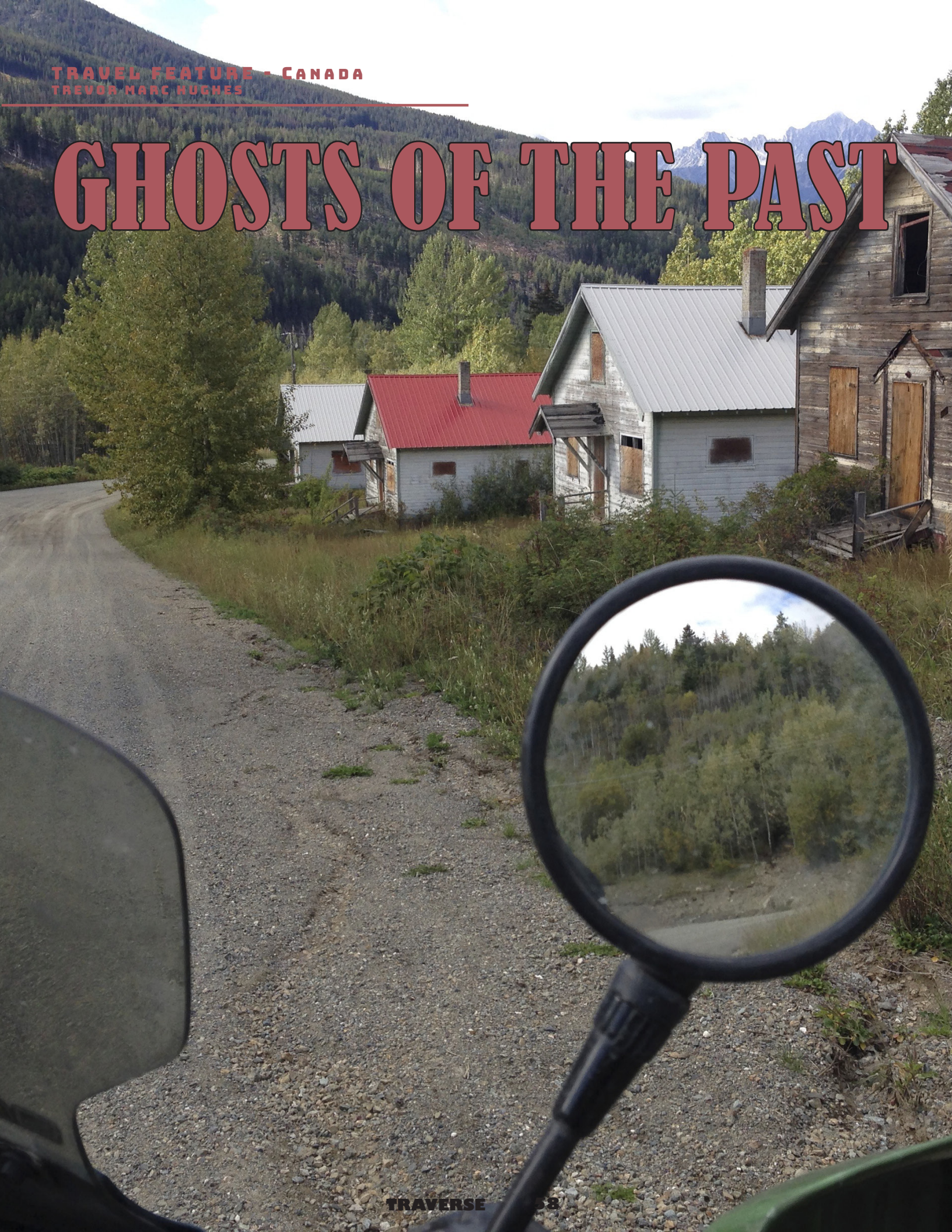


TRAVEL FEATURE • CANADA  
TREVOR MARC HUGHES

# GHOSTS OF THE PAST







**T**he Coalmont Hotel was towering above my Kawasaki KLR650. Painted in Canadian Pacific Railway red, it was

the most prominent building in the dwindling town I'd ridden to, a place that had been prepared a century ago for hundreds of railway passengers seeking a rest and a bed for the night.

The road into this dusty place followed the eloquently named Tulameen River, a waterway placer miners would have combed through looking for that greatest of motivators of the past two centuries: gold. The cracked, sun-drenched asphalt of Coalmont Road wound its way for 19 kilometres from Princeton, a town at the confluence of the Tulameen and Similkameen rivers.

I was swishing along in my riding gear, trying to get the best angle for a photo of KLR and historic hotel. I heard an engine behind me. Looking down the dirt road, I saw a yellow quad rumbling its way towards me, building a cloud of dust behind it. The rider soon pulled up next to me. After all, I was seemingly the only fellow on the streets of Coalmont, British Columbia.

Ralph was camping with his fami-

ly up the road at Otter Lake. He told me he came up from Vancouver every summer to get away from the hustle and bustle. He offered to take a picture of the KLR and I from across the street, fitting it all in.

Coalmont was little more now than a bedroom community to nearby Princeton, grabbing a few tourists interested in hiking the Trans-Canada Trail that uses the decommissioned Kettle Valley Railway line or in finding out how to pan for gold along the banks of the river. Earlier, as I pulled over into the gravel lay-by to admire the quirky "Welcome to Coalmont" sign, still wearing my helmet, I saw a man wearing sunglasses and sporting shock-white hair emerge from behind an outhouse. In my helmet with GoPro mounted on the top, sunglasses and hi-viz yellow riding jacket, I must have looked like a Mardi Gras astronaut.

"Have a nice ride along Coalmont Road?" he asked.

"I did," I responded enthusiastically.

"Nice ride, isn't it?"

