

Ultimate Trains, Nanton

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Ultimate Trains and Big Sky Garden Railway, Nanton

Photograph by: Brent Mykytyshyn, Swerve

What would you do for a living if you grew up, train-obsessed, in a tiny Swiss town spitting distance from the main line between Zurich and Germany? Why, you'd own a hobby shop in Nanton, Alta. Is there another answer to that question?

Not for Tony Scheiwiller, who, along with his wife Joan, owns and operates the town's inimitable Ultimate Trains and Big Sky Garden Railway, a hobby shop/mini-theme park specializing in "G scale" model trains. But, as is true of all memorable journeys, the trip was twistier, longer and less predictable than the couple first imagined.

Tony and Joan met in 1969 through connections at the Calgary (then Husky) Tower, where Tony was a chef. They married four months later and, shortly thereafter, recalls Joan, her new husband announced that he wanted to open a hobby shop. Instead, as people do, they built a 47-room motel in Inuvik. Then they stayed and ran the place for 29 years—except for one particularly warm and blissful season when Tony was hired as the food and beverage manager for the Canadian pavillion at Expo '92 in Seville, Spain. As Joan tells it with characteristic cheerfulness, when the couple returned home to Inuvik, they looked at each other, shrugged and said, "Well, we'll probably just die up here!"

As fate would have it, however, an opportunity to sell their Finto Motor Inn arose, and they jumped. The Scheiwillers moved back to Calgary, and Tony's long-held dream finally left the station: the couple sold

model trains out of Greengate Garden Centre for many years and, in 2000, they purchased a former hair salon in Nanton and opened their train shop 45 minutes south of Calgary.

If you want a model train running year-round in your backyard, this is the mecca. The packed-to-the-rafters store offers the country's largest selection of electric trains built specifically for gardens; they're larger, sturdier and more resistant to weather than your average model train. But the best reason to go is to spend an hour or two, with or without preschoolers, in the Scheiwiller's backyard.

A gardening fanatic, Joan is living her passion as much as her husband is his. Proof of the couple's harmonious working relationship is a huge, living model train set within a meticulous, miniature garden. For a couple of bucks extra (it's \$8 for adults and \$7 for kids to enter the yard), you can climb aboard a ride-on train that loops around the garden and through the Scheiwiller's garage. To boot, there's a picnic area, three Thomas the Tank Engine play areas and any number of friendly foster cats roaming about.

In one way, it's all a bit wonderfully bizarre. In another, the place is exactly what you'd expect from a couple who, for more than 40 years, have found adventure in the unlikeliest of places.

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