



We Welcome Wheatland Express

By Olivia Lawrence

The Wheatland Express has chugged into the Saskatchewan tourism scene offering the prairies a unique train experience.

The not-for-profit organization collects and refurbishes historical rail cars in order to offer a variety of railway excursions. Tour themes include train heists, murder mysteries, Johnny Cash and Elvis tributes, family tours, and regular excursions. Whichever tour you choose, Wheatland's tour themes appeal to everyone's interests.

"When we started talking about the idea of Wheatland, there was one only one other train experience offered in the province. There are many successful tourist train operations throughout North America however, so we thought why can't we?" said Ashlyn Weninger, Wheatland's Director of Marketing and Operations.

Wheatland Rail Inc., owned and operated by the local municipalities purchased the branch line from Canadian National Railways many years ago. The Cudworth subdivision is operated by Great Sandhills Railway Ltd, based out of Leader.

Great Sands provides railway services to farmers and grain producers in central Saskatchewan. Wheatland Express departs from two locations, Cudworth, which is 85 km northeast of Saskatoon, and Wakaw, which is 90 km northeast of Saskatoon.

"The Wheatland Express concept was dreamt up by members of the staff at Great Sandhills Railway to develop the best railway excursion conception of the prairies," said Weninger.

Wheatland purchased its first passenger car in January 2018 and the first tour took place the same year in June. Wheatland was expecting to host around eight different tours a year with 100 guests each tour. The crew was quickly surprised by the public's positive response and Wheatland gained popularity fast.

"Before our first tour even occurred, we had sold out the season and had such a demand that we ended up doing 25 tours hosting 3,500 guests that first year. In 2018 we earned Rookie of the Year at the Tourism Saskatchewan Awards," said Weninger.

Wheatland offers two types of excursions at this time – Excursions consisting of a three-hour round-trip experience with on-board characters and musical entertainment; or an excursion and dinner show

experience that consists of the three-hour, round-trip followed by a three-course meal and 90-minute concert performance at the local hall.

“Throughout the pandemic, we were able to secure some new rail cars that are going to allow us to offer some new experiences, including onboard dining. We will be able to serve meals onboard the train, and we also updated our train’s sound systems so we can have performances heard throughout the cars. The new rail cars also enable us to operate through the winter and colder seasons, and we have also acquired a sleep car to eventually incorporate overnight experiences into our program,” said Weninger.

Originally, Wheatland Express operated during June to August. In the future, when it is safe to do so, Wheatland will offer a full year experience including a Christmas program in November and December including parties and small business events.

“Wheatland is an opportunity to embrace, showcase and appreciate what we have when it comes to our history and culture. Trains are so fascinating, the rails enabled us to build our prairie communities. We are really excited to be able to offer this railway experience to everyday people, and to have it so close to Saskatoon and support the surrounding tourist operations that are out there is important,” said Weninger.

To get the latest updates on tours and dates, visit the Wheatland website at wheatlandexpresstrain.ca or their Facebook page. You can also subscribe to its mailing list to receive its monthly newsletter called “Wheatland Round Up”. The newsletter includes fun stories about characters in upcoming tours, heritage-related stories, activities for the kids, and information and updates on projects. You can sign up for Wheatland’s newsletter on the website.

“We are just really looking forward to the future and being able to offer tours again. We have been working with Hospitality Saskatchewan, Tourism Saskatoon, and Tourism Saskatchewan really closely. I think we have realized more than ever that having a collaborative and joint initiative with these organizations is going to build a really strong tourism and hospitality industry in Saskatchewan moving forward.”