

By Wendy Haaf

Finding a Home in

Vernon, BC

When Jack and Joyce Phillips, then living in Ontario's cottage country, got fed up with travelling to Florida every winter to escape the snow, they began looking on Vancouver Island and throughout British Columbia's interior for a place to retire.

While they visited many communities, Vernon, in the northern Okanagan Valley, kept drawing them back. With a population of about 40,000 (in a region of roughly 83,000), "Vernon was the size we liked, and it had less traffic than the other places," Jack Phillips says. "We like that we can walk to town—it's four or five kilometres [three miles or less]—and take the bus back." (The city also has good public transit.) The semi-arid climate, unique in Canada, and the spectacular scenery—a mixture of sagebrush-dotted hills, evergreen forest, jewel-hued lakes, and rolling mountains worthy of a Western movie backdrop—also drew the couple in.

"It's our little bit of desert," Phillips says. "Coming up the highway from Osoyoos, it's the most gorgeous landscape in Canada, bar none."

While the postcard landscape and temperate climate were part of what initially lured Kal Newell and his

wife, Gay, to Vernon from Regina more than 11 years ago ("We feel like we're getting two extra months of summer," he says), the couple also enjoyed the opportunities for outdoor recreation in their new home. Accustomed to having to drive long distances to both ski hills and lakes, they found themselves "practically living on a large clean lake," Newell says. There are six in the vicinity.



retirement destinations



“We’re surrounded by ski hills—there’s one only 20 minutes away. And Canada’s cross-country-skiing teams practised for the winter Olympics here at Sovereign Lake because of the terrain.”

In the warmer months, Newell enjoys bicycling with a seniors’ group. “There are some beautiful cycling tours. We’ve found several places that are nice and flat,” he says. One of the highlights: a section of the Kettle Valley railway that has been converted into a walking and cycling path. “We can park our car at Chute Lake and cycle all the way down to Penticton,” he explains; it’s a journey of just over 100 kilometres (60 miles) that takes them through Kelowna. “It’s unbelievable. You’re on the top of the mountains, looking down on the lakes, and there are tunnels to go through and trestles to go over.” Given the gentle incline of the former railbed, even uphill biking is manageable.

After moving here, the Newells also took up golf for the first time. “We’re surrounded by golf courses,” Newell says. There are five, ranging from nine to 36 holes and from beginner to championship level.

In fact, it seems there are places in Vernon to pursue every activity you’ve ever heard of and then some, including indoor walking (free to seniors at a local sports track), rock climbing, zip-lining, and “fat biking” (biking in snow). With a host of vacation options nearby, from winery day trips (“There are so many wineries in the region, they’ve been broken up into six different tours,” Phillips observes) to resorts like the one in Osoyoos where the Phillipses often stay, you needn’t stray far from home to holiday (though if you choose to do so, there’s also an international airport just 45 minutes away, in Kelowna).

John McMillan, who raises Peruvian Paso saddle horses on a ranch about 15 minutes outside the city, says that he and his wife, Joyce, were pleased to discover upon moving here that Vernon has a vibrant

arts scene, including a performing arts centre, a regional symphony, live theatre, galleries, and a museum. “We have Friday night music in the park: they get different bands in and you can go and listen for free. We’ve got all the culture, and yet I’m in the country,” McMillan says.

Foodies will enjoy Vernon’s varied ethnic restaurants, craft brew-pub, and specialty shops—such as the oil and vinegar retailer that hosts regular tastings—in addition to locally

produced fruit spirits, herbal teas, honey, mead, cheese, sausage, and grass-fed meat.

And in contrast to the rural city the McMillans previously called home, where



“you’re still an outsider after many years,” he says, “here you’re quickly accepted into the community.”

“There’s a wonderful mix of people here, and there’s still a lot of friendly small-town atmosphere,” Kal Newell adds.

When it comes to health-related amenities, Vernon scores well, too, with a large community hospital and three walk-in clinics, a growing number of seniors’ residences and assisted-living facilities, and a relatively new service called A GP for Me (run by the Central Okanagan Division of Family Practice) aimed at matching patients over 65 who need a family practitioner with physicians accepting new patients.

“I think Vernon is a great place to retire,” Jack Phillips says. “We’ve lived from coast to coast to coast and overseas, and everywhere I go, I boast about the Okanagan. We love it.”

