

Rossland *Winter Carnival*

By Jack Christie
Photos provided by
Tourism Rossland

Got the hometown blahs? Then why not pack up your skis, skates, and snow boots and head to the Kootenays for the Rossland Winter Carnival on January 27-29th. Hands down, there's no celebration quite like the bacchanal that folks in this Monashee Mountains hideaway have been perfecting for the past 115 years.

Who knows? Perhaps you'll stick around. As Arla Ballentine sees it, that's exactly what more folks are doing these days. The longtime resident told *Pique* that the former mining town perched on the slopes of an ancient volcano has undergone quite a makeover since she first arrived in the 1980s. "In those days, everybody who couldn't afford to live in Trail lived here. Now it's the reverse. At last count there were 69 doctors in residence. Our town is becoming increasingly popular with Australians as well, many of whom own vacation homes."

Rossland doesn't fit the image of a typical B.C. resort town. Much like neighbouring Trail, home to mining giant Teck's lead-zinc smelter operations, as well as Nelson, 70 kilometres north, many homes still bear the hallmarks of working-class bungalows. What sets Rossland apart, particularly in winter, is its elevated status. Literally. At 1,030 metres, the town of 3,500 sits above the Columbia River just north of the Washington State border. On winter days when fog encases the valley below, sunshine floods the slopes of four peaks which dominate the horizon: Granite, Roberts, Grey and Red. "We call it the Kootenay Sea," Ballentine said. "The fog is the reason our main airport in Castlegar is referred to as *Cancelgar* by Air Canada. If you're flying in from Vancouver, it's much better and cheaper to go via Trail."

No matter how you journey to the carnival, be prepared for a party designed with outdoor souls in mind. After all, the traditional inspiration for such mid-winter follies is to get everyone out of the house and into the streets where events such as the Sonny Samuelson Bobsled Race are staged. For starters, an evening parade down the town's main drag kicks off proceedings, headed by a fire engine with sirens wailing and, for good measure, a snow plow of behemoth proportions to clear the way. Close behind follows a colourful procession of townsfolk attired in retro gear, whether of the 1990s neon ski fashion variety, likely sourced at the Mater Misericordiae Thrift Shop, or heirloom threads more typical of the roaring 1890s when Norwegian ski jumping champion Olaus Jeldness — whose ashes lie mingled with iron ore on Red Mountain — organized the inaugural jubilee. In a nod to the town's recreational esprit, members of municipal council, led by the mayor hoisting a sign emblazoned with "Ship of State," tote a sea kayak. As an inducement to join in, all participants are entered in a draw for a seasons pass at Red Mountain Resort, a destination general manager Eric Kalacis described as a "slackcountry mecca" in reference to the vast expanses of ungroomed backcountry terrain favoured by those with Telemark or Alpine Touring equipment.

Beyond doubt, the weekend's centerpiece takes place on Sunday morning with the running of the bobsled race. Spectators throng the steep, slick sidewalks along Spokane Street that plummets several blocks into the downtown core, making this simultaneously one of B.C.'s most hair-raising and entertaining



sport spectacles. Custom-made, four-person sleds mounted on ski runners reach speeds as high as 85 kilometres per hour. In a nod to the safety of both competitors and on-lookers alike, braking systems must pass inspection before sleds are allowed on course. Emblazoned with monikers such as "Pink Canoe" — as vividly-coloured and contoured as its name suggests — two standout entries cheered on by *Pique* at last year's downhill plunge were "Iron Maiden," a serious contender shaped like the fuselage of a Cessna light plane, and the crew of "Wild Ones" in what appeared to be a wooden dugout with the driver arched forward Superman-style across the bow.

Although nothing short of an alcoholic stupor might tempt you onto a bobsled, how about giving natural luge a try? During the weekend, the Rossland Radicals Luge Club offers free Learn to Luge lessons on the lower slopes of Red Mountain. Unlike the icy luge

track featured at the Whistler Sliding Centre, natural luge courses are set up on snow hillsides that have been groomed and marked by a series of gates similar to a giant slalom run. Mike Curry, a club member for 16 years, told *Pique* that inspiration for the sport grew following the Calgary 1988 Winter Olympic Games. "I moved here from Alberta where I'd been a member of the Canmore Luge Club. The Olympics really inspired me to enjoy the outdoors more. Luge is like tobogganing with control. All the freeskiing antics that go around here result in a lot of broken skis. What do you do with them? Build a luge, of course, using the sawed-off skis for 'kufen' or runners, Kootenay style."

Even if you miss carnival, when passing through Rossland this winter, pause at the elaborately-sculpted ice bar on Columbia Street, a showpiece where the vibe from music and merriment lingers until melted by the spring thaw. ■



Rossland lies 740 kilometres east of Whistler on Highway 3B. For information on the festivities, visit www.rosslandwintercarnival.com. A complete list of winter festivals throughout B.C. is posted at hellobc.com. Jack Christie is author of *The Whistler Book* (Greystone Books) www.jackchristie.com
Top/far left: The beer garden is the place to be at the Rossland Winter Carnival; photos by Dave Heath. Left: Spectators enjoy the festivities; photo by Dave Heath. Above: Competitors race down Spokane Street in custom-made sleds for Sunday's *Running of the Bobsled*; Photo by Sarah Rainford.

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