

The views from Sorensen's Bowen Island homes are sublime



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Vancouver is regularly voted one of the best cities in the world for quality of life



The draw of lakes, beaches, forests and great skiing, plus the cosmopolitan chic of Vancouver, is luring British buyers to western Canada, says **Kim Davies**

t was the most dramatic entrance," says Brian Thomas-Peter, recalling the moment, earlier this year, when he and his wife, Kate, first saw the plot of land on 20-square-mile Bowen Island, just off Canada's rugged west coast, where they are building a holiday home. "There were 100ft trees all around, creating an almost magical forest," says Brian, 54, a professor of psychology. "And as we came through onto the rocky bluff of the site, to the south we saw the Strait of Georgia; to the north, the coastal mountain range; and to the west, Howe Sound. It was just spectacular."

Like the fearless explorers who founded British Columbia in the 18th century, the Birmingham couple are part of a pioneering wave of British buyers who, lured by the province's combination of summer and winter sports, and the cosmopolitan cafe culture of Vancouver, are willing to make the 10-hour flight to western Canada, a region of North America that, until recently, wasn't on the property-buying map.

"There continue to be preconceived notions about Canada," says Jeremy Tomalin-Reeves, vice-president of marketing for Three Sisters Mountain Village. This former mining town, just outside Calgary in the Rocky Mountains, is being transformed into a 2,000-acre alpine resort, and property prices here have risen 51% in the past year. "While it is admired for being wild, clean and open, it is also thought, quite wrongly, to lack amenities and sophistication," he says, adding that, "compared to Switzerland and France, Canada is half the price". In the past three years, Canada has moved from relative obscurity to boutique destination. "All the infrastructure is in place for the country to grow," says Tomalin-Reeves, "and to meet the interest of British homebuyers who are looking for something a little different."

British interest in Canada took off when Prince Charles went skiing with his sons, William and Harry, in Whistler in 1998, says Ross McCredie, founder and chief executive officer of Sotheby's International Realty. "Shortly afterwards, we saw a sudden interest from the British," he says. "Then they started to buy. It surprised everyone."

There are now more than 100 British property-owners at Whistler alone, including a 32-year-old London-based investment banker who splashed out £2.8m on a property earlier this year, causing quite a buzz among locals.

McCredie concedes that western Canada is still considered an emerging market, but he estimates that the number of Britons buying in British Columbia and Alberta, the neighbouring province, has doubled in the past three years.

"There are more direct flights," he explains, "so it is much easier to get to now, and buyers are conscious of the quality of life — they are coming to live here for a few months at a time."

Daily direct scheduled flights with BA or Air Canada from the UK to Vancouver start at about £500 return. There are also regular charter flights. When Revelstoke, a new resort about

250 miles west of Calgary, launched earlier this month, the first 59 flats released sold out within three hours. A second building was then released, and 80% of properties had been sold by the end of the next day. A 475 sq ft studio flat starts at £158,000, a 2,100 sq ft three-bedroom penthouse at £801,000; 3% of buyers so far are British, attracted by the largest vertical ski run in North America and the promise, eventually, of direct flights from Europe to nearby Kelowna.

At King Edward Bay, on Bowen Island, British interest is also high: of the 19 lots that have sold in the 41-plot scheme, British buyers have bought two, and more are nibbling, says its developer, Sorensen Fine Homes. The company also has developments on Vancouver Island (www.patriciabay.ca) and Saltspring Island (www.summersidesaltspring.com). David Sorensen, the managing director, says that 10% of its website traffic is British.

The Thomas-Peters are keen sailors and skiers; they spent two years searching, mainly online, for the perfect spot to build their dream second home. They flirted with Montreal, in Quebec, and British Columbia's sunshine coast before paying £200,000 for the 0.66-acre plot on Bowen Island, which has four lakes, 15 beaches, forests and mountain views. It will cost the same again to build their three-bedroom ecofriendly home, made largely from sustainable wood and glass. The price of land with meadow views at King Edward Bay starts at £175,000; waterfront lots, which are steeper, but have spectacular views, cost up to £670,000. Most buyers so far have chosen Sorensen to construct their home, with build costs starting at £116 per sq ft, although the company's high-spec properties can be made as luxurious as the owner wants. The company has also imposed rigid planning covenants to preserve the environment.

