



# EXIT STRATEGY

A former coal-mining town is proving irresistible to a group of Calgary artists looking to downshift. **by VALERIE BERENYI**





# FINDING GROUND





PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
**GEORGE WEBBER**

A former coal-mining town is slowly being settled by Calgary artists and artisans lured by the beauty of the Badlands, a like-minded community—and the prospect of finding an affordable piece of real estate.

by **VALERIE BERENYI**



Artists have long been colonizers. By economic necessity, they seek out cheap housing and studio space in abandoned warehouses and ramshackle houses with good bones. They move in, funk the place up and, in the process, attract other artists along with cafes, restaurants and shops. Eventually, gentrification happens: the well-heeled gravitate to the newly hip area, the chain stores take over, the rents shoot up and the creative types are forced to go hunting for other rough diamonds in less desirable but interesting city neighbourhoods. Or, they retreat to small towns that are closer to nature—authentic places that offer the quiet and space necessary for contemplation and inspiration. Think Taos, New Mexico, Todos Santos on Mexico's Baja Peninsula or, perhaps, East Coulee, Alberta.

It's probably premature to place tiny East Coulee—population 180 people “and 12 dogs,” according to one local wag—in the same category as the established art colony where Georgia O'Keeffe once flourished, filling her iconic canvases with flowers and skulls. Still, the former coal-mining town is luring artists and artisans from Calgary, given that it's only 90 minutes from the city and a mere 20 minutes from Drumheller with its schools, shops, hospital and other services. They are being drawn by the otherworldly appeal of the Badlands, by a small-town community that is undergoing a gentle regeneration and by the relatively inexpensive miners' cottages nestled by the lazy Red Deer

River, where one can swim in summer and chance upon ancient bison teeth and bones.

A ceramic artist and a graduate of the Alberta College of Art + Design, Janet Grabner swims in the river every day in summer with her husband, John Dahm, and their two children. The water is warm, shallow and clear, especially in August, she says, and you can see the river bottom. “My thing is looking for [bison] teeth. Once, I found 17 teeth in a couple of hours.”

Grabner and Dahm discovered East Coulee on a Sunday drive 17 years ago. “When we first got together we burned a tank of gas every weekend exploring the countryside around Calgary,” Grabner says. “The Badlands are beautiful and we knew that we wanted to raise our children in nature outside the city.” On one hot, dusty day spent poking around the dry lands southeast of Drumheller, they spotted a sign that pointed the way to East Coulee. When they turned off Highway 10 and into the tiny town with its lush gardens, big poplar trees and plentiful bird life, “it was like a little oasis,” Grabner says. The real estate was also affordable compared to other small towns near Calgary like Millarville or Cochrane. In 1997 the couple bought a 700-square-foot cottage for \$37,000 and lived in it for five cramped years. As their two kids, now 14 and 12, grew, they upgraded, buying a house slated for demolition in Calgary's Marda Loop district through a house broker and hauling it to East

Coulee. “The house cost us \$9,000 and \$11,000 to move it. We spent another \$80,000 to fix it up. That's quite common here. It's recycling a home instead of tearing it down.”

The cottage became their studio, where they do a brisk business in summer, selling pottery to day-trippers keen on local art. Twice a year they attend a trade show in Edmonton to meet with retailers and then ship orders to more than 40 stores across Canada. In her spare time, Grabner gardens—the valley's hot, sheltered microclimate allows her to grow cantaloupe, corn and tomatoes—or spends time with neighbours and friends like Lynne Van Kleef.

Van Kleef owned three native art galleries in Calgary before moving into an East Coulee cottage, purchased 12 years ago “for under \$40,000.” Most of her creativity is poured into her pretty garden. “It's paradise here, and very spiritual,” she says. “I like the community, the energy and the fresh air. No pesticides blowing around. I like the people. They're coming from the same place as I am in their hearts. These are people you can count on.”





One of the people she counts on is her friend Kellie Kruger. Born and raised in Calgary, Kruger moved with her husband, Jim, to East Coulee 15 years ago. They own the antique shop attached to the East Coulee Hotel & Tavern, located just off the highway when you turn into town. “It’s mostly kitschy items from the 1930s to the 1960s,” she says. Kruger has a creative bent, too. She collects and excavates glass bits from old mine sites and garbage dumps—teal-coloured Coca-Cola bottles and purple-hued medicine jars, for example, smashed or burnt by coal miners up to 100 years ago—and works them into free-hanging mosaics, much like stained-glass windows. (The piece she’s shown with below took first place in the eco-art category at the 2011 Stampede art show.)

