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Kimberley goes cuckoo

Bavarian bravado has kept this old mining town going for 35 years, but is its time finally up?

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KIMBERLEY, B.C.—Happy Hans has definitely seen happier days. But then, so has this former mining town and Hans' humble home, touted as the biggest cuckoo clock in the world.

It's late afternoon and there's hardly a soul on Kimberley's pedestrian-only main street, the Platzl. Even the young girl who has just put a quarter in the clock and has been waiting patiently for its tiny wooden door to swing open seems ready to give up and head for the hills.

Suddenly, what sounds like a badly scratched record crackles to life and a Bavarian tune blasts the length of the Platzl as Hans – beer stein firmly in hand – belatedly comes out to play.

"It must be the belt," local fix-it man Tony Schwarzenberger says later when told that Hans appears to be on his last lederhosened legs. "It's from 1972. It's stretched out a bit."

So too, it seems, is the unusual history of this tiny town (pop. 7,000) which 35 years ago did a Matterhorn-sized makeover aimed at turning what was then a dying lead and zinc mining community into "the Bavarian town in the Rockies."

Locals shut the main drag to cars, constructed a giant cuckoo clock in the midst of the new pedestrian mall and refaced turn-of-the-century shops with peaked facades and enough bric-a-brac to create a kind of gingerbread village.

As the Sullivan Mine died, a tourist town was born – complete with an annual accordion festival, a yodelling woodcarver and a city hall that could double for the von Trapp family homestead.

Schwarzenberger arrived here from Germany more than 15 years after the makeover and found himself in some strange version of home. It helped that he and his wife brought with them two gigantic crates containing a centuries-old Alpine house and cider barn, which they painstakingly rebuilt into the Old Bauernhaus restaurant. It wasn't long until they were serving up hearty helpings of schnitzel and schnapps.

But even Schwarzenberger has grown tired of all of the Bavarian kitsch – as have many of the locals who believe it's time for Kimberley, now a booming ski and golf destination in B.C.'s picturesque interior, to reinvent itself once again.

"They say we have the biggest cuckoo clock in the world, but it's not. That's in Germany. They say it's the Bavarian town in the Rockies. But we're in the Purcells," says Schwarzenberger exploding into laughter. "It's a Walt Disney Bavaria as it is now – it's more funny than anything else. I'm the only one here who has an authentic Alpine building. All the rest is crap."



SUSAN PIGG PHOTO / TORONTO STAR

It may lack the snowfall and rugged terrain of Fernie, but Kimberley has a more relaxed, laid-back feel.

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JUST THE FACTS

KIMBERLEY ALPINE RESORT and its sister property Fernie Alpine Resort are part of the Powder Highway, more than 700 kilometres of B.C. interior roads linking eight major ski resorts and 47 backcountry operations, including cat- and heli-skiing.

See KootenayRockies.com

KIMBERLEY IS ABOUT a four-hour drive from Calgary and close to the newly expanded Cranbrook airport. It has 728 hectares of skiable terrain, five lifts and 65 per cent of its runs

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To see a town in need of a new identity, all you have to do is stroll Kimberley's Platzl, where a Bing Crosby tune is wafting past stores ranging from the Mozart House Pub & Grill to the Bavarian Sports & Home Hardware.

The Yodelling Woodcarver's small store may be the most authentic thing here, given that its shelves are lined with elaborate wooden carvings handcrafted by local Adi Unterberger, legendary here for his yodelling talents as well. Just steps away is the Bavarian Schnitzelhaus with its Havana Room serving up cigars and martinis.

You can almost set your watch by the family of deer that wander into town and stroll along the Platzl at 5:30 most afternoons – especially in winter – a ritual that is clearly more bizarre than Bavarian. While sometimes annoying to locals, it's a big hit with visitors.

Make no mistake, there are some real treasures here, from the Platzl's home and giftware shop the Guilded Goat to the Village Bistro right across from city hall where Rob Davidson and his wife Jill have whitewashed their building's Bavarian past with burnt orange exterior paint.

"Kimberley is definitely coming along. This wouldn't have worked here five years ago," says Rob Davidson, scanning the cosmopolitan interior of his 40-seat, two-level restaurant. "Now we're starting to see more world travellers."

What's bringing them here isn't Kimberley's Alpine atmosphere so much as its championship golf courses – Trickle Creek, Kimberley Golf Club (est. 1924), Bootleg Gap and St. Eugene Mission – and Kimberley Alpine Resort, a fantastic family mountain three kilometres from town where some \$100 million worth of new condos and chalets are under development at the base of its 1,982-metre massif.

The pace of development has been staggering since Resorts of the Canadian Rockies acquired the local hill back in 2000 (along with sister property Fernie Alpine Resort, to the southeast of here), added a high-speed lift and expanded to about 720 hectares of skiable terrain with five lifts and 80 runs that turned the front of the mountain into a welcoming refuge for families with its leisurely blue and green runs and the back of the mountain into a largely black and blue magnet for more serious skiers.

"For three years in a row we came out here for a month of skiing in March and skied every single mountain there was in B.C. and Alberta," says long-time local and Kimberley guide Lorna Locke, 65. "Every time we came here to Kimberley, we said 'Wow,' so we moved here 21 years ago and not for one second have we regretted it."

Now Locke does double duty on the hill. She's up at 4 a.m. each winter day to check the overnight snowfall and do regular morning updates for both the Weather Channel and Kimberley's "snow phone" line. Then she hits the hills virtually every day to ski.

"If you listen to the snow phone you'll hear, 'Outside on my deck this morning we received two centimetres of snow overnight. I live right on the mountain. I watch the snow grow every day. We have the best powder – pristine Purcell (mountain range) powder.'"

While sister ski resort Fernie Alpine resort, about an hour drive from here in the Rocky Mountains, boasts far more rugged terrain and about double the snowfall (Kimberley averages four metres a winter), Kimberley has a more relaxed and laid-back feel that makes it a much better fit for the intermediate and novice skier. (It also lacks the fearsome headwall of rock, ice and snow that draws the diehard skier to Fernie, and especially to its sprawling backcountry.)

"Our powder is more dry – Fernie tends to get more rain and wetter snow. As far as consistency of snow conditions, you won't beat this mountain and I've skied over 150 ski areas in all of western Canada and lot of Europe," says Locke.

The base has a small but growing village of hotels and condos, which is why a trip into the town of Kimberley is all part of the fun, especially for families looking to expose their kids to what passes for a little taste of Europe right here in B.C. mountains.

"I know there's talk of getting away from the Bavarian theme," says Locke almost sadly. "But I hope they don't get rid of the cuckoo clock. It's on almost every postcard here. And everybody puts a quarter in to see Happy Hans come out when they're visiting Kimberley."

are beginner and novice. Five day lift/four-night stay packages for January start at \$449. One-day lift tickets range from \$18 for children to \$55 for adults.

For more information see www.skikimberley.com or www.skircr.com

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