

Keeping Up With the 'Big Boys'

SOMEBODY FORGOT to tell Peg and Sid Henderson that mom and pop motels are history; that the big chains have taken over with their huge advertising budgets and millions of dollars from investors.

So there they are out in Scottsbluff, oblivious to the fact that they're dinosaurs in the world of travel, plugging along with the simple premise that "when people stay at the Candlelight Inn, they'll feel like they're at home."

Oh, yes, they benefit from advertising—the word-of-mouth kind. And they're their own investors in the form of hard work, long hours and pumping profits back into the 56-room motel.

Don't tell them they're at the age when they ought to be thinking seriously of retirement. They admit to being in their 30s for the second time, but if they seem a lot younger than that, it's because they love what they do.

You begin to see it the moment you turn into the parking lot. Flowers grow everywhere. Where there's dirt, there are flowers.

Once inside at the registration desk you begin to get the idea this is no "one size fits all" operation with cookie-cutter-like rooms.

The office walls are adorned with mirrors, paintings and plaster-of-paris figures, a welcome sign, framed crochet work and all sorts of things you'd find in a craft shop. Right away you know your hosts are collectors.

THEMES REFLECT ROOM DECOR

And collectors they are. You'll see it in every room—little touches like lace covers for lampshades, stuffed animals, candle holders, books, paintings, photographs and much more.

But lest you think this place is just a jumble of odd items, you'll soon discover most rooms have names that represent the way they are decorated. The names aren't on the door, nor are they printed anywhere, but repeat guests (who make up the majority of their clientele) will ask for their favorite rooms by telling their hosts, "I want the golfer's room" or "the lighthouse room" or "the iris room" or "the honeymoon room."

Truth is, nearly every room could be called "the bunny room," for Peg is a sucker for stuffed bunnies. You get the

Even now, Peg laments, "There's so much more we can do with these rooms." Then she adds, "And we're going to do it."

ANTIQUES FEATURED

It seems every room has some antiques and surprises, too. For example, my room had a Queen Anne-style chest of drawers, a huge console radio and record player that worked and, of all things, an organ. Staring down at me was a reproduction of Gainsborough's famous painting, *Blue Boy*.

Some of the rooms have VCRs with

a tape that symbolizes the theme. For example, the *Gone With the Wind* room pays tribute to the Clark Gable/Vivian Leigh classic, and visitors can watch the movie at their leisure. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is another movie-featured room.

Comfort lovers will also be astounded by the comfortable chairs and/or sofas in every one of the large rooms. Even the wide hallway on the second floor is lined with soft chairs and sofas.

Each room is equipped with a small refrigerator, microwave oven and a coffee maker.

Your room rate also includes a huge breakfast buffet with a wide range of choices. There's a fitness annex and a large heated swimming pool.

A downstairs lounge and large meeting room add to the inn's appeal.

In front of the inn is a large flower garden abutting the street. Colorful tall-growing flowers and bushes provide some privacy, and there are chairs and a table at which you can rest or imbibe.

MOTEL HAS ITS OWN PARK

Always concerned about the well-being of their customers, the Hendersons purchased a small plot of land near the south parking area and turned it into a park with a gazebo and, of course, plenty of flowers. These outdoor



Scottsbluff's Peg and Sid Henderson offer a delightful alternative to the big chain motels with surprises in every room.

feeling she's never seen a bunny she didn't like—or one she didn't buy. The little stuffed creatures are everywhere.

Room themes are often carried out through the choice of bedspreads or comforters, wallpaper borders and paintings, figurines and furnishings.

They give meaning to rooms with names such as the horse room, angel room, Indian room, cowboy room, little girl's room, and there are even two lighthouse rooms. Visitors from Massachusetts were elated and surprised to be put up in one of the lighthouse rooms, reminding them of their home state. They were even more surprised to learn that less than 25 miles away at Lake Minatare there's an actual lighthouse.

refuges are great places to unwind for weary travelers, and they're all in view of towering Scotts Bluff National Monument.

The Hendersons have owned the Candlelight Inn for 23 years; it was built in 1968. Before that they owned and operated Mr. A's, one of Scotts-bluff's most popular restaurants, featuring prime rib, lobster, steaks and a salad bar that was famous all over the region.

With days that begin around 5 a.m. and sometimes don't end until midnight, it's obvious it has to be a work of love. And their customers love them right back. A German couple who've stayed there the last two summers because they love Nebraska had just sent them a beautiful flowering plant before my arrival. Some of the decorative items are also gifts from guests who've stayed there.

In critiques of their stays, the most common compliment is "homey." But others are more effusive, such as: "It's like a big home with lots of bedrooms," "The walls had wonderful bits of whimsy and nostalgic hangings," "This is by far the nicest place we have ever stayed," "Almost as good as home—better, I didn't have to make the beds," and "I felt like I was at my grandmother's house."

Everywhere you turn in the Candlelight Inn you are likely to see a sign that says "welcome." Once there, you'll discover they really mean it.

Rates are very reasonable: \$65 for one or two people, discounts to AAA members. For reservations, contact (800) 424-2305, www.candlelightscottsbuff.com or the nearest AAA office.

—**BARC WADE**
Contributing editor