“There’s terrific community spirit here,” agrees Grabner, who says she never misses the city. She revels in the fact that, when she moved in, East Coulee had one of the highest ratios of ACAD graduates to residents in the province: eight to 160. Mostly, she loves to walk in the Badlands. “The landscape is very dramatic. It grabs your heart. It still takes my breath away to look at the hills. They change colour constantly.” Initially, the fossilized seashells, sea creatures and other remnants of the huge inland ocean that once covered the land here inspired her work. Now, it’s the stripes of the surrounding hills. And the old bison teeth? Do they figure in her work? “No, I collect them in a jar, but my husband keeps giving them away to kids,” Grabner says with a wry laugh.

**T**hose toothy souvenirs hail from a much earlier time when native peoples drove the animals to their death over a nearby buffalo jump, and their remains washed down the river. Above the river are the eroded and eerily alluring cliffs, hoodoos, coulees and hills of the Badlands, striated with layers of rust-coloured iron, clay-like bentonite and black coal. It was the latter—a resource once widely used to cook food and heat homes and buildings—that spurred a coal rush in the valley at the turn of the last century and gave birth to East Coulee.

Newcastle, the area’s first coal mine near Drumheller, opened in 1911, and 138 mines and mining camps were to follow in the subsequent decades, including the Atlas Coal Mine No. 2 near East Coulee, established in 1928. Within two years the town had boomed to 3,500 people, says Jay Russell, program director of what is now the Atlas Coal Mine National Historic Site, run by a local, non-profit historical society to preserve the last remnants of the area’s coal-mining era.

Coal mining was rough, dangerous work and living conditions, primitive. Early miners, many from Europe and especially Hungary, dug holes in the sides of hills for shelter, fashioned huts from willow, straw and mud or built shacks from grain doors pilfered from railway cars. “East Coulee was very much a shantytown,” says Russell of the community’s beginnings. But, as the hamlet grew, churches, cafes, stores and a theatre were established and the shacks were replaced with modest houses. A four-

room school opened in 1930 and expanded 14 years later, a lovely building that remains at the heart of the town. The boom, however, wouldn’t last.

“The beginning of the end for coal mining in the area was the Leduc oil discovery in 1948,” says Russell. Gas was cleaner and more convenient than coal, which dirtied the air; the snow and the interiors of homes. “Even Drumheller Valley housewives couldn’t change to gas fast enough.” With dwindling demand for coal, mines closed in the 1950s and ’60s. The Atlas mine shipped its last load of coal in 1979 and, with no work, residents and commercial enterprises abandoned East Coulee. It very nearly became

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From left: Janet Grabner and John Dahm of Caracol Clay Studio; Lynne Van Kleef on East Coulee’s old bridge; Kellie Kruger with her glass art; and Brent Noland in the East Coulee School Museum.





## EXPLORING EAST COULEE

To get to the historic former mining town of East Coulee, about a 90-minute drive from Calgary, head north on Highway 2 past Airdrie, then take the east-bound Highway 9 exit to Drumheller. This will take you all the way to “The Drum,” where you will come to the intersection of Highway 9 and Highway 10. Turn right on Highway 10 and drive about 20 minutes southeast, then turn right off the highway into East Coulee.

### CARACOL CLAY STUDIO

169 6th St., East Coulee, 403-822-2258

The hand-built ceramics of Janet Grabner and John Dahm are inspired by the natural world around them. The gallery/studio is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, closed Sundays in winter. It's best to call ahead.

### EAST COULEE SCHOOL MUSEUM

359 2nd Ave., East Coulee, 403-822-3970  
ecsmuseum.ca

Get a taste of what life was like in a coal-mining town in the 1930s. The museum is open daily from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., from the Victoria Day long weekend to the Labour Day long weekend. (Visit the same website for information on the **East Coulee Spring Festival**, tentatively planned for mid-May 2013.)

### EAST COULEE HOTEL & TAVERN

491 1st Ave., East Coulee, 403-822-0007

Should you get hungry, thirsty or need to bed down for the night, this is the only game in town. It has a famous steak dinner every Friday night and serves up homemade food, including burgers.

### RETRO RESUSABLES

491 1st Ave., East Coulee, 403-821-0536

Located right in the hotel, Retro Reusables is a treasure trove of items from the 1930s, '40s, '50s and '60s. Open 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

### ATLAS COAL MINE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE 403-822-2220, atlascoalmine.ab.ca

Located across the river from East Coulee, this site is one of the most complete mining museums in Canada. Climb into coal mining's dark past with a tunnel tour.

—Valerie Berenyi

a ghost town. Even today, there isn't much, save for a few sleepy streets, the pottery studio, the antiques shop and the hotel/tavern, which reportedly serves up some of the best burgers around.

“[The end of coal mining] tore the heart out of the community. Everyone who grew up in East Coulee loved it,” says Russell, who once lived in East Coulee and now resides in nearby Rosebud. He is philosophical, though: “Like a grass fire that burns off the Prairie and through the ashes comes rejuvenation, now that the mine has shut down, nature is coming back. The area teems with history. It teems with wildlife.... And because the place was economically depressed, affordability brought people in and now East Coulee teems with culture. The artists who have come here incorporate the landscape into their work. They love story, so they love what was and what needs to be passed on.”

