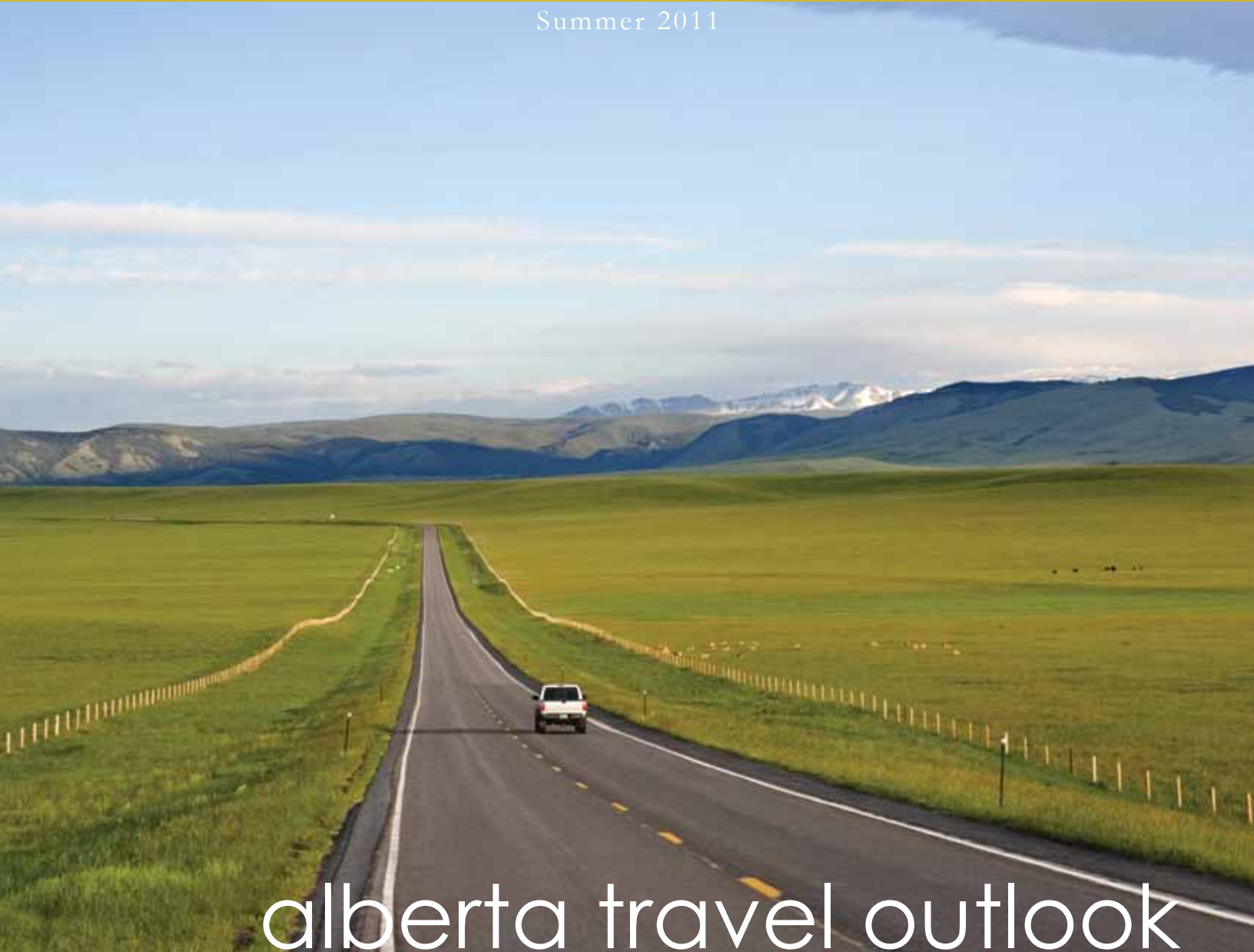


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- Building Profitable Partnerships
- Keeping Walk-in Guests
- Breaking Down Barriers
- Thrive vs. Survive

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THE BRUCE HOTEL

Offering Epic Steak Nights in a One-Horse Town

by Alex Van Tol



Built in 1911, the Bruce Hotel, which is about an hour's drive southeast of Edmonton, isn't what usually comes to mind when you think of a hotel.

Small to begin with, the property originally had only ten guestrooms. Years later, after owners Deb Boyd and Karl purchased it in 1998, the hotel offers up a mere four rooms for guests - and only those people the couple know and trust, who won't mistreat the premises. (The remaining six rooms above the dining room have been renovated to make living quarters for Deb and Karl themselves.)

