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Destination: B.C.

Explore a Ghost Town

British Columbia couple passionate about preserving the past

By ANNA RODRIGUES, SPECIAL TO SUN MEDIA

These days it's not enough to take your brood to a comfortable hotel with good food and an indoor pool. Today's families want more from a vacation and at Three Valley Lake Chateau and Heritage Ghost Town they get just that.

The Three Valley development goes back to the late 1950s when Gordon and Ethel Bell -- both in their early twenties -- bought some swampland in an isolated area off the Trans Canada Highway. No, they weren't swindled by some fast-talking salesman. The young couple saw great potential where others saw nothing. They understood the value of the swamp's location about 19 km west of Revelstoke and high in the beautiful Rockies of British Columbia. They knew that tourists would love to visit a place so full of nature's eye candy.

It would be a major undertaking to make the swampland viable for the construction of their dream business, but the Bells persevered. In 1960, after years of work and many truckloads of fill, they opened a seven-room motel. Fast-forward to 2008, and the little motel has grown into a 200-room hotel with great family amenities, a helicopter pad and its very own ghost town.

When he was 16 and working on a construction site, Gordon Bell discovered the remains of French Creek, a one time mining town north of Revelstoke. Even at that age, he was shocked to see so many historic items abandoned and left to rust. After opening the motel with his wife, he went to work salvaging and restoring the equipment.

That was the beginning of what has turned out to be one of the greatest Canadian history conservation efforts -- Three Valley Gap Heritage Ghost Town, where visitors can see life as it was in a Canadian pioneer town in 1908.



A curious young history buff peers into the trapper's cabin in the Three Valley Heritage Ghost Town. (Sun Media/Heritage Ghost Town)

Highlights include an authentic 19th-century bar, a trapper's cabin and Craigellachie School, which was built in 1902 and scheduled for demolition until the Bells swooped in and purchased it. They not only relocated the building, but also acquired some important paperwork, such as the original ledger covering all correspondence with the provincial government and minutes from the school board meetings concerning the hiring and wages of teachers during that time. It's a snapshot of the early education system and is now on display, for all to see, thanks to the Bells.

Another great story is the Hotel Bellevue. First built in 1898, this three-storey hotel was taken apart piece by piece and re-built on the resort grounds in 1965. Inside the beautiful hotel, visitors will find its original bar, curtains, tables, dishes, menus and much more.

There is also a railway roundhouse with locomotives from different periods of Canadian history, including the railway car Pierre Trudeau was riding in when he famously flipped off the press, a museum with antique automobiles, and a buggy and wagon shop.

There's still more to experience at Three Valley Lake Chateau, including a high-flying adventure like no other. For \$45, you can spend six minutes flying around the breathtaking area. For \$370, the 55-minute Glacier Express tour takes passengers to mountaintops where they can get up close to glaciers. It's pricy but it is certainly the experience of a lifetime.

BOTTOM LINE

MORE INFORMATION The resort opens in early April and closes in October. Contact 1-888-667-2109 or 3valley.com. Standard room rates range from \$100-\$160 per night (double). For info on local attractions, contact Tourism British Columbia or 1-800-Hello BC or hellobc.com.

GETTING THERE From Toronto, fly into Kelowna and drive two hours northeast to Revelstoke. WestJet has daily flights to Kelowna from Toronto. Contact 1-800-538-5696 or westjet.com.

FUN FACTS In 1980, the Bells were told it would cost half a million dollars to bring power to their hotel. Gordon didn't like that price tag and decided to build his own hydro-electric dam. He's not an engineer and never went to college. In fact, he has no training in this field at all, but after doing research and asking the right people, he built it. Today the hotel is totally powered by this effort.

The resort has a specialty room that will rock your world! The Cave Honeymoon Suite is one-of-a-kind and made entirely of rock, except for the bed, toilet and television.

Three Valley Lake Chateau is located just a few kilometres east of Craigellachie, Eagle Pass, where the last spike of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway was driven in 1885.