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KILMOREY LODGE, ALBERTA'S BEST

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services, World's Fare

WATERTON LAKE, Alberta -- What happens when your travel agent forgets to make those all-important lodging reservations, the ones you were counting on? If it happens at Kilmorey Lodge in the village of Waterton Lakes, in Waterton-Glacier National Park, not to worry. You're about to meet Canadian hospitality face-to-face.

When the four of us pulled into the 23-room Kilmorey Lodge parking lot, bone-weary after a 674-mile drive north through Montana and across the Canadian Rockies, the rustic two-story chalet and its secluded setting on Emerald Bay materialized like an oasis in the desert. Contemplating a quiet evening in the shade of those stately firs and cottonwoods was better than a tonic. It was a promise. It was, that is, until we tried to check in.

Then, just as shock had given way to "now what?" leaving us standing there in a quandary, an angel appeared (in the guide of Assistant Manager Darcy Wright), who assured us that he would certainly find us a room. Twenty minutes later, General Manager Zen Bodnar, who'd been on his way home, returned to apologize for the confusion (not his fault, of course) and to tell us that the Kilmorey had not just one but TWO available rooms.

Within a half-hour Bodnar had upgraded us to a suite (the last of two wheelchairaccessible rooms), Wright had reserved a

table for four in the Kilmorey's Lamp Post dining room and we'd settled into our rooms. That left just enough time in the light of a long summer's eve for a slow stroll along the lakeshore, chased by a cold beer in the Kilmorey's Rams Horn pub. It was a Canadian welcome we'll never forget.

Kilmorey Lodge, now closing in on a century, is legendary in the village of Waterton Lake, and not just for its hospitality. While the snow flies and most of the village stores close down for the season, the Kilmorey stays open. As the summer residents leave and population drops from 2,000 to 150, the Lodge is a bright spot in the community. Families gather for birthday dinners and clubs hold winter parties. The Lodge guests snowshoe across the meadows, or ski cross-country on nearby trails. For them, the lodge's cozy rooms and fireside evenings are the perfect hideaway.

The hotel's more conspicuous merits are equally well deserved. The

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Lamp Post dining room serves award-winning cuisine from an unusual and extensive menu, complimented by impressive wine cellar. In fact, part of the Kilmorey experience -- eating all one's meals at the hotel -- is a long-time British tradition, still practiced worldwide. Since everyone queues up for dinner at the same time, we met most of our fellow guests. Most, we learned, came from Calgary, and many were repeat visitors. Why weren't they in Banff-Lake Louise, when that resort area was so much closer to Calgary? Waterton Lake, they said, still has that small-town feel and secluded Alpine charm; Banff has been overdeveloped and commercialized.

The Lodge's present Victorian decor, overdue for an update, is scheduled for renovation this winter. The guest rooms will be as warm and inviting as ever, but the fabrics and colors will reflect more contemporary designs. Zen Bodnar reassures guests who ask, however, that new interiors won't change the Kilmorey's country inn appeal.

"That's what we're all about, that's what our quests expect," He says. "The Kilmorey will always be warm and welcoming."

REPORT CARD:

BIGGEST SURPRISE: Getting wifi Internet access on our front balcony.

MEMORABLE MOMENT: Mountain views from the Main Lodge.

BEST BUY: Off-season rates in the fall.

PRIMITIVE PLEASURE: Smelling the sagebrush after the rain.

FORGETTABLE: The \$20 per day charge for garage parking.

DON'T MISS: Sunset on the pool patio at the Mountain Lodge.

IF YOU GO:

STAYING THERE: Double rooms for two start at \$129 a night. Two-night packages for two, including dinner for two, a bottle of wine, breakfast-in-bed for two and one additional breakfast or lunch, and all taxes and tips is \$349 on weekdays and \$399 on weekends. For more information, call 1-888-859-8669, 1-403-859-2334 or visit www.kilmoreylodge.com. For summer and winter recreation, in the village and in Waterton-Glacier National Park, visit www.watertoninfo.com.

GETTING THERE: Waterton Lakes National Park is in southwest Alberta. From Calgary, drive south on Highway 2 to Cardston, then southwest on Highway 5 to Waterton. From Great Falls, Montana, drive north on Interstate 15 and cross the U.S.-Canada border at Sweetgrass. Seven miles north of the border, turn west on Highway 501 to Cardston, and southwest on Route 5 to Waterton.

(Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty explore the world from Venice, Calif.)

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