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Developing childhood vision for the ultimate White Mountains resort

By: Judy Hayes , The Independent

GREER - While some of the old timers in Greer are wary of growth and change in their little mountain village, growth has continued over the last three years and much of it has Doug Sandahl's name associated with it.

Sandahl, a Phoenix developer and builder, first bought Greer Lodge two and a half years ago to save it from the wrecking ball, and proceeded to spend over \$2 million renovating the dilapidated lodge and turning it into a luxurious, upscale mountain getaway.

If you ask him, he'll tell you why he really bought the lodge, and it's all about his childhood memories. "The whole Greer thing has to do with sharing and giving back, that's really the essence of what I'm trying to do here," says Sandahl.

The 57-year-old Sandahl remembers his childhood with fondness; he was the youngest of three boys born to Martha and Carl Sandahl in Phoenix. Sandahl remembers how each weekend his father would pack up the three boys in the family car, occasionally his mother would join them, and they'd set off on a fishing or hunting trip, a camping adventure, or some other outdoor activity. He loved those weekend adventures with his father and brothers - that's how he originally found Greer.

"I'm armed with all those memories, I just want to share and give back," said Sandahl. "I want to make this a place where people can come and make their own memories, much like my family did when I was young."

Although he describes Greer as the prettiest place in Arizona, Sandahl said the available accommodations made it difficult for people to really enjoy themselves in Greer, so he set about making a difference.

After renovations at Greer Lodge were complete, Sandahl bought the Wildflower Bed and Breakfast, the Big Ten Resort Cabins, River Bend Cabins, and he built a handful of luxury log cabins. He is currently in the process of buying the Red Setter Inn, a high-end luxury Greer resort that was recently named as one of the top ten hotels in the world by Fodor's, and the Four Seasons Resort, a more casual resort located nearby.

Sandahl says when he bought Greer Lodge; he knew he would continue his investment in Greer. "I knew I needed 80 rooms to become self-sustaining, to have a chance at being profitable," said Sandahl. "This year we crossed the over 80-room threshold and will make an operating profit."

All cabins and guest rooms are modernized and outfitted with new La-Z-Boy furniture, contemporary fixtures, lighting and décor. Throughout the changes he's made in Greer, Sandahl said he has remained faithful to his personal motto - "do the best you can and do it the right way."

"What I've done is brought comfort and luxury to Greer, enabling people from the average Joe to the upper echelon to make their own memories here," said Sandahl.

In addition to the 373 Bar & Grill at Greer Lodge, which is touted as the "best steakhouse on the mountain," Sandahl recently purchased Cattle Kate's restaurant which he plans to renovate and rename "The Watering Hole Saloon" when it opens early next year.

"When the Red Setter deal is complete and the cabins are done, I will have 140 rooms and enough land to build another 140 rooms," said Sandahl, who figures he has invested over \$28 million dollars to date in Greer.

He's proud of the accommodations his facilities offer mountain visitors, from cabins that are ideal for young families to enjoy a comfortable vacation, to elegant lodge rooms that are perfect for a romantic getaway, to large luxury log cabins that can accommodate family reunions or girls-only weekend escapes.

Sandahl's facilities can provide lodging and dining accommodations for over 200 guests, making it the perfect destination wedding spot. Greer Lodge has become so popular they've hosted over 30 weddings this year alone.

