

SANDLAND from page 1B

sand or get stuck and need help, and we had to have something to go out and do it. When we had just the rentals, we didn't have anything for little kids to do, so Dad started giving Mom and the little kids a ride in one of the buggies to check on the families and get out and see the sand. People kept saying we should give tours in them, so they built a couple of buggies and started giving tours.”

In 1990, Chris and Darla moved down to Florence from Spokane with their daughters to help Larry and Ilene with the business. At that point, Chris and Larry started building the tour buggies using Volkswagen engines.

“They'd carry five people max — four average sized adults or five if we had two little kids,” Chris said. “We ran those for a lot of years, but the problem with the Volkswagens was as people got bigger, the [engines] didn't have enough power. We would go through three or four engines per buggy a year, and we had six buggies. We knew we had to do something different.”

Initially, Larry didn't want to change because he knew the Volkswagen engines and how to work on them.

“He didn't want to move to fuel injected engines run by computers; he just couldn't wrap his head around something that didn't fail, but in all the time we've been running, we've never had a computer fail,” Chris said.

In 2005, Chris and Darla purchased the dune buggy side of the business from Larry and Ilene and started building the long travel buggies they currently operate. Larry and Ilene continued to run the amusement park portion of Sandland until their retirement in 2010, at which point Chris and Darla purchased the remainder of the family business.

“We've been doing all of it since then,” said Darla. “Our daughters would come home when they were going to college and help us with the business.”

The Hagues' two larg-

er buggies are designed to handle a full coach of people, fitting 27 on each giant buggy. This way, Sandland can accommodate large tour groups comfortably.

“Chris and his dad built the big buggies with Dale Jackson, who worked for us for a lot of years,” said Darla. “They started out as school buses, and they stripped them down to the bare frame and got rid of the body.”

“The body we took off and made the tunnel for the train we have,” Chris added. “My dad designed the railroad. We haven't been able to run it in the last few years, because we just don't have the manpower to do it.”

The Hagues ran the giant buggies with the original school bus engines for many years, until about five years ago when they upgraded the motors.

“We couldn't get the same tires we'd been using for years and years; Good-year Quit making them,” Chris explained. “So, we changed tires, but the only tires we could get were quite a bit bigger, and a lot heavier with full tread on, so now the engines didn't have enough power. So, we had to change the engine to be able to turn all of that.”

This turned out in their favor.

“It actually worked out better because we found that these new engines, even though they were much larger engines with a lot more power, got probably close to twice the fuel economy because they're fuel injected, which is a lot more efficient. So, we get much better power and a lot better fuel economy now,” he said.

After being in business for 35 years this summer, there are many reasons Sandland Adventures happens to be the number one rated tour in Florence on Tripadvisor. First and foremost is safety.

“We spend the time to train our drivers,” Chris said. “Our rule of thumb is, if I wouldn't send my kids out with them, I'm not going to send somebody else's kids out with them.”

Knowing that safety comes first for the Hagues

allows visitors to relax and enjoy the ride, which is the next thing that sets Sandland apart from other tours.

“As far as the experience, we've always strived to give people a consistent, exciting, fun experience, while seeing one of the most special areas in this state, if not the country,” Darla said. “The dunes are just so unique and beautiful, so to be able to give people a fun ride out while seeing this natural wonder is pretty cool.”

“And it's different every time you go out,” Chris added. “We have people who come back year after year, and if you come in the spring, it will look entirely different than if you come in the middle of summer or the fall.”

When people take a tour on a sandrail, they have the opportunity to see various features of the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area (ODNRA) guided by one of Sandland's expert drivers, such as Gage Miller. Miller is currently in his fourth year driving for the Hagues, having learned to drive stick shift on the dunes when he was only 10 years old.

He was knowledgeable about the features of the ODNRA, its wildlife and history.

Then, when he took the tour flying through the dunes at 55 or more miles per hour, Miller made sure the tour group felt safe at all times.

According to Chris, the autumn is often when the dunes are the biggest because the winds blow all summer and build them up. The dunes tend to flatten over the winter, but this provides an opportunity for little ponds to form, as well as patterns and formations in the sand.

The park runs from March through December, so visitors can enjoy the dunes almost year-round, with the busiest times of the season being during spring break and summer.

“From the first of July on, it's always super busy every day,” Darla said. “We've always been open seven days a week from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and this year was the first

time we closed for one day during summer.”

Sandland is closed to the public in January and February for maintenance.

“It's the time of year when we strip the buggies to the bare frame and repaint and put them all back together,” said Darla. “We usually do half of the fleet one year and the next year we do the other half and keep rotating, so we can keep our equipment in good condition. Then we have less maintenance in the summer when we need them running.”

According to Chris, “We try and fix things before they break, because if we wait until they break out on the sand, it's much more difficult to fix out there than it is in the shop.”

