

Paying the price - Whistler Pique, Nov. 8, By Clare Ogilvie -- Paradise isn't cheap.

But when you wake-up on your day off up to a foot of fresh powder, an azure blue sky, and the promise of untouched terrain, the fact that bread, beer, and beef, are more expensive in resort towns doesn't seem to matter.

And that's just as well since residents of Whistler can pay almost 30 per cent more for just about everything than if they were living outside Whistler.

Three friends sharing a home here will pay up to \$2,500 a month in rent, gas is eight to 10 cents a litre more than in Squamish, just 45 minutes drive south of North America's No. 1 rated ski-resort, and a pre-packaged sandwich grabbed for lunch on the go will be at least a dollar more.

"I don't think it costs 35 per cent more just to bring (the sandwich) up the highway," said long-time corridor resident and president of the Whistler Real Estate Co. Pat Kelly.

"It's the cost of a bottle of beer out at a restaurant. It's going out for a meal, it's everything. It's the cost of going skiing, everything here costs more."

Whistler IGA Foods owner Jim Chan said the higher prices reflect the cost of doing business in the resort.

"We probably have the highest rents and taxes anywhere in Canada," said Chan.

Then there is the cost of delivery. Everything must be trucked in, and unlike Vancouver where local farmers may deliver for free to get business, no-one gives away free trucking to Whistler, said Chan.

As for Whistler's gas prices Petro Canada owner Bonnie Cerka said the high cost of fuel is just as upsetting to her.

"I'm frustrated too," she said, adding that the price she charges is set by head office in Alberta and offers no extra profit to her.

"Our price is higher because the oil companies sell it to us at a higher price, because they know the market can bear it."

Petro Canada spokeswoman Anne Makin said the price is affected by a number of factors including the price of crude, wholesale gas pricing and supply and demand.

And each station owner negotiates their own contract with Petro Canada.

"I can't tell you what their specific contracts are and they can vary depending on a number of factors," said Makin.

Although Whistler's population continues to grow - it's expected to be over 10,000 when the results of the next census are announced - there is still not enough people to support major chain stores such as Canadian Tire or Wal Mart.

That forces locals to shop for retail items, like children's clothing, at tourist prices, adding to the financial strain of living here.

But for Susan Darch, who worked in public relations for Whistler-Blackcomb before moving to work in the same field for the Aspen Skiing Company earlier this year, the higher costs are worth paying to live in a resort town.

"I love the mountains and I love the mountain resort industry," said Darch adding she didn't even notice paying more for things when she moved to Whistler from Vancouver.

In Aspen, population 5,900, she's found the cost of living the same or a little less than Whistler.

"I've been introduced to a tons of deals," said Darch. "In town I can get a pizza and two beers for US\$10. That's a pretty good deal to me.

"In terms of rent and cable and that sort of thing it is exactly the same or even less expensive."

But more than anything else it is the cost of real estate that jacks up the cost of living in a resort, from the rent retailers and service providers must pay to the cost of housing.

A starter family home in Whistler will be at least \$350,000 and more likely \$500,000. And a house like that will usually need renovations said Kelly.

An empty lot, if you can find one, will sell anywhere from \$400,000 to millions. Most homes cost about \$200 a square foot to build.

The average resort home will be over a million dollars, making it the most expensive municipality in Canada, according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

The CMHC predicts in a report that the average price of a single-family-home in Whistler could be \$3 million shortly after 2010.

While soaring house prices mean a bonanza for long-time residents who decide to sell, they threaten to change the very character of the town say some locals.

"We are at risk of losing the diversity of our community," said councillor Ken Melamed.

"My big concern is for the people who are the heart and soul of the community. They bought homes here 25 years ago. They didn't move to a

resort then or buy their homes as an investment, but now they are thinking of cashing out."

It is this very hand over of older homes, often redeveloped, to incoming buyers along with the development of "estate" homes which could be a threat to Whistler.

While some call this "Aspen-ization" others call it progress. Some even view the development of estate homes as one of Whistler's industries.

Simon Fraser University geography professor Alison Gill, who has studied the effects of tourism on Whistler since the early 1990s, believes "Aspen-ization" is a threat to any successful resort community.

"I think from a social perspective it is seen as bad because it is seen as exclusivity of all but the very rich, and therefore (the resort becomes) a place normal people can't live in and in some cases can't even have access to for tourism purposes," said Gill.

"In a democratic society we see that as undesirable."

But it is not just the fact that some people are leaving the resort, it is also who is leaving that can have an effect said Gill, who is one of a team of consultants currently short-listed to advise the municipality on its Comprehensive Sustainability Plan.

"What is critical is having the community leaders stay in place because it seems to me that if they sell up and move the new people, who acquire those properties, are likely not going to be community minded," she said.

"They have different lifestyles and they will be away from the community for long periods of time."

What can happen, said Gill, is politics becomes entertainment and "people play at local politics."

This can lead to a loss of "soul" in the resort.

"It is a question of a place having a heart and soul as opposed to being some sort of artificial creation which is all commercial," said Gill.

If people live and work in the community and they have pride in their home, visitors feel their enthusiasm and catch the spirit of the town, making their stay memorable.

Whistler's sense of community really began about a decade ago, as the resort started to gain international attention. It is thriving now with organizations from parent-tot drop-ins to a food bank looking after the soul of the town.

Millennium Place is helping to bring art and culture to town and plans for a new museum and library are well under way.

In these ways Whistler is becoming more like Aspen, which boasts an active cultural scene and even hosts operas during the year.

The difference in Aspen is that few locals can afford to live in town and so most commute to enjoy recreational activities from bedroom communities.

