

The Convent Inn



Val Marie

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"We spun a pencil to see where we were going, and it pointed south."

Every country inn has a story, but the Convent Inn is unique among the bed-and-breakfast volumes of Saskatchewan. Adam Ducan, who runs the Convent Inn in Val Marie with his mother Mette, was just thirteen years old when he first laid eyes on the beautiful brick building off Highway Four, just 40 kilometers north of the Montana border.



In 1996, Adam and his dad, Robert Ducan, were on a road trip and followed a pencil pointing south from Swift Current, on a quest for Grasslands National Park. “We crossed the first cattle guard and our van died on us,” says Adam. “A mechanic working at a nearby farm towed us into town, and while we camped, waiting for a new alternator, we saw this gorgeous building covered in condemned signs. It was a week away from being torn down.”

The village of Val Marie offered the derelict building for \$1, but the individual who had expressed interest had not yet paid his dollar. Robert Ducan offered the village \$1,000 and they gladly accepted. Robert called his wife, Mette, back in Nanaimo, B.C. and said, “It’s got 25 rooms and beautiful winding staircases. I don’t know what to do with it, but I have to save it.”

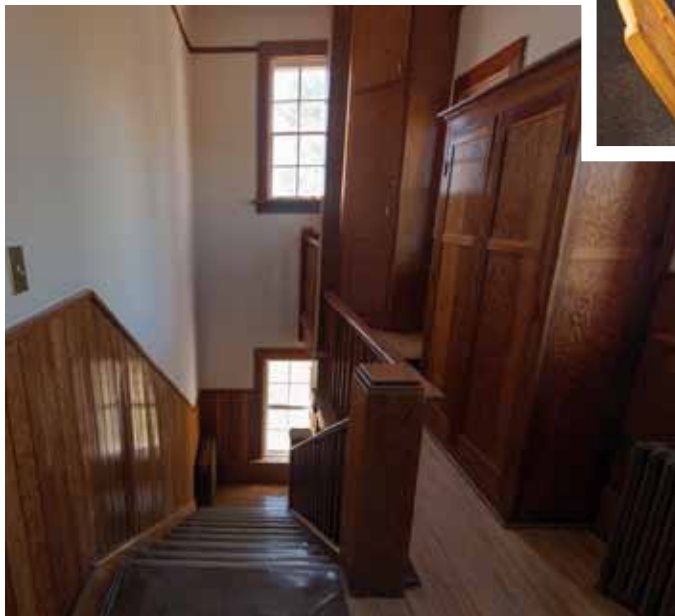
“What he was describing was his vision, not the reality,” Mette Ducan now says wryly.

The reality came to fruition, a gracefully restored 1940’s convent, but its resurrection didn’t take place overnight. Originally designed as a Catholic high school and run by the Sisters of the Assumption, it opened in 1939. The floorplan included three classrooms, a chapel, and cloistered rooms for seven or eight nuns at one end of the building. “It wasn’t

a residential school, but the nuns did keep a bunk room for rural kids when they got snowed in,” says Adam.

Two of those original classrooms (their chalk blackboards still intact) are now part of the inn’s breakfast room. The chapel, complete with altar and confessional box, serves as a sitting room for guests to rest and reflect. There is no sign of the collapsed roof—the reason the building was condemned in 1996. After careful inspection of the roof, Robert Ducan discovered it had been built to slope toward the center to drain into a cistern. “The building was structurally sound, but it did have a lot of water damage,” says Adam.

The plaster had come off the walls and the floors were warped and buckled. “We shoveled out about two dump truck loads of fallen plaster and wrecked wood before we could start fixing stuff,” says Adam. All the vertical wood was in good condition. “We peeled up all of the hardwood flooring, pulled all the nails, sorted through it to get rid of the bad, re-laid it, and refinished it all. It was a lot of work,” he admits.



▲ Woodwork throughout the interior keeps the original character of the convent intact.

▼ The Convent Inn is open from April to October for family reunions, workshops, weddings and individual reservations.

Adam and Mette are proud of the inn's restoration, but guests should ask to see the "before" and "after" photographs to fully appreciate this small Prairie miracle. "Renovations took about two years," Mette recalls, and for the first summer—one of the hottest summers on record—the family lived in their Westfalia van. "We went room by room from top to bottom," says Adam. "It wasn't quite a finished building when we rented our first room in August 1997." Two Argentinians who worked for the Park were desperate for a room—and so the convent was christened a bed and breakfast.

