

# “I left my kids behind”

**Leaving your friends and family behind to start a new life in a country thousands of miles away is a challenge for many emigrants, but to have to leave your husband and two daughters in the UK must be near impossible. This was what Wendy Bernthal had to deal with, as Canadian immigrant Claire Bolgil found out this winter**

**A**s I leave home on what is the coldest day we've experienced since immigrating to British Columbia in May 2007, I'm very pleased to have my husband, Müfit, with me in the car. Minus 33°C is just a little too cold, and the car thinks so too – the clutch nearly froze in place a couple of times on the drive to Lumby. At least if the car did break down I wouldn't be alone; a thought I don't relish when travelling on remote roads in the middle of winter. Of course, I wouldn't usually venture out in such conditions but this is a special occasion: I've been asked to visit and interview Wendy Bernthal, a UK emigrant who's been out here since August 2008.

Considering the amount of snowfall we've had, the roads aren't too bad to drive on, thanks to the work of the snow ploughs. The traffic around us falls into two categories – those who couldn't care less about the conditions, and those who are being far too cautious. I fall somewhere in between, though the occasional icy patch soon makes me slow down some more.

It's a beautiful day, perfect for a road trip if it weren't for the low temperature. The sun is shining and there's hardly a cloud in the sky. The snow always looks so fabulous against the blue sky and it's days like this that remind us how great it is to live in this part of Canada.

We drive through Vernon, the closest major town to Lumby, and as we get closer the distance between the properties gets larger and larger until there are only occasional houses and farms to be seen. Smoke rises from the chimneys as owners struggle to keep their homes warm, reminding me of our first winter when we relied on a wood stove alone and found this wasn't enough. This winter is even colder so I'm glad we have propane heating now. I wonder how Wendy is coping with this sudden cold snap and what she thinks of all this snow? More importantly, how is she coping being away from her family?

Two-and-a-half-hours after setting off we pull up at the farmhouse where Wendy is lodging. The house sits all on its own, surrounded only by farmland. The narrow driveway had been cleared of enough snow that we could drive in, our car nearly brushing against the tree branches which, laden with snow, droop towards us. We get out of the car and take in our surroundings – the mountain and farmland vistas make the setting idyllic, and very peaceful.

Wendy comes out of the house to greet us. My first impressions are that she is a very friendly and outgoing person and I begin to realise that this buoyant personality has no doubt helped Wendy to cope with the separation from her husband and two daughters.

There's a Volvo estate sitting on the driveway, with the bonnet up. Wendy explains that the car wouldn't start this morning, but the guys from the farm are on their way with jump leads. Wendy, and husband Steve who arrived on a plane just last night, are supposed to be heading off to Mabel Lake this afternoon for a Christmas break together. The car is needed to get them there, so it's a worrying few minutes waiting for Don, one of the founders of Cedar Bridge School (where Wendy works), to arrive.

Inside the farmhouse I meet Steve. He seems surprisingly awake considering his long flight.

We don't have time to get acquainted as Don arrives in his truck with a friend. They spring into action trying to get the Volvo started, but the battery sounds dead. We leave them still trying as we set off on a brisk walk to the nearby school.

The snow squeaks under foot, but the temperature has warmed up by several degrees and the sun is shining, so although it's still absolutely freezing by UK standards, being outside is actually bearable, and quite pleasant.

The walk to the school takes about ten minutes and Wendy uses the time to tell us a little more about the area



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and the school. Enthusiastically, she explains that Cedar Bridge School is an alternative school based on the Waldorf Early Childhood initiative. The fantastic 'Kinderhouse' which the school is set in was built to very specific requirements – no right angles, numerous coats of organic paints and a beautiful natural wood frame, constructed from trees which were felled on the farm.

I'm keen to hear more of Wendy and Steve's story. How she came to leave him and the children, and ended up in such a rural place working at this small school. We head into the 'staff room' if you can call it that – there's a sofa and a desk, but that's about it.

I discover that their emigration story began a great many years ago. As a young couple, before their children were born, Wendy and Steve worked at a cross country ski resort for four years. Steve developed his love for cross-country skiing there, and as we sit and chat he looks longingly out at the mountains, wishing he could be gliding over the frosted whiteness right now! Before returning to the UK, Wendy worked in Toronto for a while.

"On arriving back in Britain I vowed I would return to Canada one day. That was 24 years ago! I had been seeking ways of getting here ever since," Wendy tells us.

Having had several trips out to Canada as a family, the Bernthals had come to love Salt Spring Island. This is one of the Southern Gulf Islands off the coast of Vancouver Island, just north of Victoria. It's a beautiful place, and when Wendy discovered that there was a Waldorf school there it became even more attractive. A series of coincidences, though, eventually led Wendy here, to Lumby, in the Okanagan Valley, situated in the foothills of the Monashee Mountains.

Having trained as a Waldorf teacher at Emerson College and the Michael Hall School in East Sussex, Wendy is passionate about this holistic and artistic way of teaching children. She picks up several First Nations puppets which she helped to make. These were used in a recent winter puppet show and helped to bring the story to life for the children. Clearly a lot of care and attention went into making them.

Wendy speaks very fondly of the school and the children, recalling a discussion she had with the school children about the Queen one morning.

"The children spoke about 'our Queen'. I was quite surprised that Canadians shared such an interest in our Queen. There were many conversations about how the Queen eats, drinks and puts her napkin in her lap. She became a picture of beautiful dig-

nity for the children. I then realised how British I was! I didn't realise how much the Queen is a part of me!"

