

Travel

REVELSTOKE

Three Valley Gap features railway roundhouse

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As we wandered through the reconstructed heritage ghost town at Three Valley Gap high in the Rockies of B.C., a shadow loomed at our backs. The ghost town is only part of a 200-room hotel, restaurant and theatre complex by the side of the Trans Canada Highway near Revelstoke. It is the newest building on site that dominates the scene. A gigantic railway roundhouse, with a covered turntable used for shunting carriages, is the shadow of things to come at Three Valley.

Inside this vast dome, the hotel's visionary owner, Gordon Bell, has gathered a collection of rolling stock, steam locomotives and railway cars, including one rumoured to have been used by Barnum and Bailey. He is having them restored to their original period grandeur. The building is large enough to be used as a major conference centre in the future. Our tour guide told us that plans call for one of the cars to be converted to a restaurant; others may be available for tourists to sleep in overnight.

It's just one more entertaining service that makes Bell smile. He can add the roundhouse to his full meal

deal at Three Valley Chateau — along with the café, souvenir shop, helicopter rides, barbecues, nightly stage show and guided ghost town tours.

Most people would have laughed back in 1956 when Bell and his wife, Ethel, bought a piece of swamp at one end of a ribbon lake, tucked between the highway and the railway line. What most people didn't know is that Bell had experience in building over 800 homes in Regina, many of them on what he terms "gumbo."

At the Gap, he brought in sand to fill in the land, built his own hydroelectric generator and challenged the banks to assist him in financing the venture. When they hesitated, he did it for himself. In 1960, the couple opened a seven-room motel and a small café that offered a nickel cup of coffee. Over the years, it grew.

Why would anyone choose to live in this windy site, 19 km from Revelstoke and covered in two to three metres of snow in the winter? Bell says that his choice of location has allowed him to retain his fierce independence.

The indefatigable 72-year-old operates Three Valley as a family dynasty with various members of his family employed in key positions. Bell is everywhere

— flipping steaks on the grill, supervising roundhouse construction, even taking tickets at the theatre. He also finds time to chat with many of the guests.

Today, the red-roofed chalet style hotel is easily visible from the road. Many of the bedrooms are built with lofts to capture the magnificent view of mountains and lake.

When the Walter Moberly Theatre was added in the 1970s, it housed the extensive Bell collections. He's gathered antique bottles, telephones, arrowheads, eyeglasses, tins, oil lamps, insulators, even antique barbed wire. Theatre-goers can wander among the collections while waiting for the nightly performance from a fine old cowboy entertainer Sky Floyd Drew and his wife Dana.

Sky has been performing variations on his show for 16 years. He pulls out all the stops: he sings country favourites such as "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," spins his lariat, cracks jokes, yodels and gives audience a generous dollop of local history.

Since Three Valley Gap is situated near Craigellachie, scene of the ceremonial pounding of the last spike on the national railway, the history is rich in train lore. (For those wishing to know more about trains, the Railway

Museum in Revelstoke holds excellent displays on the subject including a massive CPR steam locomotive and carriage.)

The Three Valley ghost town is a fascinating reconstruction of heritage buildings. In the saloon, a gloomy moose head looks down on the bar where rugged men once knocked back whiskies. In the fine Hotel Bellevue, the table is set with a typical British dinner of the time: roast beef, creamed parsnips and tapioca pudding. The little St. Stephen's Church, originally built in 1886 in Donald, was taken apart, rebuilt on site and re-dedicated.

Visitors can see the RCMP headquarters, a typical trapper's shack and a general store. One of the many barns houses a collection of motor cars dating from 1902, including the first mass-produced car in North America, the curved dash Olds, along with newer models such as a 1927 sky blue Chrysler coupe.

Another barn houses a collection of buggies and carriages. As prospectors and trappers trudged through the mountains from Revelstoke to French Creek, they found temporary respite in a simple cabin with its plain tables and wood stove. Today, this halfway house features a huge barbecue grill where bus tours can enjoy steak dinners.

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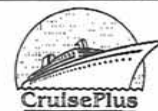
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