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A visit to B.C.'s Cariboo region may have you catching gold fever

This interior district in B.C. is known for its gold, and the picturesque mining town of Wells is still home to a full-scale hard-rock operation.



Star writer Tim Johnson stands on the snowy main street of Barkerville, B.C. (TIM JOHNSON)

By **TIM JOHNSON** Special to the Star
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WELLS, B.C.—There's still gold in them hills — and some of it happens to be on the table, right here, right now, at breakfast. A few ounces, both dust and nuggets, drawn from one of the richest mining claims ever staked in North America. Worth a few thousand dollars, and just sitting on the table here at the [Wells Hotel](#), between our omelettes and coffees and huevos rancheros.

“All through the region here, people still work every creek, and you can't step out of your car without setting foot on someone's claim,” says Robin Sharpe, the mayor of this picturesque mountain town, which is still home to a full-scale hard-rock operation.

As snow falls lightly outside, I weigh up the heavy, valuable stuff currently selling for about \$1,600 an ounce — in my hand. Noting a certain glitter in my eye, Sharpe feels it's about time to issue a warning. “Gold fever, you know, it's an addiction,” he says, with a knowing smile. “People really go nuts.”

I may not have gold fever — at least not yet. But it's true that I'm here in the heart of the Cariboo Mountains in search of some kind of fortune. Maybe not a lucky strike, but a rich seam of stories, the legacy of one of the world's greatest gold rushes, one which formed the Canada that we know today.

Here in Wells, a village of some 200 friendly and hardy souls, the mining didn't begin until the 1930s, and both Sharpe and Dave Jorgenson, a local businessman and sometime gold miner, school me in the distinctions between here and Barkerville, just up the road, where it all began.

In Wells, the hard-rock gold mining takes place on a large scale, but in Barkerville — and all those little creeks — it's more mobile, and one on a smaller scale, something called “placer mining.”

And a lot of people here are still involved in placer mining — including Jorgenson. “Placer miners are the most romantic people in the world,” he says, explaining that they scour historical records, and stand out on the land, trying to imagine what it was like, and where they might find it.

Yes, people still walk around these parts with gold bars in their pockets, but with boom comes bust. He notes one unlucky fellow who invested \$200,000 in fuel and equipment, walking away with just seven ounces in his pocket. “It's one giant crap shoot. You need to have this faith, this vision.”

Piling into his pickup truck, Sharpe gives me a tour around Wells, a collection of well-preserved, colourfully painted wooden shops and restaurants and homes deep in B.C.'s interior, the green and blue and purple walls and gables standing out against a shockingly white layer of snow that coats everything like icing sugar.

Pointing out the old buildings — churches, shops, the former Bank of Canada — Sharpe notes that many of them have been reborn as art galleries, this remote little place drawing painters and sculptors and even filmmakers from across the country, displaying their works in their own galleries and contributing to a collective called Island Mountain Arts.

And then, together with James Douglas, I head down the road to Barkerville.

Douglas — an actor and filmmaker by trade, and director of visitor services at Barkerville Historic Town and Park — explains that here, five valleys come together, the local waterways bringing down an incredible deposit of gold.

It's hard to imagine now, but William "Billy" Barker was actually late to the party. Along with seven compatriots, they staked a claim already abandoned by other prospectors. Playing a hunch, they went deep, down as far as 50 feet — and struck it rich, finding a seam 30 feet all the way through, as much as 30 times thicker than most in the area.

Peaking in the first half of the 1860s, Douglas says that Barkerville drew as many as 100,000 hopeful souls over the mountains, all of them in search of their little slice of the riches — in the end more gold, per lineal foot, than any other place on earth.

Douglas adds that, over a 30-year period, one 4-kilometre stretch of creek yielded (in today's dollars) about \$13 billion. "There are about 200 creeks in the area, but this one is by far the richest," Douglas says, noting that the possibility of gold led some to extreme measures. "Even in the winter, they'd dig down through 10 feet of snow, build a bonfire to melt the ice, then pan those rocks in the river."

As we walk up a quiet, snowy thoroughfare through the middle of town, the old hotels and print shops and restaurants clustered closely together, Douglas points out that British Columbia is probably part of Canada because of Barkerville — between American designs on the west coast, and Britain's waning interest in its increasingly unprofitable colony north of the border, Douglas notes that Canada's current map probably owes much to the gold strike here.

And despite the many hours he spends here, Douglas has never gotten the fever — but it's a phenomenon he sees all the time. It's like an addiction, he says. "It's that itch people get, and they go out in search of the gold, more and more. It's like a lover, in a way. They let something into their lives that will never leave."

While I avoid the fever, I do feel the love — making my way around the area, chatting with local artists in their galleries, rambling around the 1940s miner's cabin where I stay for three nights, and snowmobiling some 30 kilometres deep into the woods, the evergreens heavy-laden with snow, roaring right past Barkerville and all the way up to Groundhog Lake, headwaters of all the gold creeks in the region.

Back at the Wells Hotel on the last night of my visit, I savour a flight of five scotches from the rather remarkable 345 bottles at the bar, the bartender pulling together a range, from delicate and light, to smoky and peaty, based on my preferences from the past couple nights. Artists and playwrights swing by my comfortable spot in a big, cushy chair, striking up conversations as I slowly sip the scotch, its warmth blooming on my cheeks in my snug corner of the pub as the snow continues to fall outside.

No, I may not have any gold in my pockets — and perhaps I never will. But I feel plenty lucky, all the same.

Tim Johnson was a guest of Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism, which didn't review or approve this article.

When you go

Fly: Both Williams Lake and Quesnel — the two largest towns in the region — are serviced by Central Mountain Air, which flies from Vancouver International Airport.

Stay: Step (and sleep) back in time at [Mountain Thyme Getaway](#), a three-bedroom cabin that looks and feels — and was, once — a 1930s and 1940s gold miners' cabin, but with modern conveniences like a TV/DVD player and a deep-soaker tub.

Eat: Recently renovated and reopened, the Pooley Street Café, located inside the historic [Wells Hotel](#), offers a wide variety of very good food, including smoked-on-site ribs and pork and chicken, Mexican favourites, and classics made with a twist. Finish off your dinner by choosing from 345 varieties of scotch at the hotel pub, just across the lobby.

Visit: Recognized as both a provincial Heritage Property and Park and a National Historic Site, [Barkerville](#) well preserves its 1860s boom town feel, attracting some 60,000 visitors annually to its 100+ heritage buildings.

Do your research: hellobc.com

Read more about: [British Columbia](#)



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