The inn's guests over the years were often former students of the Convent High School, or family members of former students, many of them with stories about the place. One young woman remembered a relative who was nursed back to health by the Sisters after a serious illness; another remembered a grandmother who lived there as a child for a short time in 1958 when her family was too poor to keep her.

"Her mother saw her daughter walking unattended from the convent to the post office one day," Adam chuckles, "and then decided to move her to another convent to curb her wandering."

A few of the teaching nuns have revisited the Convent Inn, and their grateful comments are written on the blackboard where other guests leave their observations. "There have been people visit who were involved with the building of the place, too" says Mette. "We do our best to collect the stories, and keep a verbal history."

Documents from local villagers are carefully preserved at the Convent Inn, treasures like old reading texts and school material, some donated from local farmsteads. Rumours of ghosts surface at times, and many guests report hearing footsteps in the night. At least one guest has reported a ghostly hand tucking her blanket around her, but Mette denies there are ghosts. "There are creaks and bangs," says Mette, "but it's not haunted. It's the



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prairie wind—when it gets going, the windows bang and the pipes creak. We’ve even had professionals come in—APTN television did an episode of *The Other Side* here—and they didn’t find any ghosts.”

The Convent’s history is no less fascinating for lacking ghosts. The original convent’s high school was the only school in the district until 1945, when the village’s little brick schoolhouse opened. The convent shut its doors in 1964, and all the religious icons, the altar and statuary were removed. Most of the nuns had left the convent by then, but the four who stayed on found the building too large for them, and so they arranged a trade with a local family. The nuns moved into a local family home, the Dumonts, and the Dumonts moved into the building. The Dumonts ran it as a care home throughout the '60s. After the Dumonts left, the building sat empty for about 20 years.

Over the years since its restoration, Robert Ducan’s family have replaced much of the religious furnishings, some of it from as far away as Mexico. The pews came from the nearby Rosefield church, and the altar is from a Lutheran church. The altar, now interdenominational, is bestowed with gifts from visitors: a Buddha, a tiny Koran, a Ganesh figure, a shaman’s stick. A beautiful alter cloth was donated by the housekeep of a visiting priest.

The Inn’s common areas are comfortable, a combination of the modern and old-fashioned. Each of the nine guest rooms has a clean, spare look, and its own closeted sink. The bathrooms—one with a claw-foot tub and charming cupboards—are shared. The cabinetry throughout the building is beautiful: old-growth fir—acres of it, and all varnished to a rich red-gold.

► (Top) Owner Managers Adam Ducan and Mette Ducan on the front step of the Inn.

► (Bottom) Aeolian Piano at the Convent Inn, circa 2004.

▼ Robert Ducan (far seated) with guests Bob Harwood and Pam Woodland





People generally come to Val Marie for the beauty of Grasslands National Park and the peacefulness of the prairies. The Inn, located on the edge of the village, is across from a campground, and a five-minute walk from the local grocery store and a Chinese restaurant. Situated in the heart of ranchland, Val Marie has a rich history of French-speaking people.

Guests of the inn enjoy the Convent's eclectic collections—for example, the skeleton of a piano in the yard. "A group of dancers performed in the park in 2004," Adam explains. "They had an Aeolian piano—a wind harp. You run wire from the back of the piano and the wind makes the music. They left it here as a token of thanks. All the wood has since disintegrated, but we have a bucket of hardware—foot pedals and so on. I can't let it go." He grins.

Part of Robert's original vision for the place was to sponsor artists. "The arrangement was never formalized, but we had a little room in the basement and he thought we could take in an artist," says Adam. "As long as they cleaned up after themselves, talked to the guests and worked on their art every day, they were welcome to stay." Several of these artists, a writer and a photographer, who came for varying lengths of time, have since become permanent residents of the village.

After the Ducans finished the Inn's renovation, Robert went on to serve as Val Marie's mayor for two terms. He was instrumental in acquiring the old grain elevator, an ongoing restoration project in the village. In 1990, he led a group of locals to fix Highway # 4, much to the embarrassment of the Department of Highways. He took a lively interest in local business, and brought the Chinese restaurant to town by inviting the whole town to the inn for a meal cooked by the prospective restaurateurs. Adam took over the management of the inn in 2018, a year before his father Robert passed away.

"He was quite a character, and the driving force behind this place," says Adam. "This is absolutely not something I wanted to do in the beginning. I bounced around Canada after I graduated, always looking for a place to settle, but everywhere I went there were too many people, too much traffic, too expensive, too much pollution. It took me about 10 years to figure out that everything I was looking for was back here."