Between the weather conditions of the dunes and the number of hours the vehicles run, the maintenance is definitely necessary, and the Hagues are on top of it constantly to ensure that guests have a fun and safe time at their park.

“On average, this year we probably do 30-plus rides a day on the sandrails,” said Darla. “It used to be a lot more, but we're not running all the buggies this year; we normally have five running, and this year we're running four max.”

Then, each buggy usually does seven to 10 trips each day, depending on the length of tours.

A couple weeks ago, “We had a group of about 50, so it took us two runs to get them out. Usually, a group of 32 we can get out in one run,” Darla said.

Sandland hosts summer camps from all over the country, and tour groups often opt to stay at Honeyman State Park then ride on a buggy tour.

Chris and Darla recommend booking in advance for groups of 50 or 100, but smaller groups will have an easier time booking in the near future. This summer, tour companies are starting to come back to the area after the pandemic caused Sandland to experience their first year without any tour groups in 2020.

After refunding all of their reservations on the books in March 2020, fortunately, in May they were

allowed to reopen with restrictions.

“Because everything we offer was outdoors, there were less restrictions at that time,” Darla said. “We shut the office down and helped everybody through the plexiglass window, which was something we added because at that time, the restrictions meant nobody could be inside.”

Sandland also required people to wear face coverings and purchased an ozone machine to disinfect helmets and goggles. Now that things are almost back to “normal,” face coverings are not required, but Sandland still takes great care to disinfect equipment between each trip.

The park is still down a couple of drivers after the pandemic, as it is currently too late in the season to begin to train new drivers.

“We want to know for sure that they're ready to drive and take people out there,” Darla. “So, by the time we get to this point in our season, we're too busy to train, because our guys are all on the sand every day.”

The training process is intense, and drivers practice for a minimum of two weeks behind the wheel before being allowed to drive buggies on their own. After this, drivers practice with buggies loaded with sandbags to get used to driving with the realistic weight of a passenger load before actually taking any visitors out on the dunes.

Sandland also has to consider paying their staff during the offseason.

“The problem we have in these small tourist towns up and down the coast is we

have such a narrow window to make it,” said Darla. “You do really well, but for only two or three months, and that money has to carry us through the winter, because we try to keep our drivers on year-round.”

“That extra money we make in the summer is what we use to pay our guys through the winter so we know we have experienced drivers come the next season. It's difficult, and once you've missed a season, it's tough.”

Still, Chris and Darla recognize that they have been fortunate compared to other businesses in town.

“We feel blessed,” said Darla. “Even last year, we did about half of what we normally did, but at least we were able to do it. A lot of the restaurants and little shops weren't able to stay open.”

Above all, the Hagues recognize the importance of every business in town's success contributing to Florence thriving on the whole.

“We've always tried to run our business the best we can to give people a great experience, so they keep coming back, because once we get them here, they're going to eat in the restaurants, they're going to stay in our hotels, they're going to do the other activities in the area,” said Darla. “So, if any one attraction that's in the area — whether it be the Sea Lion Caves, the lighthouse, C&M Stables, the Sandboarding Park — can bring people to the area, then everybody benefits. So, that's really what we've always tried to do.”

For more information, visit www.sandland.com.



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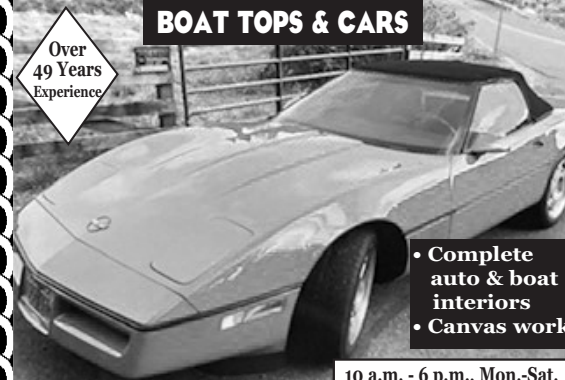
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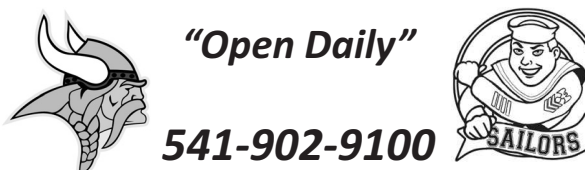


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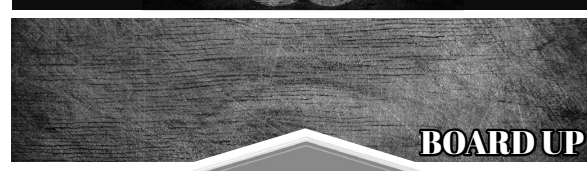
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