

Snug in a dream come true



Alex Barta

Bruce Walker: charmed by Oak Bay Beach Hotel

By Al Forrest
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IT WAS about a decade ago that Bruce Walker stopped for a drink for the first time at the Snug in the Oak Bay Beach Hotel.

"This was exactly my image of what a Victoria hotel should be like. I was determined to buy it."

He had to wait more than a year but he did purchase it — and has been delighted with the result.

The hotel has a unique atmosphere making it both a pleasant and profitable place to work, he says.

Its location and historic charm have helped it to thrive, even during the recession.

"Our revenues this year will match 1981, which was our best ever."

"Our occupancy rate so far this year is 82 per cent. By year's end this will be down to 76.5 per cent."

Tour buses continue to bring visitors for lunch or high tea.

"Business was down in March and April and, like many people, we were beginning to wonder how bad it was going to get.

"Fortunately it picked up. July was as good as in 1981 and both August and September were record months, better than last year."

Walker has been owner for nine years.

Since then he has added to the supply of antiques in the rooms and lounge areas and spent \$500,000 in 1975 converting staff accommodation to hotel use, adding 12 rooms.

Four years ago the hotel was expanded in a \$750,000 project, tripling the size of the kitchen and banquet room.

Walker says the hotel's antiques, which have been purchased gradually over decades, are now worth more than \$1 million.

For example the four-poster canopy beds, which cost \$3,000 each seven years ago, have been valued at \$15,000 each now. He wouldn't want to part with them at any price because they are an integral part of the hotel.

Many of the antiques were purchased by a former owner, Norma MacDonald, who delighted in travelling abroad to find them.

In 1963 she sold the hotel to two Calgary men, Art Davis and Norman Dutton, who decided to modernize the hotel.

They removed some antiques and began the process of selling others. There was such a public outcry the sale was stopped and most of the antiques were returned to the rooms.

Since that time the hotel has consistently favored the ancient over the modern in its decor.

The Oak Bay Beach Hotel was built in 1928, 54 years ago, by Major William Merston, who lived next door.

It began with 36 rooms and a number of them were for year-around residents. The hotel continued to have permanent residents right up until 1981 when the practice was ended.

After Merston died Mrs. Merston sold the hotel. She now lives in Sidney and comes in to the hotel occasionally for lunch.

Walker, 53, was born in Winnipeg and he became fascinated with the tourist business at an early age.

"We had a summer cabin near a resort. To me, everything about resorts was exciting."

After high school he worked for four years in a bank and then with his father began to make his dream come true by purchasing a hotel at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba.

"We had only \$5,000 to put down on the hotel, which cost \$50,000. We knew it would be a lot of hard work but we were ready to do it."

The business expanded to include a bowling alley, gas station, bicycle rental and cabins.

His father also operated a boat rental and marina.

"We worked very hard. We had to make it in a short season. When fall came, we closed. I never had a summer holiday."

Nor a winter holiday, either, although there was a change of scene.

They bought two motels in Miami and went to Florida to manage them in the winter months.

"Looking back, that was a wonderful time: summer at the resort and winter in Miami. But it wasn't easy. It was all work."

After he was married and started to raise a family the Miami business was no longer practical and the motels were sold. Instead, he stayed in Winnipeg during the winter selling fuel oil.

The hard work took its toll and he had a heart attack.

On doctor's orders he was to find a warmer climate and take things a bit easier.

"It came to a choice between Victoria and Miami. The choice was easy. Victoria has the best climate in Canada and I sure didn't want to become an American."

He moved here in 1970, buying the Jolly Knight and Pacific Isle motels.

A short time later he made that fateful visit to the Snug. He sold the two motels to buy the Oak Bay Beach Hotel.