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Laurie Michaud, from Riviere-du-Loup, sits in her camper van, which she moves back and forth between two safe spots to overnight in Canmore. Michaud is one of many opting for a van dwelling to make living and working in Canmore financially viable amid extreme housing costs. *PHOTOS: BRENT CALVER*

‘YOU HAVE TO LIVE IN A VAN’

BILL KAUFMANN

CANMORE, ALTA. Laurie Michaud’s living quarters shift between two Canmore parking lots.

“I prefer the recreation centre, it’s less dusty and there’s no train at night,” said the woman who hails from Riviere-du-Loup.

“But we have to move the van at 8 in the morning.”

The 31-year-old spoke from inside her van, parked in a gravel lot behind a grocery store designated by the Town of Canmore’s Safe Park program as a refuge for workers who can’t afford the town’s sky high rental prices.

According to the latest report by the Bow Valley’s Job Resource Centre, a one-bedroom dwelling rents for an average \$2,344 a month, while a two-bedroom goes for \$3,018.

In 2023, the Alberta Living Wage Network pegged Canmore’s living wage at \$38.80, the highest in the province, with the cost of housing the main driver.

“If you want to live here, you have to live in a van,” said Michaud, who pays the Town of Canmore \$350 for five months’ parking privileges.

While her beige-coloured 1988 Chevy has some engine problems, its recently renovated interior contains a double bed, camp stove and box toilet, she said.

There is a porta-potty at the end of the lot, while Michaud said she showers at nearby gyms.

Her boyfriend, a roofer, lives out of a camper at a different location.

Hospitality workers in Canmore, Alta., face squeeze as high rents push many to long commutes or living in vehicles



Vans line the parking lot behind Save On Foods in Canmore recently. With housing becoming unaffordable in the tourist town, many service workers opt to live in vans, paying for a permit to use the parking lot.

But the draw of the mountains and adventure makes living out of a vehicle worthwhile, she said.

“I love to be in nature surrounded by mountains and wildlife,” said Michaud.

“If I rented an apartment here, I couldn’t afford to travel.”

Michaud’s story is one of many in a town where affordability issues and recent changes to Canada’s temporary

foreign worker rules are squeezing both workers and their employers.

French national Quentin Coustes, who’s lived in the Bow Valley for the past two years, works as a cook at the Grizzly Paw Brewing Company and lives in a self-converted school bus with his wife and two dogs — but the vehicle is too large to qualify for Safe Park.

Instead, he’s parked alongside High-

way 1A just east of Canmore in a setup he calls “precarious.”

“It’s not the best place because it’s near the highway,” said the 31-year-old Marseille native.

“It’s really expensive here — if you’re a single person, I think it’s really painful to live. I don’t find that normal.”

Coustes said he’s also reapplied for a work permit and the wait has led to considerable anxiety. He doesn’t want to share the fate of other foreign national staffers who have been forced to leave the country.

“It’s a really hard process because they’re changing the rules all the time,” he said.

“It takes eight months to get an answer, it can be really stressful.”

That stress extends to employers in the Bow Valley, who not only have to contend with the crisis in affordability but the uncertainties of immigration regulations.

“This is a kick on top of a punch — you’ve got a visa issue on top of a rental issue,” said Symon Wilcox, Grizzly Paw’s director of hospitality.

“I’ve been managing for years in and around Alberta, and I would have to say Canmore is the trickiest market I’ve had to work in.”

His company, he said, comes across numerous worthy candidates-for-hire, but rental costs and access to housing drive them off.

Grizzly Paw employee Brande White, who recruits for the company, once rented a space above a Canmore garage for \$2,500, including utilities.

SEE WORKERS ON **A2**