

BRITISH
COLUMBIA
MAGAZINE

ROAD TRIPS

Great Escapes

Volume #5

DISCOVER
OVER
5,500 KMs
OF:

EPIC
BACKROADS

SCENIC
HIGHWAYS

OUTDOOR
ADVENTURE

NORTHERN
BC

CARIBOO
CHILCOTIN

KOOTENAY
ROCKIES

THOMPSON
OKANAGAN

VANCOUVER
COAST &
MOUNTAINS

THE
ISLANDS

A SPECIAL ISSUE OF **BRITISH COLUMBIA MAGAZINE**



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Stewart-Cassiar Highway 16 in Northern BC.
Photo: Northern BC Tourism/Andrew Strain



Sinclair Canyon along Highway 93 near Radium Hot Springs. **Left:** Gearing up for a fishing trip at the historic fly shop in Little Fort.



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KOOTENAY ROCKIES

Kicking Horse Mountain Resort
overlooking the Rocky Mountains



KOOTENAY
ROCKIES

KOOTENAY
ROCKIES

Distance: 275 km
 Duration: 4 Days
 Off the Beaten
 Track Rating:

BETWEEN TWO MOUNTAIN RANGES

Adventures in the Columbia Valley

BY HANS TAMMEMAGI

KOOTENAY ROCKIES

Often you rush through a trip just to reach the destination. Other times—like life—you should meander slowly and enjoy the detours along the way. The drive northward from Cranbrook to Golden along the Columbia Valley, which cuts through the mountainous terrain of southeastern British Columbia with the precision of a surgical incision, is full of fascinating diversions.

DAY 1

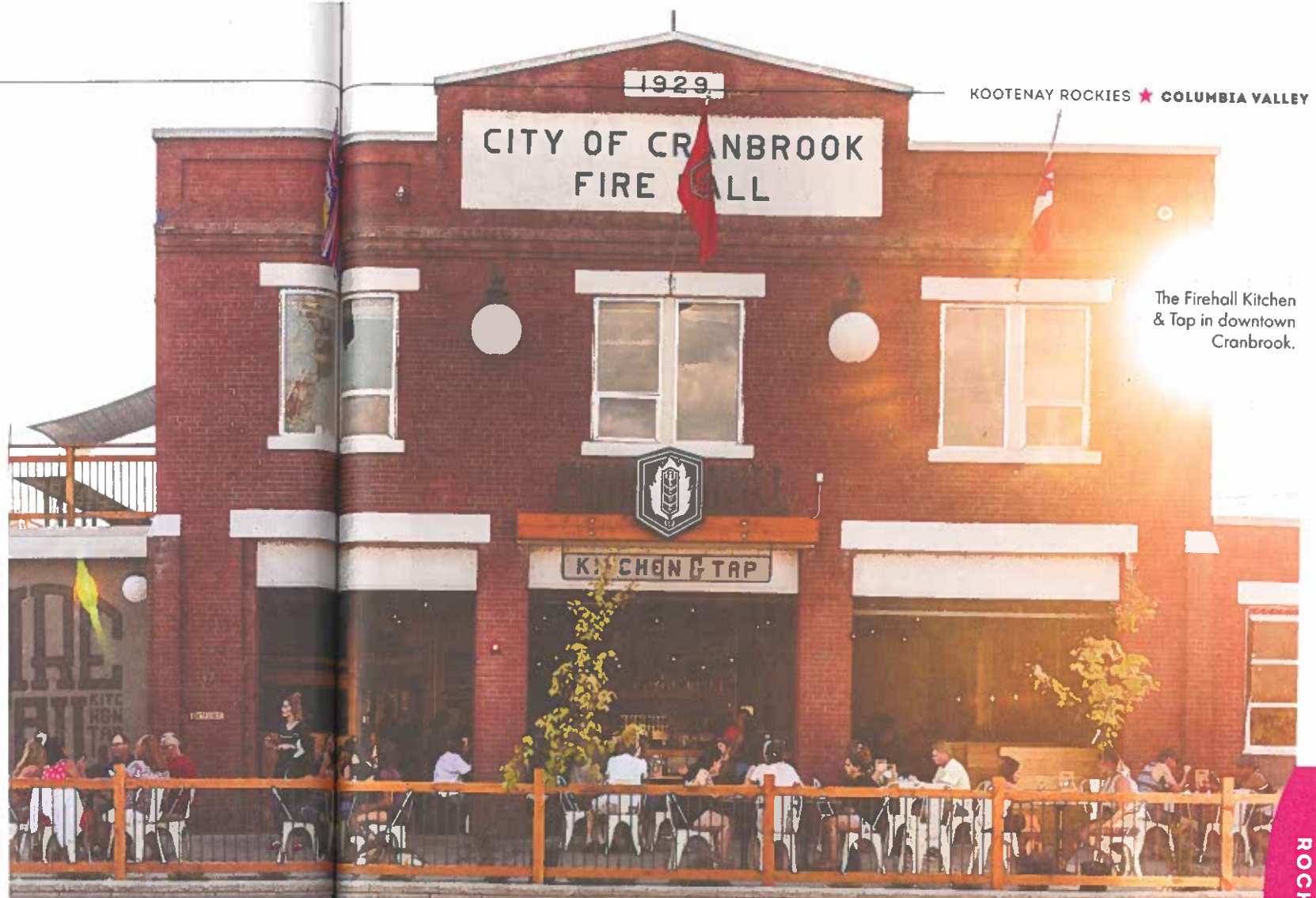
In Cranbrook, an elephant statue marks the Great Elephant Escape of 1926. A circus came to town and one night some of the elephants made a break for it. Of the five deserters, four of the large creatures were back with the circus in a few days. Amazingly, the large, floppy-eared and very obvious Charlie Ed eluded capture for several months,