While Sandahl has made significant changes throughout Greer, his efforts were not always well received. Earlier this year Sandahl placed several signs throughout Greer that directed visitors to his facilities - a handful of townspeople took exception to the signs and complained to the county planning and zoning office. Recently when owners of a non-Sandahl resort closed for remodeling, they hung a

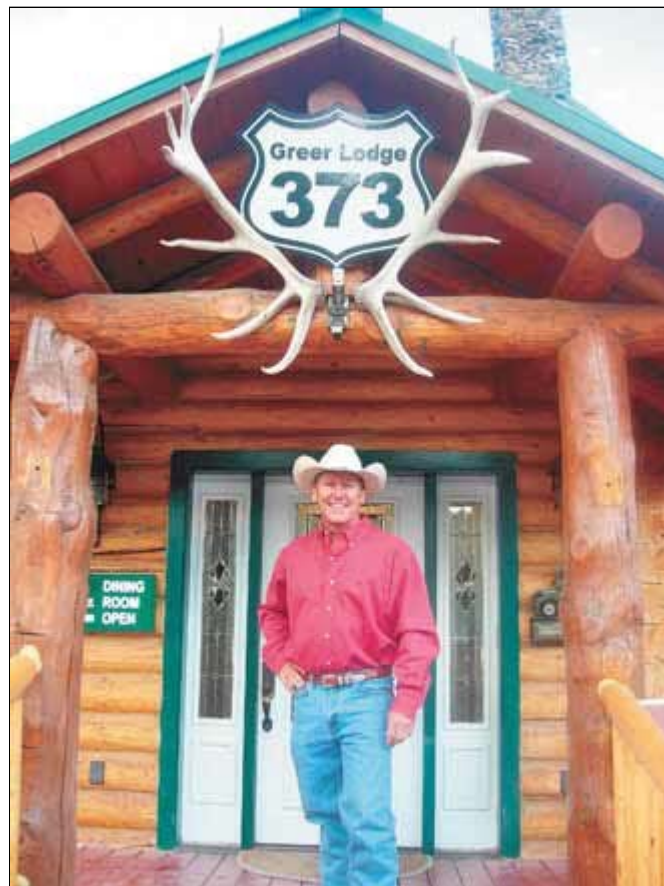


Photo submitted
Doug Sandahl

large banner across their driveway explaining, "Doug didn't buy us, we're remodeling."

Sandahl takes it all in stride and says the biggest challenge he has faced involved staffing his operation. When he bought Greer Lodge, Sandahl said he toyed with the idea of bringing an experienced staff up from Phoenix to run the business, but ultimately he decided to keep his hiring local. "Instead, I hired a singing bartender who had been a prison guard for 13 years to oversee the operation," said Sandahl. "Together we built our business one step at a time."

The singing bartender Sandahl refers to is his general manager, Jeff Akins. With Akins at the helm of the day-to-day operations, they have built a staff of over 100 employees who all live in the White Mountains. "They live in the mountains because, like me, they enjoy the mountain lifestyle."

Sandahl said he once read that Henry Ford paid his employees enough money so that they could afford to buy one of the Model "A" cars they produced, even those people on the assembly line. So, like Ford, Sandahl said he pays his employees well. "By paying them fairly and treating them well, they become the heart of the operation."

"We have an incredibly beautiful place, we have the infrastructure, and we have the heart of our staff, a mountain friendly staff - this sets us apart!"

The Little Colorado River runs through the scenic Greer Lodge property, and visitors are able to fish the river and private ponds for free. Massages are available in the lodge's massage room or in guest rooms, and Sandahl has arrangements with the nearby X-Diamond Ranch to provide horseback rides for his more adventurous guests.

"The lodge is a reflection of what I value," said Sandahl, who said he writes the ads, brochures and the verbiage for his website in addition to orchestrating the restaurant menu and hand selecting the wine list. "The Greer Lodge resort is Doug Sandahl."

Sandahl said that although he continues to build luxury homes in the Phoenix area, he is able to spend about half of his time living in his Greer home at the northern end of Greer. Each day, Sandahl rides his Harley Davidson down to the Greer Lodge for breakfast and takes a daily hike through the pine trees. Activities each week while in his mountain hideaway always include some fishing and horseback riding and snow skiing in the winter.

Showing no signs of slowing down, Sandahl said he will continue his relationship with the small Greer village he has loved since he was a kid. "I'm a mirror of what's there; I'm just polishing the gem."

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