

Nelson's a place that's nutty . . . but nice

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Nelson, B.C.—There has to be a hemp store around here somewhere.

I've seen the bead shop, the glass-blowing atelier, the craft centre, the funky fabric store, the handmade soap company, and more health food stores than you can shake an organic stick of asparagus at.

There just has to be a hemp store. Nelson, B.C., is that kind of a place.

I remember one school friend telling me, at a very impressionable age, that at some point God had lifted up Eastern Canada, using the St. Lawrence River as a handhold, and all the nuts had rolled into Western Canada. That vivid image is still held, albeit usually in a more politically correct form, by many east of Winnipeg. And Nelson, around halfway between Vancouver and Calgary in the Kootenay mountains, is everything easterners think the wacky West Coast should be.

You can't throw a rock in Nelson without hitting a healer. And if you do throw a rock and hit a healer, they can recover with reiki, shiatsu, sound therapy, aqua therapy, Ayurvedic treatment, art therapy, acupuncture, candling, you name it.

There is also a major ashram just outside town, founded in 1963 and one of the first large yoga centres in Canada. It's the sort of place that has art walks instead of pub-crawls. Though, of course, it also has The Nelson Brewing Company —motto: "So much more than just a breakfast drink." The beer is, it goes without saying, organic. And all this in a town with a population of around 10,000 (jumping to a still pocket-sized 50,000, if you include everything within an easy drive).

But, the thing about Nelson is that it somehow manages to be flaky and funky — surprisingly less cloying and more cool. Part of it has to do with the setting. It is postcard Canada. Heritage buildings speckle a

wooded hillside overlooking Kootenay Lake (if it looks familiar, that's because it was the set for Steve Martin's movie *Roxanne*). You can see the mountains and white peaks of Kokanee Glacier Provincial Park, from downtown. And it's a short drive to the natural hot springs. With world-class skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and more at the edge of town, Nelson has almost as many sports equipment shops as spas. The outdoorsiness of the community has balanced the introversion of the spiritual and creative search to achieve a remarkable equilibrium.

Nelson just works. Effort has gone into making a modern, sustainable neighbourhood in the heart of the woods. It has a thriving local arts community, based around local galleries and a restored 1920s theatre, and the town is also partially powered by environmentally friendly local hydro.

But does it have a hemp shop? I know it has a store that sells paraphernalia related to hemp's close cousin, because the owners of Nelson's Holy Smoke Culture Shop (a.k.a. the Holy Smoke Mission of God) were busted in 2006 for, surprise, surprise, having cannabis. But hemp is different. Hemp clothing feels great, like a cross between raw silk and cotton, but it is relatively expensive – as much of a political statement about agriculture as a T-shirt.

And often the designs are sort of nouveau India – no-button, no collar, men's shirts that go to mid-thigh. Only a certain sort of economy can support a hemp shop. I ask around. It doesn't take long to find out. Nelson has two hemp shops. And one, Still Eagle Planetary Persuasions, is the oldest in B.C. I head over to browse the racks. It is surprisingly large, and surprisingly mainstream.

There are as many button-down Oxfords as piss-off-the-parents hoodies.

Times have changed. If the nuts used to roll west, it's been a long time since Canada was flat. And what used to seem loopy, like a week at the ashram or cranial sacral therapy, now sounds like a good Mother's Day present. The rest of the country is finally catching up with Nelson, and appreciating a place that has more massage therapists per capita than bartenders.

And Nelson is showing that not only can smalltown Canada survive, it can thrive, two hemp shops and all.