becoming part of Cranbrook's local folklore.

Cranbrook is the starting point, not because of Charlie Ed, but because of the city's big mountain views and seemingly endless hours of sunshine—2,229 hours annually. The community began in 1898 with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The rail yard complex is in the heart of the city and forms the centre piece of the Cranbrook History Museum. With 27 refurbished historic railcars, it is considered one of the finest railway museums in North America. We felt like tycoons wandering through the Argyle, the dining car of the famed 1920s Trans-Canada Limited, a special CPR train that was lavishly appointed to transport the ultra-rich.

My friend Ally and I head northwest on Highway 95. The direct driving distance to Golden is about 250 kilometres and can be done in half a day, but why rush? You should travel leisurely and

KOOTENAY ROCKIES ★ COLUMBIA VALLEY



The Firehall Kitchen & Tap in downtown Cranbrook.



Canadian Museum of Rail Travel.



Fort Steele Heritage Town.

KOOTENAY ROCKIES

savour the many enticing stops. This journey will take four days, and we could have easily made it longer.

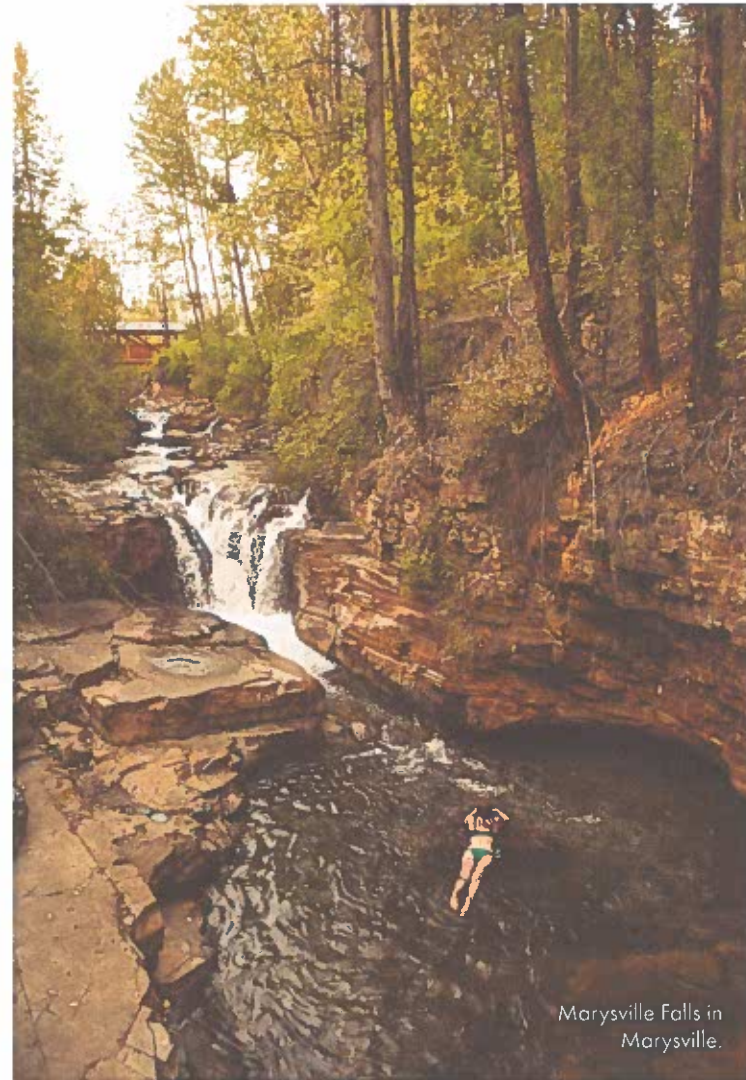
Turn left on 95A toward Kimberley and head for the fashionable St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino, which the Ktunaxa Nation converted from the St. Eugene Mission, the first residential school in western Canada. Wandering through the elegant three-storey building, you will visit contemporary hotel rooms as well as a museum, that serves as a memorial to the past.