This isn't a subject I, or Müfit for that matter, have ever really thought about. I suppose we're shying away from the things which make us British. For example, we're noticing that we speak with a slight Canadian accent now when we talk to Canadians, and are using Canadian terms because we want to fit in. We actually get a little uppity when people we don't know ask us how long we're staying, or where we're from, and are quick to point out that we live here!

Wendy goes on to tell us about some of her experiences with wildlife, including one which was a little too close for comfort.

"I was cycling in to school one morning when this black bear suddenly came out from the side of the road, standing on his back legs! He must have been..." Wendy looks at Steve "What are they, eight-feet tall or something?"

We have a debate for a few minutes about just how tall a black bear is when standing, and decide that it must have been at least six-feet tall.

"Anyway," Wendy continues, "he sees me and stops. I stopped cycling, but then from the other direction comes this yellow school bus. The bear looks at me, and looks at the



**Pictured**  
page 79:  
Clockwise,  
from top left:  
The house  
where Wendy  
is lodging; two  
snowy scenes  
from Lumby;  
Wendy and  
Steve outside  
the school;  
inside the  
school;  
children  
walking home;  
a portrait of  
Wendy



### Timeline

**30 years** after working at a cross country ski resort Wendy and Steve apply for Permanent Residency in June 2004. The process went smoothly and no interview was required.

**May 2007** they received their PR visas.

**August 2007** the family entered Canada to activate the visas.

**August 2008** Wendy goes to Lumby to live and work, leaving Steve and the girls in the UK.

**31 January 2009** Wendy leaves Canada and returns to the UK.

**Note:** Time is running out for the family to keep their permanent residence status. One must be resident in Canada for at least 720 days in every five-year period to keep one's permanent resident status.





**Pictured**  
(This spread,  
from left)  
A coyote on  
the scent;  
Wendy with  
the First Nations  
puppet;  
a black bear  
with its eye on  
something

school bus, and decides I'm the safer bet so heads towards me!"

Wendy stops her narration, and leaves us hanging, wondering what happened next, but once prompted finishes the story with a blasé.

"Oh, he just took off into the field."

It turns out that this was just one encounter out of several with the local wildlife. On another occasion a bear came onto the school grounds and tried to pick fruit off the fruit trees, and another day a pack of coyotes came in and circled around the school building for several minutes.

No doubt being circled by coyotes was not part of the immigration plan, but what was?

As we chat, I begin to get the picture that perhaps Steve wasn't

fully behind the emigration as much as his wife. Wendy certainly seems to be the more keen of the pair. The plan had been for Wendy to come out here, as she'd been offered this position at the school. The trail-blazing was to see how things would work out and Steve would follow with their daughters if it was decided that this was for them.

The daughters, I find out, are Dominique, aged 22, and Rachael, aged 19, so I immediately wonder whether they would want to come and live in such a rural place considering their ages. Both Wendy and Steve agree that it would be unlikely that the girls would want to come here, to Lumby, hence leaving the family torn.

Wendy really wants to emigrate permanently, Steve doesn't seem sure, and the girls would rather not. Regardless of who does want to and who doesn't, Wendy's emigration story is about to end, for the time being anyway.

They are reluctant to sell their home in England at present, due to the falling house prices and the unfavourable exchange rate for changing Sterling to the Canadian dollar. Also Steve is very reluctant to give up his secure job as a secondary school teacher. So the plans for the whole family to emigrate have been put on hold. Wendy has handed in her notice at the school and leaves on 31<sup>st</sup> January to be re-united with the girls and Steve once again, returning to their family home in Kent. It's such a shame that this reunification won't be taking place here in Canada, but in this current recession I really can't blame them for coming to this decision, as difficult as it must be for Wendy.

So I'm left wondering, is Wendy, and for that matter her family, going to return to Canada?

"Returning to Canada is a possibility" Wendy says, looking at her husband. Steve himself certainly seems keen on the idea of miles upon miles of cross country skiing on his doorstep. But whether they would return to a rural community like Lumby, I'm not sure.

Salt Spring Island is still appealing to them and it's certainly not as rural there, but it sounds to me like the girls wouldn't want to live on Salt Spring, either.

Perhaps their emigration story will be put on hold for another few years, or maybe even ended permanently. After all, I'm not sure that either Wendy or Steve could really leave Dominique and Rachael behind for good. On a final note, I ask Wendy what she will miss about Canada?

"That's an easy one... I love Canadians, they are so laid-back they almost fall over... they are so friendly and helpful, a bit like England 40 years ago. Also, I'll miss the big, open skies and superb wildlife," she pauses in contemplation, "yes, for sure the wildlife. I feel so, so lucky to have experienced it all."

On that note we make our way back to the farmhouse. The Volvo is sitting on the driveway with the engine running and there's no sign of Don anywhere. It's great that you can leave a car running here with no concerns for it getting stolen: not something you'd do regularly in the UK! The thought brings a smile to my face – as does the knowledge that the Volvo has been lent to Wendy by one of the school children's mothers. I can't see that happening in the UK either.

We say our farewells, and as we drive home I feel both happy and sad – happy to have met such a great couple, and sad that their emigration hasn't worked out (yet).

The other troubling thought is that this is likely to become a common story now with the recession hitting so hard in the UK. It's heartbreaking for would-be emigrants who wait years and years for their visa to arrive and when it finally does, they can't use it. They end up tied to the UK because they can't sell their property and don't have enough money to be able to afford to emigrate. I'm just so pleased that we got out when we did, otherwise we too would have been in the same position as Wendy, Steve and the girls.

■ *Wendy is very happy to share her knowledge and experience with readers of Emigrate! She can be contacted by email at: [wbernthal4@yahoo.com](mailto:wbernthal4@yahoo.com)*

