Mining the world's second largest oil deposit requires a huge, skilled, and dedicated workforce, and getting it to the wilds of northern Canadian requires more than just a beefy salary.

It requires a city that appeals to a global population, their kids, and their spouses. A city where oil workers can blow off steam after several days cramped up in remote dorm rooms, as well as a place where a young PhD from a big city would be happy to call home. A tall order.

Check out photos of Fort McMurray >
For better or worse that city is Fort McMurray, and meeting the needs of residents and oil conglomerates alike falls to one 42-year-old woman with a husband and two young sons of her own. Melissa Blake has been the mayor of Fort McMurray for eight years, and thinks her city gets a bum-rap.

She believes crime isn't as high, and problems aren't as vast, as the media makes them out to be. But the city's residents are a unique bunch, and they live demanding lives.

When they're on the job, many workers live by their mine in a camp with strict rules and schedules where they rotate several days on, and an equal number off. When they're off work, many head back to homes and families in the Fort McMurray area. Many others come back to have fun.

And there are a lot of people here, in a small space wedged between a couple of rivers and some hills. Once an old trapping town, Fort McMurray's population has more than tripled in the last 20 years. By 2028 it is expected to more than triple again to around 230,000 people.

I dropped into the the city aboard a Cenovus Oil corporate jet after a full day touring a distant drilling site that showed no more ecological impact than a water treatment plant.

It had been snowing all day, flakes nearly the size of tea saucers on May 1. I was wet, cold, and mildly frustrated that the closest I'd been able to get to an actual chunk of oil sand was inside a Syncrude research site in Edmonton the day before.

The media reps and Canadian Broadcast Corp reporters on the plane told me "Ft. Mac" was a rough town, but most admitted they hadn't been there in years. They all seemed to agree the Oil Can was the quintessential bar, but told me to be careful because it was dangerous.

They didn't think much of the place.

That's thing about Fort McMurray, everyone has a strong opinion about it, but no one is completely correct.
