

# MONEY

**MAKE SAVE SPEND**

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## Mining the nuggets of history

**REMEMBRANCE:** Britannia Museum expansion reveals past, present

BY PAUL LUKE  
BUSINESS EDITOR

**BRITANNIA BEACH** — Kirstin Clausen allowed herself a moment of pride three years ago as she gazed at the reborn mill at the Britannia Mine Museum.

The mill, which looms over Britannia Beach like a temple to ancient mining gods, had never looked better. True, the eight-tiered brute would never be mistaken for The Louvre.

But the new white cladding and 14,416 hand-puttied panes of glass had replaced its derelict grandeur with massive industrial grace.

Then came a phone call from an area resident who said he was appalled at the gleaming structure that had purged the old one's run-down romance. "You've just made that mill that had such character look like modern condos," he said.

Clausen sympathized. But she had a museum to run — and propping up a dilapidated mausoleum to mining would never work.

The museum takes an even bigger esthetic gamble next month when it unveils the results to date of a \$14.7-million program that has seen it rehabilitate 10 of its 15 historic buildings — and erect new ones.

The museum has embraced a contradictory set of challenges — celebrating mining's contribution to B.C. while acknowledging the darker

sides of its environmental impact.

It wants to peer into the past, hopes to encourage visitors to probe mining's possible future and boost its annual number of visitors from 35,000 to 60,000 — ultimately, pushing that attendance to 80,000.

"With 60,000, we're squeaking by at being self-sufficient," Clausen says, fighting to be heard over the power saws finishing the visitors' centre.

"If we can double our attendance in the first 18 months with our new experience, and we're confident we can, then you do like every other business or museum has to — you work for your audience."

Those visitors may be surprised to learn how the museum has transcended its homage to a bygone era to become a living organism.

The two-lobed brain of this entity is the exhibit-laden visitor centre, and the administration building, a restored heritage structure showcasing the local community's history.

Underground mining is about punching bowels into rock to extract minerals. The Britannia Mine Museum may have the longest grand intestine of any museum in the world — more than 210 kilometres of tunnels carved through mountains during the copper mine's 69-year life.

So vast was the labyrinth that it took up to 45 minutes for the "man cars" to move miners to work sites — the same time needed to reach the



## Mating for retirement

Marry investment guru Warren Buffett (left), 79, or his business partner Charlie Munger, 86? Buffet advises gold diggers go for the older man.

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Britannia Mining Museum's executive director Kirstin Clausen oversees a \$14.7-million rehabilitation of 10 historic buildings, as well as a few new ones, at the former copper minesite. WARD PERRIN — PNG

museum from Vancouver.

The 20-storey mill, built in 1922, is the heart of the mine and the museum. In its heyday, it was a hungry, noisy heart, gobbling 7,000 tons of ore a day and pounding it to powder.

"This building was never quiet. It rocked and rolled 24/7, and if it was quiet, there was trouble in the town." Today, its hushed interior has the intimate power of a cathedral. A startling feature is the lush, reverb-heavy ambience created as sounds bounce off huge pipes and raw rock faces.

Choirs and instrumentalists have come to admire — and be wary of — the mill's eerie ability to prolong a sound's life, she says.

If music goes quiet during a concert, the audience hears the steady drip of mineral-infused water forming icicle-shaped stalactites.

"We recognize the huge opportunity that the mill affords us but it isn't our priority to turn it into a concert hall," Clausen says.

"It's not heated. You have to sit on folding chairs so it's not for those who want to go to The Chan [Centre] but it is a unique venue."

The machinery building displays equipment used to tear away and transport rock. These machines were the mine's muscles.

And the soul? That belongs to the 60,000 people who worked at the operation or lived at Britannia from 1905 to 1974.

Some may see the relaunch set for Sept. 18-19 as an ethical dilemma. The museum owns the site of the old Britannia Mines, once the largest copper producer in the British Empire.

Britannia also became one of the

worst polluters of its kind in Canada after it closed in 1974. Rainwater poured through the operation's tunnels and five open pits, mixing a nasty, acidic soup of dissolved metals that spewed into Howe Sound.

A treatment plant built in 2005 cleans up water coming from the old mine.

Michael McPhie, co-chairman of the Britannia Beach Historical Society, which governs the museum, says the site's cleanup shows how the mining industry has evolved.

"The mine did leave a legacy and I don't think we should hide from that," McPhie says.

"We should learn from it and make sure that what we do is consistent with the values of society today."

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Vancouver Province (Business Front A33), August 22, 2010

Headline: "Mining the nuggets of history"

For Blue Sky Creative ([www.blueskycreative.ca](http://www.blueskycreative.ca))

Client: Britannia Mine Museum