So how does a hotel make ends meet with only four guestrooms? Why, with a focus on F&B, and a feature that draws appetites from hundreds of miles around, of course. Steak night, a weekly occurrence at the Bruce Hotel, brings in crowds of up to 200 on any given Friday night, and more in the winter. During the Christmas season companies will rent buses and ship in partygoers from up to 200 miles away, reports Deb. "Winter is our busiest season by far," she notes.

"Starting at the beginning of November until mid-February, we're in party mode."

It wasn't always this way. Deb recalls their inaugural steak night, just two weeks after the hotel opened: "We had fourteen customers on our first night." But Deb and Karl had purchased the hotel with the specific intention of creating a weekly steak night phenomenon, and their numbers quickly grew. As word spread, the couple found they had to operate on a reservation-only basis. "People couldn't comprehend why they must have a reservation to come to a one-horse town!" she chuckles. Nowadays, with no space for walk-ins, eager diners must reserve weeks to months in advance.

Saturday nights at the Bruce Hotel sometimes feature steak and all-you-can-eat shrimp, or steak and all-you-can eat ribs. "This all depends on what the largest group has asked for and we work around that," Deb explains. The Bruce Hotel's website lists dates and events for the upcoming two months so customers can plan accordingly. "People love our steaks,"

boasts Deb, adding that they value quality of ingredients above all else. “The freshness is incredible.”

While the Bruce Hotel opens for pub business from noon until 10:00pm six days a week, steak night is the focus of operations. During the week leading up to the main event, Deb and Karl take reservations, shop for groceries, and prep for the upcoming weekend. “It requires a lot of organization and prep to host up to 400 people per weekend,” admits Deb. “Our steaks [all aged AAA Alberta beef] are always cut fresh in the morning of the event.” Deb and Karl dash out to pick up the fresh meat from just up the road in Viking. “We have utilized the same butcher and supplier for the past thirteen years,” she adds. On steak night, two bartenders and several loyal waitstaff hold the fort down, while Deb cooks. “I have barbecued every steak since the beginning of time!” she exclaims.



Deb and Karl, Owners

And as for leaving her corporate job 13 years ago to buy an aging hotel in a dying town? “Karl and I knew the owners for twenty-some years,” she recalls. “One of the owners had passed away, and we knew that the place was up for sale.” After nearly two decades with Praxair, Deb decided it was time for a change. “I wanted something different, where people mattered. I had worked hard, I

had achieved everything, and I just wasn’t satisfied anymore. I had always wanted to work for myself.” So, during a long car ride to visit her parents, she sprung the idea on Karl. “He thought I was crazy. It took me three hundred miles to convince him.” As part of their original business plan - which many knowledgeable observers, such as the banks, advised them



against - the two decided to take their lawyer’s advice and go for a unique angle. Instead of building a bar, Deb and Karl wanted the Bruce Hotel to become known for something different. “It was a scary venture. We had no idea what we were doing.” The couple dipped into their own finances and retirement funds to come up with the purchase money themselves. Now the epicenter of a central Alberta foodie phenomenon, Deb and Karl are glad they took the chance. ☞

Out With the Old

Who needs the regular business model when a new one will work? A few Alberta properties have swapped their old operations for new ventures, revitalizing the premises and increasing revenue at the same time.

Changing demographics and consumer trends led the ownership and management of the Best Western Wayside Inn in Wetaskiwin to turn a nightclub into a beautiful new pub. “This pub isn’t a bar,” explains general manager Kent Sjolín. “Our food sales are similar to our in-house restaurant.” With seating for 180, the newly renovated pub (including energy-efficient upgrades and a separate area for gaming) draws most of its clientele from the community. “It was a matter of being more efficient with our foodservice, and it also gave both our hotel guests and the local population another choice,” describes Sjolín.

At the Best Western Wayside Inn in Lloydminster, general manager Dan McHale decided it was time for the tavern to switch over to a banquet room. “We were becoming a Best



Best Western Wayside Inn, Wetaskiwin

Western at the time,” McHale explains, “and Best Western has some fairly stringent rules governing F&B. [They most certainly did not involve exotic dancers.] It’s not part of the family-style image,” laughs McHale. Swapping the tavern for banquet space was less expensive than renovating a bar, and the numbers made sense. “There’s a market in Lloydminster for weddings,” notes McHale. The renos have now doubled the hotel’s conference space, which is divided up according to group sizes. “Now we can do a conference for 300 in the existing space, and then move into ballroom for lunch or dinner,” he explains. “In terms of that availability, it helps us generate more room revenue.”