Continue to Kimberley, which from 1917 to 2001, was home to the Sullivan Mine, the world's largest lead-zinc mine. The city was named in 1896 after the eponymous mine in South Africa. Instead of going on the Underground Mining Railway, we set out to explore waterfalls.

The choice is plentiful with Perry Creek Falls, Meachen Creek Falls and Marysville Falls all nearby. Stopping near Marysville, we stroll along a boardwalk with views of rushing rapids and finally, a gorgeous plunging waterfall—we got soaked by the mist.

An alternate method to travel between Cranbrook and Kimberley is by bicycle along the scenic North Star Rails to Trails, a 28-kilometre paved trail, that links the cities. However, our e-bikes stay strapped to the car at this diversion.

WE DETOUR BACK onto Highway 93, the main route to Golden, and double back south to Fort Steele Heritage Town. It became the administrative and commercial centre in the region in the late 1860s with the discovery of gold



Marysville Falls in Marysville.

at nearby Wild Horse Creek.

Dozens of old buildings are the backdrop for locals in period costumes, who act as though we stepped back a century. And there are animals! We pet an enormous Clydesdale horse, who, along with his colleagues, offers fun sleigh rides. There are also donkeys, heritage-breed chickens, ducks, turkeys and black pigs. A 100-year-old train chugs around a four-kilometre loop, its chimney belching black smoke. The heyday of Fort Steele ended long ago

in 1898 when the CPR ignored the town, passing through Cranbrook instead.

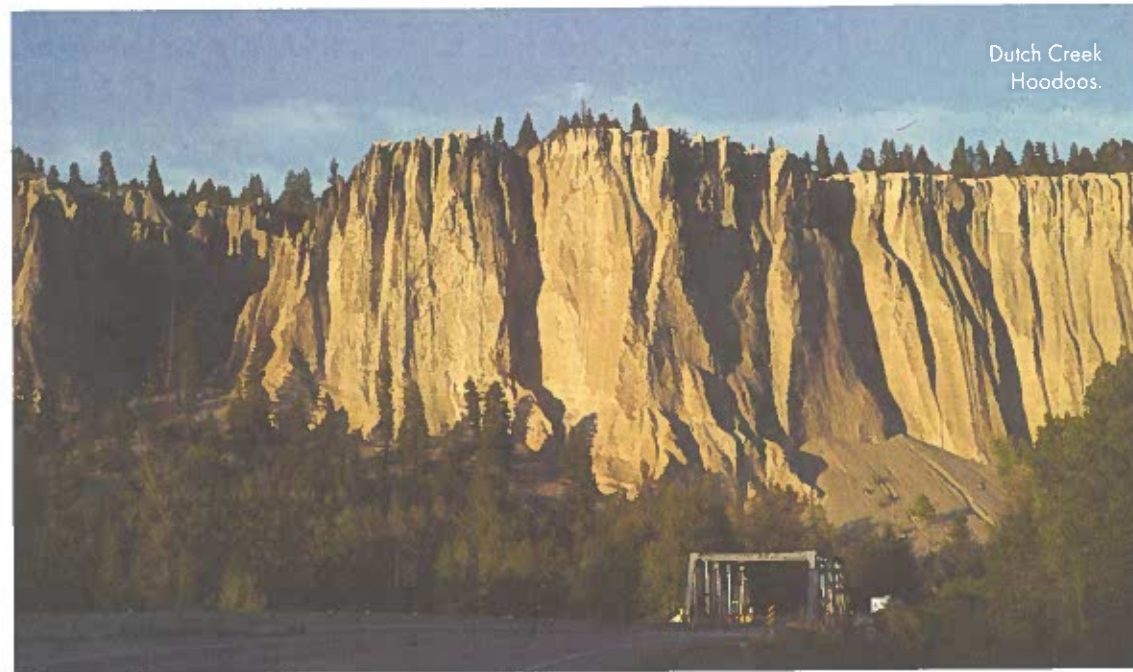
BACK ON HIGHWAY 93, just before Canal Flats, a sign at the turnoff to the east reads Lussier Hot Springs. Though tempted by the warm waters, we continue northward.

