



featured CAN YOUR PLACE BE A

By Jacelyn Downey

Ever imagine turning your land into a lodge, bed-and-breakfast, or dude ranch?

For some, this might be a dream. Large and small family-run businesses dot Wyoming offering scenic views and a Western experience. For Steve and Becky Noecker, one look at their new creek-side property was enough to convince them it was an ideal location for a guest lodge. The property sits tucked behind the town of Story. Like many residents there, the Noeckers fell in love with the picturesque town and small community. They purchased the land in 2003 then began welcoming guests to the Hitchin' Post Lodge in the summer of 2004.

Thinking about opening a guest lodge? Here are some suggestions

When asked, Steve and Becky offered advice for anyone considering opening guest lodging on their property. She says there are a few questions you need to ask yourself.

- Is your location desirable, will people want to come there? – Becky says people come to places like their lodge to get away, relax, and be surrounded by natural beauty.
- Do you have existing facilities to accommodate guest lodging?

"I don't think we ever would have built a guest house or even cabin to start a lodging business. We used what we had," she says.

Lastly, Becky notes, "It's a very 'personal' business, not only the interaction with guests, but you have to be comfortable with people walking around your property, in and out of your house, using your stuff – it's a much more personal interaction than, say, a motel would be."

The Facilities

The 6-acre property consists of a main house, the guest lodge, and a pool house. Nearby are remnants when the property housed a speakeasy, and an earthen pool, stone benches, and a stone house. Built in 1952, the original owner constructed the home and did all the wood, cabinetry, and brickwork. He also dug and poured the cement to make a pool. Later, another owner built a second home on the property. In the '60s, the pool was renovated, and a pool house was built to accommodate visiting families.

The outdoor horse arena was the last addition completed before the Noeckers bought the property.



Families refresh and relax in the pool.

Each owner has contributed something to the property. The sum of all the improvements led to an ideal location for a guest lodge.

Getting Started

What must be done to turn your property into a guest lodge? Becky notes that the first job was to remodel the lodge kitchen and decorate and update the lodge and pool house with a Western theme.

"Our biggest task was purchasing enough linens," she says.

When you consider the pool, the three bathrooms, and five guest rooms on the property, there are many towels, sheets, pillows, comforters, dishtowels, and more to supply.

They also had to redo the asphalt driveways to make the roads easily accessible for guests.

Next, Steve knew that no Western lodge was complete without a campfire, so he installed one near the pool.

landowners

WYOMING GUEST LODGE?

He began by creating a large sandpit and building a fire ring out of an old culvert. Ample seating completed this area.

Steve also built a deck and installed a hot tub not long after it opened, and this has been extremely popular with the guests. The deck and hot tub overlook the creek. Guests can relax and watch the fish in the clear water.

The couple decided not to offer fishing or riding because there is a nearby stable that leads pack rides into the hills and a local outfitter that guides fly-fishing trips.

Becky notes that many of the guests enjoy just helping with the daily horse chores or simply sitting by the creek watching the trout.

The Work

You may wonder how much effort it takes to run a lodge. Becky says that she enjoys the fact they get to decide how much they work on the lodge business. They are open May through September and reserve the right to decide when they'll accept guests.

Having the lodge allows them to be flexible with their time to be able to travel and visit their grown children and grandkids.

"We do all the cleaning and yard work ourselves. Occasionally I'll hire a helper if we have two groups back to back or if I have other obligations but, for the most part, it's a team effort with Steve and I," says Becky.



Becky and Steve Noecker opened their Western-theme lodge near Story in 2004.

Upkeep and yard work are certainly no small effort with the 6-acre grounds. Steve notes that, unlike most parts of the state, their property can get really dense with brush and trees if they let it go. They cleared some open spaces between the homes, the arena, and the pool, and now a lush lawn has taken over. Steve also does all the maintenance on the roads and pathways year-round including snowplowing.

Several attempts at planting a garden were thwarted by deer. Finally,

they decided to create a bird habitat where they took advantage of a thicket of trees. The area has all the ingredients for a wildlife friendly area: a variety of tree types, access to water, and a food source.

The Noeckers have supplied a variety of feeders each suited to a different type of bird. They also put up hanging planters with nectar-rich flowers and hummingbird feeders.

"The guests absolutely love the hummingbirds," notes Becky. "They'll sit on the deck and watch them or



The wooded setting invites relaxation.

even observe them from inside. I never knew how many hummingbirds we had around here until we started putting up the feeders. The daily visits by turkey, deer, rabbits, and a variety of birds always delight the guests."

People Watching

Becky says her favorite part has been watching the families come each year.

"I've watched the kids grow up and had so many wonderful experiences connecting with the guests," recalls Becky.

Steve adds, "When the guests are here, we try to be available if they need us, but we also want to let them have their privacy. But more often than not, we find ourselves at the campfire or sitting around the pool just getting to know each other."

In the beginning, most of the people who came to the Hitchin' Post were from out-of-state. More recently, many of their guests are

from Wyoming. Story is a popular place for weddings, so they often host families in town for weddings.

"Really, most of our guests are just looking for a place to gather their families and enjoy spending time together," says Becky.

Steve and Becky say they thought the guests enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere. During the day, they often find guests cozied up in one of the hammocks or swinging chairs reading a book. At night, the campfire is the hot spot.

In the end, all lodges are, like any business, driven by the bottom line. The Noeckers are not dependent upon trying to make a living with theirs; they use it to cover the costs of utilities, insurance, and other day-to-day costs. Still, there's something priceless about the flexibility it offers them. And they provide a quintessential experience for the families who visit them.

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THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WITH A GUEST LODGE

1. **Hospitality is the key to success.** Guests require a lot of personal service and attention. If you are not an active person who truly enjoys meeting and waiting on people, chances are you are not suited to operate a guest lodge.
2. **Keep it quality.** Guests expect well-kept properties, and they want comfort. Provide top-quality mattresses and be thoughtful about the other furnishings and decorations (reading lamps and tables, a spruced-up entryway).
3. **Set the rules.** To avoid misunderstandings, state your policies ahead of time regarding smoking, alcohol, children, pets, reservation policies, deposits, and meal times.
4. **Be aware of zoning and health regulations.** In small communities, approval may be granted as a "matter of right" if the guest lodge complies with specific standards for residential neighborhoods. Health regulations and licensing information for Wyoming bed-and-breakfasts can be found under the Resources heading at <http://wyagric.state.wy.us/divisions/chs/food-safety>. In addition, be conscious of building, fire, electrical, or plumbing rules in your jurisdiction.
5. **Prepare a plan.** Take time to think through pricing, marketing, and staffing so the guest lodge enterprise makes sense financially as well as personally. Building a concise business plan in advance can help sort out issues and set priorities.

Information taken from "Direct Farm Marketing and Tourism Handbook" by Russell Tronstad and Julie Leones, University of Arizona <http://ag.arizona.edu/arec/pubs/dfmthandbook.html>

For more information visit:

- <http://bit.ly/bedandbreakinfo>