

Crowsnest Highway great way to explore the Kootenays

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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Highway 3, the Crowsnest Highway, is a great alternative to the busy Trans-Canada Highway when travelling through the Rockies. This southerly route takes us from the Crowsnest Pass on the Alberta-British Columbia border through non-stop mountain scenery and a series of interesting towns and small cities in B.C.'s Kootenay Rockies.

First is Sparwood, with a long history of coal mining in the Crowsnest Pass. An unusual attraction here is the world's largest truck. Everything about it is gigantic. The tires alone stand 3 1/2 metres tall, and the box could hold two Greyhound buses plus two pick-up trucks.

The Terex 33-19 Titan was built in 1973 by General Motors as a prototype, but it never went into full production. Titan served in the steel and coal mines near Sparwood before being retired in the 1990s and donated to the town as a tourist attraction.

Our next stop, Fernie, stood out as one of our favourites. It's known for its wealth of outdoor activities, and hiking and biking trails are so numerous and varied that it's difficult to know where to begin.

The short and easy hike to Fairy Creek Falls, following a picturesque creek valley to a nice waterfall, was a definite highlight. The trailhead for the five-kilometre return hike starts right beside the town's visitor centre along the highway.

Fernie's history shouldn't be overlooked. We followed an historic walking tour to many town treasures, such as the unusual and ornate court house, and the old coal company offices now used as city hall.

At St. Eugene Golf Resort, just outside Cranbrook, a storied past combines with a successful present-day operation. Dating back to the late 1890s, the St. Eugene Mission with its stately stone and brick building was run as an Indian Residential School until it closed in 1970.

Almost everywhere in the country, Indigenous groups have been anxious to get rid of reminders of residential schools. However, here they adopted a different approach. The Ktunaxa people of the area, many of whom attended the school, acquired the building and grounds and turned it into a 4.5-star resort with a luxury hotel, casino and a championship golf course.

At the resort's interpretive centre, visitors can learn about Ktunaxa culture and tour the building with a former student for a behind-the-scenes look at what life was like at a residential school. Their philosophy is to take something that was negative and build it into something positive.

The town of Creston and the Creston Valley is the agricultural heartland of the Kootenay region, with a mild climate and fertile soil on the broad valley flats. Produce



Kootenay Lake boasts the longest free inland ferry service in Canada. | ROBIN & ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS



A produce stand is open for business near Creston.



The "Titan," the world's biggest truck, can be found in Sparwood, B.C.

and fruit markets spring up everywhere, including wineries.

Driving through the centre of town, we were surprised to see two (soon to be one) classic prairie grain elevators.

One is an Alberta Wheat Pool elevator with a restored exterior that was just finished this year. Plans are to begin restoration of the inside next year. When we visited in late September, another elevator in rough shape stood next to it. We were told that it was slated to be demolished shortly because it had deteriorated too far to save.

Instead of continuing west on Highway 3, a short but worthwhile detour is to take Highway 3A, which heads north of Creston along the east shore of Kootenay Lake. This was our favourite part of the drive for scenery, along a winding lake-shore road to Crawford Bay.

A scene that seems to belong on the coast rather than in the interior mountains is the Pilot Bay Light-house. Years ago, when stern-

wheeler boats plied the waters of the long Kootenay Lake, the light-house marked the way.

From Crawford Bay we can cross to the west side of Kootenay Lake on the longest free inland ferry service in Canada — a 35-minute trip.

From Balfour on the other side, another delightful road skirts the west shore of the lake north to the town of Kaslo. It is home to the SS Moyie, an old paddlewheeler from the early days. Built in 1898, it is the oldest intact sternwheeler in the world.

A pleasant small town, Kaslo has several historic buildings, scenic views everywhere you look and several trails to explore farther afield.

To continue travelling west, Highway 3A heads southwest through Nelson and joins the main Highway 3 at Castlegar.



The Alberta Wheat Pool elevator in Creston, B.C., has been restored. The elevator beside it isn't in as good of shape.

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