The East Coulee Spring Festival, begun in 1994 with just four bands, is the most obvious example of this cultural flowering, and of the desire to keep the town's heritage alive. The 12-hour music festi-

val—beloved by fans who wish the media would stop talking about it so that this hidden gem doesn't get wrecked—attracted 700 people and 120 musicians to East Coulee on May 12. It featured 37 acts—a steal at \$25 a ticket with the likes of SandyBone & The BreakDown, a dynamic roots band from Vancouver; Emily Spiller, a solo jazz/blues artist who performs with a live looping machine and a laptop; and The Kirby Sewell Band, a high-energy R&B group from Calgary. Many residents volunteer and the four indoor stages—two rooms in the old school, one in a newer community hall and one in the East Coulee Hotel & Tavern—are packed with festival-goers of all ages. The words “awesome” and “magical” are often used to describe the vibe.

“It is magical. It has a hippy feel to it,” says Brent Noland, a self-described “refugee” from Calgary who's produced the event for the past four years. “What makes Springfest completely different is that the musicians donate their time. If you take the money out of it, it becomes more of a spiritual event.”

It's remarkable: Although they're put up in donated hotel rooms and fed by the community, musicians from across Western Canada, and



K. Gwen Frank in her studio that once served as East Coulee's post office; Michael Dangelmaier in his music studio where the town's postmistress used to live.



sometimes from as far away as Ontario, vie to play East Coulee, even though they travel on their own dime and perform for free. All of the funds raised, about \$15,000 to \$20,000 annually, go to support the East Coulee School Museum. You see, when the Atlas Coal Mine closed in 1979, so did the school. It sank into disrepair until a group of residents got together to restore and reopen it as a museum in 1985. Running an old building is expensive, so that prompted the founding of the music festival, says Noland, who's also served as president of the East Coulee School Museum for the past two years. (He lives in Drumheller, but describes East Coulee as "my spiritual home.")

Today, the 12-room school is dedicated to East Coulee's coal-mining past. It features artifacts and haunting portraits of coal miners by documentary photographer Lawrence Christmas. There's a small lending library, and the place can be booked for weddings and special events. The search is on for an operator who can run a small tearoom during tourist season, says Van Kleef. Groups of school kids stay there while they're touring nearby attractions such as the Royal Tyrell Museum and the Atlas Coal Mine. The '30s-era experience is made real with dunce caps and spoonfuls of cod liver oil.

In such a small place, everyone pitches in. Calgary's Michael Dangelmaier, a graphic artist, illustrator and musician, has contributed the groovy posters for the last two East Coulee Spring Festivals, and his company is a sponsor of the event. He and his wife K. Gwen Frank, a printmaker and painter, are relative newcomers to East Coulee. They had long talked about finding a piece of land near water where they could plunk down a camper or trailer and recharge their city-sapped batteries. When Frank's niece, also an artist, suggested they'd enjoy a day trip to the East Coulee area, they found a place that spoke to Frank's roots in rural southern Saskatchewan. "My greatest feeling was a desire to see the stars at night the way I did on our Saskatchewan farm, billions of them, clear, cold and sparkling in the deepest sea of black space," she says.

Four years ago they bought three town lots in East Coulee for just under \$150,000: one with a mobile home they could live in; one occupied by the town's former post office, which would become Frank's studio; and another that the postmistress once called home—her old quarters now serve as Dangelmaier's music studio. (Even now, property is cheap. In mid-May, the asking price of a wooded town lot near the river with a cabin worthy only of tearing down was

\$55,000.) After much hard work and many visits to the Drumheller Salvation Army for retro-chic '60s and '70s furniture and decor, they have created a quirky retreat. For now, they remain "weekenders," making the trip from Calgary as often as possible.

"In the end, this place really does help me to come back to centre, on the inside. Snowshoeing on New Year's Day, on the middle of the Red Deer River in total minus-30 silence, with white all around, is nothing short of sublime," says Frank. "It's soul food."

As the couple slowly puts roots down in the community, Frank is seeing the East Coulee landscape seep into her art. A recent watercolour, for example, features banded hills and the "architecture" of the valley. "I find myself looking for a way to simplify the busy textures of this 'new' primordial landscape, but I get mesmerized by them, pulled into them as into a labyrinth," she says. "It's a curious but new and welcome challenge."

For Dangelmaier, life in East Coulee is the antithesis of the Calgary experience. "I like to say that 'east' is just one letter away from 'easy.' It's easy to get to, the people are lovely and charming, the music is great.... We've rekindled our spirit of adventure with walks in the grasslands, bike rides and playing in the river. It's just easy." 