"It is like living in the country, but without the isolation," says Brian. "We like the great outdoors, but we also like city life. Here, we're only 30 minutes [by car] from Vancouver and an



King Edward Bay, on Bowen Island, opposite, is only an hour's drive from Whistler, above

hour from Whistler. We can enjoy the best of both worlds." The opportunity to enjoy a hike in the wilderness as easily as you can sip a latte in downtown Vancouver is western Canada's main appeal, and it is reeling in buyers.

McCredie explains that all the purpose-built year-round resorts under development have been designed with European as much as American buyers in mind. "Five years ago, builders in British Columbia wouldn't think of what a British, German or Spanish buyer might want," he says. "Now sophisticated developers will design for the international market." And these new developments encompass the varied landscape of the region, from the mountains to the sea. There's Revelstoke's neighbour (in Canadian terms), Big White, 35 miles from Kelowna (with about 250 properties); Bear Mountain, on Vancouver Island (1,300 acres and 3,000 homes); and Porteau Cove, a 1,400-home oceanfront development 25 minutes' drive north of Vancouver.

Dale Sproule, director of real-estate sales at Bear Mountain, near Victoria, has witnessed a surge of British interest since last summer, and is coming to Britain later this year to sell property in the 1,200-acre scheme. He estimates that there are now more British owners at Bear Mountain than Americans. "They all say they have been thinking of buying for a long time," he says. "Now, they are taking advantage of the recent strength of the British pound against the US and Canadian dollar. It is a good investment, and they feel Canada is a safe place to live."

At Bear Mountain, salmon-fishing is virtually on the doorstep, and skiing is three hours' drive away at Mount Washington. Prices range from £112,000 for a one-bed flat to £756,000 for a six-bed house sitting on an acre, but Sproule says it is the "lock up and leave" appeal of the condominiums that is really hooking Britons.

Robert Patterson, 75, a retiree who lives just outside Glasgow, last year bought a one-bedder at Bear Mountain for £120,000. He plans to spend three months there every year. "It's a beautiful place," he says. "I go cycling and walking, and sometimes I even climb mountains, but I haven't seen a bear yet."

Vancouver itself, with a population of about 2m, is regularly voted one of the best cities in the world for quality of life, and is now attracting British holiday-home buyers. Next month, Sotheby's launches the Hotel Georgia, a 48-storey tower in the city centre. Prices for its 155 private residences start at £312,000 for a studio, rising to £2.7m for a penthouse.

"Compared to New York, London and Hong Kong, Vancouver is competitively priced," says McCredie. "You can go skiing in one of the best resorts in North America, go sailing or walk in the wilderness, all within an hour, and come back to enjoy cosmopolitan cafe life. What more do you want?"

■ King Edward Bay, 00 1 604 947 2891, www.kingedwardbay.com; Sotheby's International Realty, 00 1 604 632 3300, www.sothebysrealty.ca



Breathing space



Mountain
hideaways



A three-bedroom penthouse in the second phase of Nelsen Lodge, in the Revelstoke Mountain resort, is on sale for £580,000. It is due for completion by 2009. Revelstoke Mountain, 00 1 250 837 2188, www.discoverrevelstoke.com



Five minutes' drive from Whistler village, this timber-built three-bedroom house has an open-plan living-dining room, decked veranda and a balcony with mountain views. It is on sale for £445,500. Contact Marshall Viner, Sotheby's, 00 1 604 932 3388, www.sothebysrealty.ca



Snowbird Lodge is a fully furnished two-bedroom flat with a hot tub in Big White, Canada's largest ski-in, ski-out resort. It is on the market for £267,000. Contact Rene Palsenborg, Sotheby's, 00 1 604 541 2791, www.sothebysrealty.ca



This one-bedroom flat is one of 195 in the Highlander, a Scottish-inspired, 14-storey development at Bear Mountain, a 1,300-acre golf and leisure resort near Victoria. It is on sale for £156,000. Bear Mountain, 00 1 866 391 6100, www.bearmountain.ca