Just across Dutch Creek are, arguably, the most impressive hoodoos in British Columbia. From the road, the turrets of soft glacial sediments soar overhead like



KOOTENAY ROCKIES

KOOTENAY ROCKIES



Dutch Creek Hoodoos.

KOOTENAY ROCKIES

fairy chimneys. Turning left on Westside Road we find a trail that leads to the top of the hoodoos. Wandering amongst the glacial-till formations, we also have views of the Columbia Valley which forms an important wildlife corridor. Interpretative panels explain that the hoodoos are formed by millions of years of erosion in areas where a thick layer of soft rock is covered by a thin layer of hard rock.

DAY 2

Soon after checking in at the village of Fairmont Hot Springs, our e-bikes carry us to the Fairmont Hot Springs Resort and its naturally hot waters. An old Indigenous stone bathhouse sits on a plateau of rock coloured orange, green and blue by the spring water that seeps out of the ground. We immerse ourselves in the thermal waters of

the resort's large pools, relaxing and gazing peacefully at the surrounding mountains.

The Kootenays have a rather remarkable tree, whose beauty dazzles. The larch is the only conifer in the Pacific Northwest with needles that turn a golden yellow for a brief period in the fall. Entire mountain sides transform into brilliant hues—like El Dorado. Many visitors time their travels just to experience this stunning display. Sadly, the beautiful needles fall off as winter arrives.

THE NEXT MORNING, Chris Skinner of Playwest Mountain Experience leads us on a hike high into the spires at Pedley Pass, about 20 kilometres southeast of Invermere. Heading there, we pass a large herd of elk quietly munching in a meadow. Donning our packs, we trudge upward and upward, panting heavily. Soon, solitude and the natural surroundings wrap around us in a

giant caress. Brilliant golden larches are set against enormous cliffs and towering peaks, their yellow colour contrasting with the dark green of the rest of the forest. Humans are but tiny cogs in the midst of this mighty creation.

Descending, we are soon at Invermere, a small town on Lake Windermere that anchors the Kootenay Valley between Fairmont and Golden. The shops are full of trendy ski, snowboard and alpine gear. Equally trendy young people stroll the streets.

We head west into the Purcell Mountains to Panorama Resort. Mountain biking is now the rage, but only until snow brings ski season. Helmeted riders are everywhere, racing downhill and then riding the chair lift back up the slope. Regretfully, there is not enough time to ride the lift to the world-class bike park.

Instead, led by Lorraine of Toby Creek Adventures, Ally and I

mount all-terrain vehicles, and bump and jolt along 20 kilometres of rocky, dusty trail way up high into the Purcell Range. It is exciting and our adrenaline count goes off the charts. The larches are golden and magnificent, and the mountains are stunning in their grandeur.

The next stop is Radium Hot Springs where Highway 93 turns north into Kootenay National Park. The hot springs, for which the town is named, are in the Sinclair Canyon with spectacularly steep multi-coloured walls. We sample one of the hiking paths but don't try the many mountain-bike trails. After the workout, we soak in the thermal waters... Ahh, so soothing.

DAY 3

The water rushing and frothing down from the Rockies is a boon for whitewater rafting. Of the Kootenay River Runners' three launch

sites, we wish there was time to try the full-day trip on the Kootenay River departing from Radium Hot Springs. The highlight is Pedley Falls, which tumbles down a rugged cliffside. The ubiquitous spray would ensure we'd get wet!

Venturing northwest on Highway 93, we enter a stretch of the Columbia River that forms one of the largest intact wetland ecosystems in North America. At the Columbia Wetlands Outpost, about 26 kilometres south of Golden, we paddle a canoe, silently gliding between lily pads, reeds and abundant wildlife, both feathered and furry. In a single day, volunteers counted nearly 21,000 birds and 75 different species.

DAY 4

Reaching Golden, a small town that has established itself as a major tourist destination, we head for Kicking Horse Mountain Resort.

An enormous ski-lift whizzes us high, seemingly into the clouds, the domain of skiers, snowboarders and mountain bikers. Behind a fence, a grizzly bear, built like a tank, stretches and relaxes, oblivious to the many watchers. I'm drawn to what is probably the best via ferrata on the continent, it's a pathway of cables and ladders up the mountainside. I get an enormous thrill—and a scare—dangling on a high, sheer cliff.

Golden has recently added the Skybridge, the highest suspension bridge in Canada at 426 feet. There are actually two long, swaying footbridges, and they're only a small part of the immense complex. Ally ziplines over the canyon screaming the whole way. Then she clammers along a challenging rope course high up in the trees. Did I mention axe throwing and a climbing wall? We shriek, hoot and have a barrel of fun. 🎯

KOOTENAY ROCKIES



The Golden Skybridge is Canada's highest suspension bridge.

Mitch Winton