



Tuesday » September  
5 » 2006

## Albertans bring cash for B.C. properties

### Costly hunt for retreats spills into Lotus Land

**Shawn Ohler**

The Edmonton Journal

*Sunday, August 27, 2006*

EDMONTON - Jay Champigny rattles off the numbers -- "7,000-square-foot lot, 2,350-square-foot house, \$1.75 million" -- like a blase shopper reciting a short grocery list.

Yet the most remarkable thing about the Edmonton businessman's new property on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast is not its gaudy pricetag -- or its stunning ocean view, or its secluded locale in relatively undeveloped Pender Harbour -- but the fact he's never actually seen it.

"I've seen pictures. But I've never been there," Champigny said. "I bought it sight unseen. But I know B.C. and I know property, and the feedback I got from people I trust said Pender Harbour is IT."

The real-estate dabbler and owner of Duraguard Fence has plenty of company.

Land developers can smell cash-flush Albertans like Champigny a time zone away, and they're flooding here from the Rockies and B.C. with salesman grins and full-page ads touting grand projects with five-star amenities and holistic spas and legend-designed golf courses.

Edmontonians are responding by snapping up land in Canmore, the Okanagan and on B.C.'s coastline at an unprecedented rate.

Landcor, a B.C. real-estate research firm, said Edmontonians bought 279 B.C. recreational properties in the first six months of 2006, ahead of the 2005 pace and more than buyers, state-wide, from Washington and California. (Calgarians, starved for local lakes and three hours closer than Edmonton to the East Kootenays and the Okanagan, purchased 1,219 titles in B.C. between January and June.)

Landcor president Rudy Nielsen, a veteran B.C. landman now hawking acreages on the northern tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands, said Alberta's appetite overshadows all others.

"Ten years ago, the Germans came in to buy a lot of recreational land. If you look at what Germany's buying and what England's buying and what Alberta's buying -- it's Alberta. We've become the playground for Alberta money."

Often, Nielsen said, Albertans aren't content to stop at single properties, and Champigny is proof.

Before securing the Pender Harbour unit, Champigny bought a vacation home in Vernon's Outback resort, and is about to nab a third at Lakestone, between Kelowna and Vernon.

"I'm 46, my kids are eight and nine, and I love my job. I'm not looking to retire," said

Champigny.

"But I'm spending money now because it may not be affordable 10 years from now, and I'm quite happy to spend my six, seven weeks a year out at those properties."

Champigny guesses Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympics will boost the value of his Pender Harbour property to \$3.5 million-plus.

"My wife is an aspiring writer, and I thought it might be a very inspiring place for her to pursue her dreams as she's allowed me to pursue mine in the businesses," he said.

"Whether it makes sense to keep the property at that (2010) price, we'll have to see."

James Askew, who sells and markets the Outback and Whittakers properties, said Albertans have become a dominant player in all areas of B.C. waterfront property since 2003.

When Askew sold a 54-home project in Kelowna, 35 per cent of his buyers were from Calgary and 25 per cent were from Edmonton.

One-third of his units on the Sunshine Coast and Ucluelet on Vancouver Island went to Albertans. Of 2,000 people interested in a just-announced beachfront condo in Osoyoos, half are from this province.

Courtenay, B.C., online entrepreneur Sharleen K. Whiteside lists lakeside and coastal properties at WaterfrontWest.com, and draws 200 hits a day from Albertans despite never advertising here. For Whiteside, more tangible evidence of Albertans' growing interest in Vancouver Island is easy to come by, too.

"Everywhere you go in Courtenay or Comox, you see Alberta license plates. Since Westjet started flying into Comox (from Calgary and Edmonton), it's boomed," said Whiteside, who got the idea for the site after Edmonton buddies of her locally raised father called him in B.C., looking for inside dirt on sweet oceanfront.

A half-dozen B.C. real-estate experts

interviewed by The Journal all acknowledged that their market -- in part because of land-hungry Albertans -- is growing more difficult for young British Columbians to buy into.

But Askew said the conditions for a sustained Alberta invasion are perfect.

"The economy there is incredible. And, yes, you have places like Pigeon Lake and Sylvan Lake, but because there's not many of them, everyone's descending on them in the summer, fighting for land. It's easy to get there, but they're small lakes," he said.

"Those people look to B.C., and they soon learn they can choose from Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, the Vancouver coastline, the Okanagan lakes, the Kootenays, the Columbia Valley. Both provinces are lucky in certain ways, that's for sure."

"Lucky," "flukey," "incredibly fortunate" -- Edmonton businessman Ben Sawatzky uses all to describe his improbably blessed foray into the B.C. market.

In Nov. 2002, the Spruceland Millworks owner bought an 80-acre Vernon horse ranch with panoramic Okanagan Lake views for "several million dollars." It's now worth three times what he paid.

Three adjacent empty lots, which he bought for \$175,000 each, have invited recent offers in the \$400,000 range. In the last two months, he bought two nearby condos, and expects their value to soar as Albertans increasingly turn their attentions north from crowded Kelowna to Vernon.

"Within the last year, I know six other people from my circle of friends who've bought here (around Vernon). It seems to be the place where people are buying their second homes," Sawatzky said by telephone from his ranchhouse's deck.

"And it's not only oil money. None of these six people I know are in the oil industry."

He takes great pains to make this last point. Because Sawatzky bought the B.C. ranch after selling a 7,000-acre farm near Keepphills and Wabamun Lake -- a farm with 14 oil wells on it -- the Vernon

coffee-shop buzz mistook the sawmill owner as "another oil baron from Alberta."

Sawatzky sniffs disdainfully.

"The oil wells only brought in \$20,000 a year for access rights. But that's the reputation here -- big oil money from Calgary."

Still, the local cliché isn't hoary enough to drive Sawatzky back to Alberta's tiny lakes. He's found his little piece of heaven, and named the property Paradise Ranch to reflect his feelings for it.

"I would never in a million years consider investing a million dollars in lakefront in Alberta, where you have weeds in the lakes and temperatures that are very unfriendly, and the season is six weeks long," he said. "I'm standing on the deck right now, enjoying clear sunshine and 30-degree temperatures, and it's been like this, with the exception of a few days, since May. This," -- he pauses, and a long breath of a more relaxed sort crackles over the phone line -- "this is why people come here."

sohler@thejournal.canwest.com

© The Edmonton Journal 2006

CLOSE WINDOW

---

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.