

A view of the south side of the Prince of Wales Hotel. A national historic site since 1995, this graceful edifice has stood as Waterton Lakes National Park's most iconic landmark since its construction in 1927.



All images Benjamin Freeland

The Prince of Wales Hotel in Waterton

by Benjamin Freeland

On a typically blustery September morning in Waterton Lakes National Park, Don Budgen, the energetic manager of the park's flagship hotel, the Prince of Wales, is busy doing repair work outside the hotel's grand entryway.

"I call it 'my ship,'" says Budgen affectionately, gesturing to the venerable wooden building. "It has a personality all its own."

The sight of the manager of an iconic luxury hotel singlehandedly doing upkeep of the building in difficult weather conditions might seem odd. But the Prince of Wales Hotel is not a typical

hotel. Nestled in Alberta's southwestern-most corner, Waterton Lakes National Park is truly the Manhattan of national parks. A small park by any measure at 505 square km (less than one tenth the size of Banff National Park), it nevertheless manages to pack in a staggering amount of wilderness with enormous geographical and ecological diversity.

In the middle of the park is the Prince of Wales Hotel, humankind's impressive contribution to the park's picturesque landscape. A National Historic Site since 1995, the Prince of Wales has been a Waterton fixture for over 80 years, and it

is difficult to imagine the landscape ever existed without it.

Sitting atop a grassy windswept promontory overlooking Upper Waterton Lake (the deepest lake in the Canadian Rockies), the Prince of Wales Hotel punctuates the magnificent statement of Waterton like an exclamation mark, and is the first building that everyone sees upon entering the park.

A southern Alberta icon since its completion in 1927, the Prince of Wales is a true oddity. While it is counted among Canadian railway hotels, it was actually built by the American Great Northern



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Railway, which sought to promote it as a cross-border retreat for Prohibition-era American tourists. Even today it draws a largely US clientele from neighbouring Glacier National Park, for whom rustic lodge-style hotels like the Prince of Wales have long held more appeal than they have for Canadians. And in spite of its name, no Prince of Wales has ever stayed at the hotel, although its founders had hoped to lure the future King Edward VIII to the hotel during his 1927 Canadian tour by naming it after him.

Construction of the hotel was challenging. It cost \$800,000 to build—an enormous sum in the late 1920s—and was redesigned several times. The structure had to be anchored to the hill by cables in order to prevent the building from being blown into the lake below.

While the Prince of Wales is scarcely the party place it was in the 1930s, when the nearby Waterton Dance Pavilion's Midnight Frolics routinely attracted A-list big bands, jazz musicians, and merrymakers from around the region, the hotel is still typically booked solid during the summer season.

Much of the hotel's appeal lies in its gracefully anachronistic character. While some travelers may find Waterton's stately hotel frustratingly lacking in modern amenities, visitors who fancy a trip back in time to an earlier, more romantic epoch of travel could scarcely do better.

The spectacular lake and mountain views from the main foyer, restaurant, ballroom, and guest rooms on the south side of the building more than compensate for the lack of television, and even the less costly north-facing rooms offer a nearly equally resplendent view of the grass and aspen-covered foothills to the north and east of the park.

North America's largest wooden hotel, the Prince of Wales is a beautifully maintained living museum that retains its original 1927 feel—from the old-style keys issued to guests at the check-in desk to the art-deco furniture and Group of Seven-influenced paintings adorning the guest rooms to the massive chandelier suspended above the central atrium.

"It's not an easy hotel to maintain," asserts Budgen. "Pretty much everything has been kept in its original form."

Located in one of Alberta's most volatile climatic zones, the hotel is



Left: The dining room of the Prince of Wales Hotel. Normally providing diners with a breathtaking view of Upper Waterton Lake, the dining room windows are protected by wooden planks when the hotel is closed due to the risk of break and entry by bighorn sheep and other resident wildlife.

Right: The view from the Prince of Wales' third-floor atrium balcony, highlighting the hotel's famous chandelier. Cleaning the chandelier formerly involved being suspended on a wire from a trapdoor underneath the bell tower, and was reputedly once a much sought-after job among hotel staff members.

Bottom: A typical guest room at the Prince of Wales Hotel.



says Budgen. "I've also had people ask to be moved out of the room after having been scared by something."

For Budgen, a transplanted Montrealer now in his fourth year as the Prince of Wales manager, overseeing the operation of this historical treasure is a demanding job, which he tries to keep in perspective. "I was pretty nervous when I first started until my son said to me, 'What are you worried about? It's just a big gingerbread house!'" He adds, "I always remind myself of this when things get difficult."

Budgen has long-term plans for the hotel.

"Waterton is a small park and people leave after only a couple of days, after they've done all the hikes," he explains. "We want to do more to encourage people to stay longer and to really appreciate the finer points of the park and the hotel."

He'd like to convert the hotel's cavernous old boiler room into a children's theatre and diversify the entertainment featured at the hotel to include storytellers.

"I'm hoping to organize a Prince of Wales reunion with all the old staff members," he adds. "There are so many great stories to tell." ●

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regularly battered by gale-force winds that rattle windows and rock the building, which, coupled with rapid changes in cloud cover and the occasional thunderstorms, can make for a decidedly Transylvanian setting.

The hotel is also famously haunted. Among the Prince of Wales's alleged long-term guests is the ghost of a chambermaid named Sara, who reputedly worked at the hotel in its early years. After being spurned by her lover, legend has it that she threw herself off the fourth floor mezzanine to the lobby below, and makes her presence known by rattling bottles and exhaling icy sneezes down the necks of guests.

This story bears an uncanny resemblance to a late-1970s incident, in which a gift shop employee named

Mary took a dive off a sixth floor balcony after she was spurned by the hotel's dashing former manager. It is said her disembodied spirit pilfers and rearranges objects in the hotel's gift shop.

Two other spirits are said to inhabit the building—one believed to be the ghost of a construction worker who fell to his death from scaffolding during the construction of the building, and the other the wife of a former hotel chef who mysteriously disappeared. So synonymous is the Prince of Wales with ghost lore in the region that the hotel is broken into on a nearly annual basis, usually by poltergeist hunters, and the hotel's infamous 'haunted' room 510 regularly attracts interested parties.

"I've had people come up to me and specifically ask for the 'haunted room,'"