While Whistler's council members may not always see eye to eye on how to keep the town's community strong they are united in their efforts to keep Whistler's sense of community strong and maintain a large portion of the workforce as locals who live here.

"The success of the resort is dependent on having a strong community," said Mayor Hugh O'Reilly.

"We are diverse and we want to stay that way."

The municipality is working on an affordability strategy for residents, but it is still in the initial stages.

A major component of staying diverse is being able to offer minimum wage earners affordable housing. Most consider Whistler a leader amongst resort communities when it comes to providing affordable housing, and it is committed to growing in a sustainable way.

To some that means stopping the development of monster homes. But as O'Reilly points out these homes and their wealthy owners also pay high taxes while using few services. And the developers of these homes can be encouraged to build environmentally friendly houses.

Currently 70 per cent of municipal revenue comes from property taxes. The remaining 30 per cent comes from user fees, grants and other sources.

The desire to limit growth was one of the reasons Whistler's current bed cap was introduced as part of the Official Community Plan in 1988.

But this well-intentioned measure is also a major catalyst to sky-rocketing real estate prices.

"It's economics 101," said SFU professor Gill. "When the supply goes down the price goes up."

Still, Whistler has a long way to go to catch up to some American resort towns such as Aspen and Vail.

Within Aspen's city limits a single family home averages US\$3.8 million (CDN \$5.9 million), a condominium is US\$1.16 million (CDN \$2.5 million), and an empty lot can set you back US\$2.6 (CDN \$4.1 million) million.

Then there is the "fashion" factor, where the international jet set moves in and buys property because the town is the "in place." Aspen definitely rates as one of the places to see and be seen. And now so does Whistler.

The low Canadian dollar is also playing its part.

In Whistler just, as in other premiere resorts, multi-million dollar properties are bought by a high-end, often international market.

The average Aspen worker will buy outside of town where prices are lower but still expensive, considering the average salary is US\$39,898 (CDN \$62,823.39).

A recent study by the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments found that a family of four in Pitkin County, where Aspen holds some of the nation's most expensive real estate, pays on average eight times as much for housing as the national average.

In Eagle County, the home of Vail and Beaver Creek resorts, a family of four devotes 41 per cent of its income to housing, compared to the national average of 16 per cent. Even in Garfield County, considered a bedroom community for residents of Aspen and Vail, housing prices are twice as high as the national average.

So far that hasn't happened in Whistler's bedroom communities of Squamish and Pemberton, although the latter has doubled in population since 1991.

In Pemberton the average house sold for \$280,000 last year and a vacant lot was \$118,000, said Kelly who moved to the quaint valley town because it offered a lifestyle he preferred for his family.

Squamish is even more affordable.

A three-bedroom home will sell for \$185,000 and a "castle" with a view will be \$400,000.

As for food costs and other staples, they are about the same in Aspen and Vail as they are in towns just a short drive away.

But in Whistler not only is food and clothing more expensive than in Squamish, Pemberton, and Vancouver, it can even vary in cost depending on where you shop in town.

Locals do get some fabulous deals on skiing though. This year boarders and skiers in Vail can play all season on five mountains for US\$599 (CDN \$943) if they qualify for the merchants pass. Most buy the \$299 (CDN\$472) Colorado pass which gives them 10 days on Vail and Beaver Creek and unlimited play time at three other local resorts.

A season's pass for all five Vail resorts cost US\$1,499 (CDN \$2,360.33).

At Aspen the unrestricted \$999 (CDN\$1,576) Chamber Pass is the most popular pas for locals, but the Aspen Skiing Co. also offers a host of other deals.

So keen are they to get Aspen locals on the mountain they even have a chair-lift running out of the back of the local high school.

In Whistler a dual mountain ski pass costs \$1,519. If you work for the mountain a free pass is one of the perks but not every business in Whistler can afford to give out a pass.

However, locals can qualify for the \$1,099 Whistler Spirit dual mountain pass by taking a hospitality course through the chamber of commerce.

But, a higher cost of living is a small price to pay, said new Whistler resident Brian Park of Manchester, England.

"I've been reading about the snow in Whistler for years and now I'm here," he said hunkered inside an inadequate parka as one of Whistler's first snowfalls settled on the ground.

"I'm living cheap with some friends and I don't care how much things cost, it will be worth it."

Resort price comparison

(All prices converted to CDN\$)

Item Whistler-Blackcomb Aspen/Vail

Glass of beer \$5.50 \$4.73

Glass of wine \$8.00 \$ 9.47

T-shirt \$18.00 \$15.71

Grain Bread \$3.00 \$ 3.16

Gym pass \$6.00/day \$ 23.67/day

Movie \$10.00 \$12.63

Express Ski Pass \$89.00 \$156.25

Season Pass \$1,519.00 \$ 943-\$2,360.33

Day skiing \$ 61.00 \$ 102.59

Firewood /cord \$175 \$ 291.99

Condominium \$220,000 and up \$299,000 - \$2.5 mill

Single Family Home \$400,000 - \$8.9 mill \$600,000 - \$14 mill

Empty lot \$ 400,000 and up \$260,000 - \$6 mill

Skier visits to the resort:

Whistler-Blackcomb 1999-2000.....2.18 million

Vail Resorts 2000/2001, which includes:

Beaver Creek.....675,528

Breckenridge.....1,422,783

Keystone.....1,230,100

Vail.....1,645,902

Aspen Skiing Company 2000/2001, which includes:

Aspen Mtn.....319,343

Aspen Highlands...140,640

Buttermilk.....148,826

Snowmass.....740,241