one of the largest fully integrated zinc and lead smelting and refining complexes in the world,” says Wally, our 84-year-old guide and ex-employee of the operation.

I am at the Teck Interpretive Centre in downtown Trail, a large room filled with displays, hands-on exhibits, videos and facts.

Founded in 1896, Teck Trail has gone through many changes and been the pioneer of several technologies that changed the face of smelting and mining world-wide. Aside from production of lead, zinc and precious ores, Teck Trail also now produces fertilizers and recycles batteries.

(Fun fact: the walkie-talkie, a precursor to the cell phone, was invented in 1937 for Teck).

This two-hour free guided tour includes a trip up to the electrolytic and melting plant to view the operation.

Teck Trail is appropriately my first stop on a three-day road trip through the West Kootenays, looping from Trail to New Denver and back. After all, it was mining that put the region on the map, including the building of the railway, hydroelectric dams and towns. Teck Trail is still the largest private-sector employer in the city.

We head 10 kilometres up-mountain to Rossland, founded in the 1890s as a gold-mining town, to the Rossland Museum, located on the original Le Roi mine site. This well-put-together museum has artifacts and displays that focus not only on mining history, but also the social/cultural history and nearby Red Mountain's ski history.

The museum houses replicas like a trappers cabin, post office, bar, and general store. QR codes on some exhibits provide access to narrated stories. Allow yourself a couple of hours so you can also wander the extensive outdoor display, exhibiting items like pneumatic compressors, aerial tramways and a 1945 caboose.

Today tourism is the mainstay for Rossland, so it's fun to shop the unique boutiques and sports shops.

Rossland is all about the outdoors: golf courses, skiing at Red Mountain Resort, hiking and mountain biking trails and, of course, amazing restaurants.

After placing our order at Underbelly, a little bistro with a big personality specializing in house-smoked meats, we cross the street for a beer at the Rossland Beer Company. On the sunny patio I enjoy every last bite of my succulent shredded-pork sandwich, slathered with cheese, hot banana peppers and just the right amount of house-made BBQ sauce.

We wear off the calories with the self-guided Rossland Heritage Walking Tour, a collection of 31 heritage buildings and sites ranging from the Miners Union Hall to the Kamloops Mining and Drilling Co. building (tip: plan your route, Rossland has a lot of steep uphill streets).

The next morning is a 40-minute drive north to Castlegar. Along with mining, the region has an important history for the Doukhobors, a pacifist, non-materialistic religious sect who fled from persecution in Russia in 1899.

At the Doukhobor Discovery Centre, several beautiful red-bricked buildings contain displays that celebrate the Doukhobor culture and heritage, including a replicated “dom”, a traditional communal residence.

A life-size statue of Leo Tolstoy overlooks the grassy courtyard, an homage to the great Russian novelist who helped fund their journey.

Carrying on the road trip, we take a 30-minute drive to Nelson, established in 1886 when a copper-silver deposit was discovered on Toad Mountain. On the second floor of the Nelson Museum, Archives & Gallery, a collection of over 7,000 artifacts walks you through local history from First Nations Ktunaxa and Sinixt peoples, to the early mining history which put Nelson on the map, to the logging history and the culture of sports and arts that are strong in the city.

The drive up Kootenay Lake from Nelson to Kaslo, alongside the deep

blue lake flanked by snow-capped mountains, is arguably the most stunning drive in all of British Columbia.

Kaslo, the oldest incorporated community in the Kootenays, was established in 1893 to service the silver mining rush in the region.

The *SS Moyie*, a stern wheeler that provided service between Nelson and Kaslo and the last sternwheeler in Canada when it retired in 1957, is our first stop.

We wander the luxurious passenger dining, lounge and staterooms and check out the cargo deck and vintage cars (all carefully restored in 2023).

For a \$5 donation, you can even blow the ship's original steam whistle. Onsite there is also a miner's cabin, CPR caboose and restored Kuskanook Ladies' Salon.

We overnight at the Kaslo Hotel, originally built in 1896, but burned to the ground in 1950. Built again in 1958, it was completely restored/renovated into the current boutique hotel in 2009. From 1942-1945, the hotel was also used for interned Japanese Canadians.

This is a sadder part of the history of some of the small towns of the West Kootenays. They were government-designated as internment camps for Japanese Canadians forcibly relocated during WW2.

On the second floor of the Langham, we learn more at the Japanese Canadian Museum, from a self-guided archival display of artifacts, photographs and story-boards.

Eighty Japanese were interned in this building, and on the third floor there's a replica of the sleeping quarters of one of the families.

Both the Langham and the *SS Moyie* are included on the self-guided Kaslo Heritage Walking Tour, which also includes churches, city hall, the Molly Brown House (you guessed it, a brothel), masonic lodge, a heritage-home street, and several more stops.

Another scenic 40-minute drive brings us to Sandon, a ghost town located in a steep, narrow valley. It's hard to

believe that this was once the centre of the richest silver-lead producing region in Canada. Incorporated in 1898, Sandon at one point had 5,000 residents.

Today there are only a few buildings still standing, including the original 1900 City Hall.

The Sandon Historical Society Museum, housed in the restored Slocan Mercantile Block, has an extensive display of mining artifacts. Sandon was also a Japanese internment camp designated for those who were Buddhist, before they were moved to nearby New Denver, due to the severe winter conditions.

Continuing 14 kilometres down the mountain, we arrive at our final destination, New Denver. Founded in 1892 by silver miners, by 1920 the boom was over and logging became more important.

New Denver was also home to an internment camp, the third largest in the province. The Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, a national historic site, beautifully preserves the life and condition of the “nikkei” (a person of Japanese heritage) living here and in the region between 1942-1957, with original buildings, period artifacts and interpretive displays.

A Zen “dry garden”, made up of carefully placed rocks, plants and foot bridges weaves around the buildings.

On our drive back to Trail, we make one more stop at Camp Cafe in Silverton for a mid-afternoon treat—mouth watering carrot cake and a latte.

Who would have thought there’d be so much to learn about and experience on a 300-kilometre road trip? |



TOP | Exhibits at Sandon Museum

MIDDLE | A replica of the sleeping quarters that interned Japanese were housed in at the Langham in Kaslo.

BOTTOM LEFT | Old church on the Rossland heritage walking tour

BOTTOM RIGHT | Displays at the Teck Interpretive Centre give you an historical glimpse of the mining and smelting process and progress that anchored the Kootenay region for many years

