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Outlook

The Balch Hotel

Exploring the eastern Gorge

Historic hotel features unique east-side experience

Walker Sacon
The Dalles Chronicle

Since purchasing Dufur's historic Balch Hotel in 2015, Josiah Dean and Claire Sierra have worked to get people looking farther east than what Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance chair Renee Tkach calls the "walls and falls" section of the Gorge. "A lot of people don't realize that the Gorge goes past Multnomah Falls," Sierra said.

With Dean on the tourism alliance's executive board, the couple helped develop the alliance's "East Gorge Food Trail." Sierra said collaborating with others towards this goal has been an "amazing" part of working in the Gorge. "It's not like 'No you can't have our people!'" Sierra said. "It's more like 'Yeah! Go to the Dalles! Go to Dufur!'" Tkach said the east end of the gorge offers different experiences for tourists.

"First stop is going to be Multnomah Falls and then maybe you lose 50 percent and the next 50 percent goes to Hood River and thinks that's where the Gorge ends," Tkach said. She said this means many forget about "this incredible town of The Dalles—which has a whole different flavor to it—and then Dufur, which is stepping back in time and is a quieter pace."

At the Balch, Sierra and Dean have built their marketing around Dufur's bucolic pace. "I think the main thing we have going for us is this," Sierra said, gesturing toward the rolling hills between Dufur and Mt. Hood's majestic visage. "We kind of have a whole lot of nothing going on." For some, the Balch is worth going a little out of the way.

"A surprising number of business travelers choose us that are going to The Dalles," Dean said. "It's like 'it's 15 minutes away but I can stay at a Best Western anywhere. I want to do something unique.'" For others, it takes some reminding that Dufur isn't as out of the way as it seems.

"People see the sign and it says 'Dufur, Bend' so they think we're next to Bend," Dean

said. "It's like, 'No we're right here.'"

The Balch has been right there—across Fifteenmile Creek from Kramer's Market, the post office and the rest of downtown Dufur—for well over a century.

Charles Balch was a business partner of the Dufur brothers when he built the hotel in 1907 from bricks made at a Dufur brickyard with clay from his ranch, according to Dufur Historical Society archives. Dufur Historical Society President Nancy Gibson said the Balch, Kramer's market and the adjacent building were all built with Dufur bricks.

"We've just been scanning old pictures of Dufur and it hasn't really changed that much," Gibson said. "When you look down the picture or look down the street whether north or south or whatever, it's pretty much the same." When Charles Balch ran the hotel, his customers were primarily travelers and salesmen coming into town on the newly-finished railroad.

In 2019, Dean said, the hotel had guests from 17 different countries. Sierra said she had grown used to seeing the same guests return multiple times, becoming friendly with the owners and staff.

"People have been three or four or six or eight or more times," Sierra said. "I have to say, for myself—as someone who travels a lot—there's not a lot of places I can say I've even been back to a second time that I liked a lot." Sierra referenced one guest who had recently celebrated a birthday at the Balch for the third time.

"To me, that says something. That does something for my heart that is not about bottom line dollars," Sierra said. "It just shows that we're doing something different."

The Balch was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1987 by then-owners Howard and Patricia Green. The Greens purchased the hotel with plans to restore it after previous owners had converted the hotel into a private residence, according to their National Register application.

The Greens completed most of the structural repairs to the building and operated the hotel by appointment, Gibson said. They sold the building at auction to Hood River natives Samantha and Jeff



Josiah Dean and Claire Sierra, above and top, are working to draw visitors off the beaten path. Walker Sacon photo

Irwin in 2006 due to increasing age and declining health, according to a letter they sent to friends.

Under the Irwins' ownership, finishing touches were added to the Green's repairs and the Balch was once again open for business daily. Gibson said the Irwins painted and refinished doors and walls to bring back the interior's original splendor.

Since purchasing the Balch turnkey from the Irwins in 2015, "Josiah has just gone forward from that, trying to get more people and offering more events," Gibson said. Sierra said the Balch has guests that had come to Hood River before and wanted to try something different.

"They want to be in the area, but they want to do something a little bit more quiet or kind of out of the hustle and bustle so people can still easily get to hiking or kayaking or rafting or wine tasting and then they're not in the fray trying to fight for parking or whatnot," Sierra said. Tkach said Dufur, and the Balch specifically, make a good base for recreators.

"Not only do you get to spend time in Dufur, but you can go down and raft and play on the river or go fishing," Tkach said.

"It's got it all except for you don't have the total opposite experience of the kind of towns that have it all—in terms of the rafting—would be, for me a nightmare, like Bend," Tkach said. "Some people love all that going on, but if you just want that relaxing, friendly, warm town with real cowboys walking around too, it's pretty cool." Sierra said she thinks Dufur's agrarian connection to the land makes the town "a really grounded, grounding place."

"It's not complicated," Sierra said. "People here, we're not complicated."

"People, when they come here, they're like 'Yeah we went to Kramer's and we met all these really cool old guys!'" Sierra said. "We're like, 'yeah we know exactly which guys, they're those guys that are always there. We know those guys!'"