A couple of Chihuahuas emerged belonging to my new acquaintance. I held my hand out as a peace offering. I got an aggressive bark in return.

"He won't bite you...he's just nuts,"





my white-haired friend admitted with a chuckle.

He went on to tell me the old Coalmont Hotel wasn't open. Despite its regal appearance and fine upkeep, my new friend told me its future was uncertain.

"The Hurley". It's one of those roads that, when you mention it to local adventure motorcyclists, they simply nod in understanding. Sure, British Columbia is full of gravel forest service roads like it. But the reputation of "The Hurley" precedes itself.

Leading me out of the Pemberton Valley, not far from Whistler, the Hurley River Road "FSR" climbed up switchbacks that kept going...and going. Rocks bounced off my KLR's bash plate as I stood up on my foot pegs,





rebalancing the bike. I hoped one of the bouncing rocks didn't reach a front wheel brake caliper. The route's washboard surface led me to believe this was either a road extensively plowed in the winter or a road where ABS brakes on larger 4x4 vehicles were used a great deal. Eventually the bouncing road relented, reaching a plateau. I was now moving into the South Chilcotin region of the province and stopped the bike to take in the beautiful views of the Coast Mountains, the Pemberton Valley floor and rushing Lillooet River.

I had heard of the "I Survived the Hurley" stickers and I planned to get one for my aluminum panniers. After this ride I would have deserved one.

After about an hour of negotiating an increasingly narrow road that changed from wide gravel track to muddy trail while keeping the Hurley River on my left, I had achieved my destination, one of the most successful gold mining towns in British Columbia history.

I put the kickstand down outside the Bralorne Pioneer Motel, which had been modified from the former mining office. Inside was the original safe where gold extracted from nearby claims would have been kept before transport arrived to take it to the bank. In 1933, during the Great Depression, 80,000 ounces of gold were extracted, valued then at \$2.5 million CDN. There were signs that gold mining ambitions were alive and well in Bralorne, as the lights of the new mine buildings were what guided me in to town the night before, but it would be hard to compete with the heyday of the town in the Great Depression years.

After a solid sleep in my comfortable mine office's motel room, I explored the nearby area, riding the KLR across the gravel leading to Bradan, the work town of the mines. The houses in this residential neighbourhood for mining personnel and their families were all boarded up, the red

corrugated roofs peeling away from the elemental power of many harsh winters and spring thaws.

Further down the road was the former site of Pioneer Mine. On my map it said "Pioneer Mine (abandoned)". I could see why as I rode further down a gravel lane. A massive pile of sun-bleached wood and rusting metal girders and gears were all that was left of the processing facilities for ore extracted from the claim. Apparently the town decided to destroy what was left of the derelict buildings in the 1970s when it was discovered squatters were living in them. Now only ghosts remain in the splintering and rotting wood of an historic mine town's buildings.

Sandon is a 5-kilometre ride down a black gravel road that leads from Highway 3A east of New Denver. Highway 3A is a gloriously twisty fun road that takes in a route from New Denver east to Kaslo. This is the Silvery Slocan, a part of the West Kootenay region of British Columbia famous for its silver mining past and its many excellent motorcycling routes.

I rumbled down the gravel Sandon Cody Road in a hurry as I was keen to see this quintessential ghost town. A former silver mining town, this place had been the definition of a boomtown following 1891 when two prospectors stumbled on an outcrop of silver ore. But before I could achieve my destination, I glanced to the right







to see a one-storey structure with a sign reading “Molly Brown’s Brothel” above its front door. I shrugged, thinking I was seeing things. Next I crossed a small wood bridge across Carpenter Creek and looked to my left where eight rusting Brill trolleys, the kind of buses that wound their way around Vancouver up until the 1980s, stood at attention next to a restored steam locomotive. Either my KLR650 was a faulty time machine or



I was going to a peculiar town indeed.

After putting my stand down in a lot surrounded by aging wood wagons and other rusting machinery, I walked over to the Sandon Historical Society building. There was a hand-operated pump standing sentry, not unlike a functional one I used to fill up the bike in a West Kootenay town called Trout Lake City the day before. Carpenter Creek gushed nearby. I glanced at a pile of rotting blanch wood. It looked like a disorganized giant had piled it up. I would discover these were the remnants of the flume that had covered the creek and created Sandon’s Main Street for decades before being flooded away in 1955.

The building before me housed the Sandon Museum, a fascinating place housed in one of Sandon’s few remaining buildings. Not only does it tell the tale of the town’s rise to a community of two thousand in just seven years, it describes a community where it would not be unexpected to see poker chips in the collection box at church and that burned to the ground while gamblers took their game tables outside and continued

playing cards.

It’s these kinds of historic towns that the motorcycle brings me to. The Kawasaki KLR650 has been a kind of time machine for me. Sometimes I imagine it to be a mechanical horse bringing a stranger in to town. Riding a dual sport bike that can handle many kinds of terrain has allowed me to connect with these places in a way other kinds of transportation wouldn’t have allowed. People stopped their trucks and asked me how I was when resting along “The Hurley” to have a cereal bar and admire the view. The grit of old roads was on my riding gear afterwards and on my face where it had managed to get past my goggles. It’s been a great way to see British Columbia’s pioneer history up close, and I’m just scratching the surface. *TMH*

*Trevor has written two books; Nearly 40 on the 37 and Zero Avenue To Peace Park. Both explore the history and wilderness of his native British Colombia and surrounding regions, including Canada's nearest neighbour, the United States.*

*Aboard his KLR650 Trevor discovers that a nation's history is important to its future and that perhaps neighbours are often suspicious of each other regardless of how friendly you believe you are.*

*Go to [www.trevormarchughes.ca](http://www.trevormarchughes.ca) to discover more of what Trevor has discovered.*