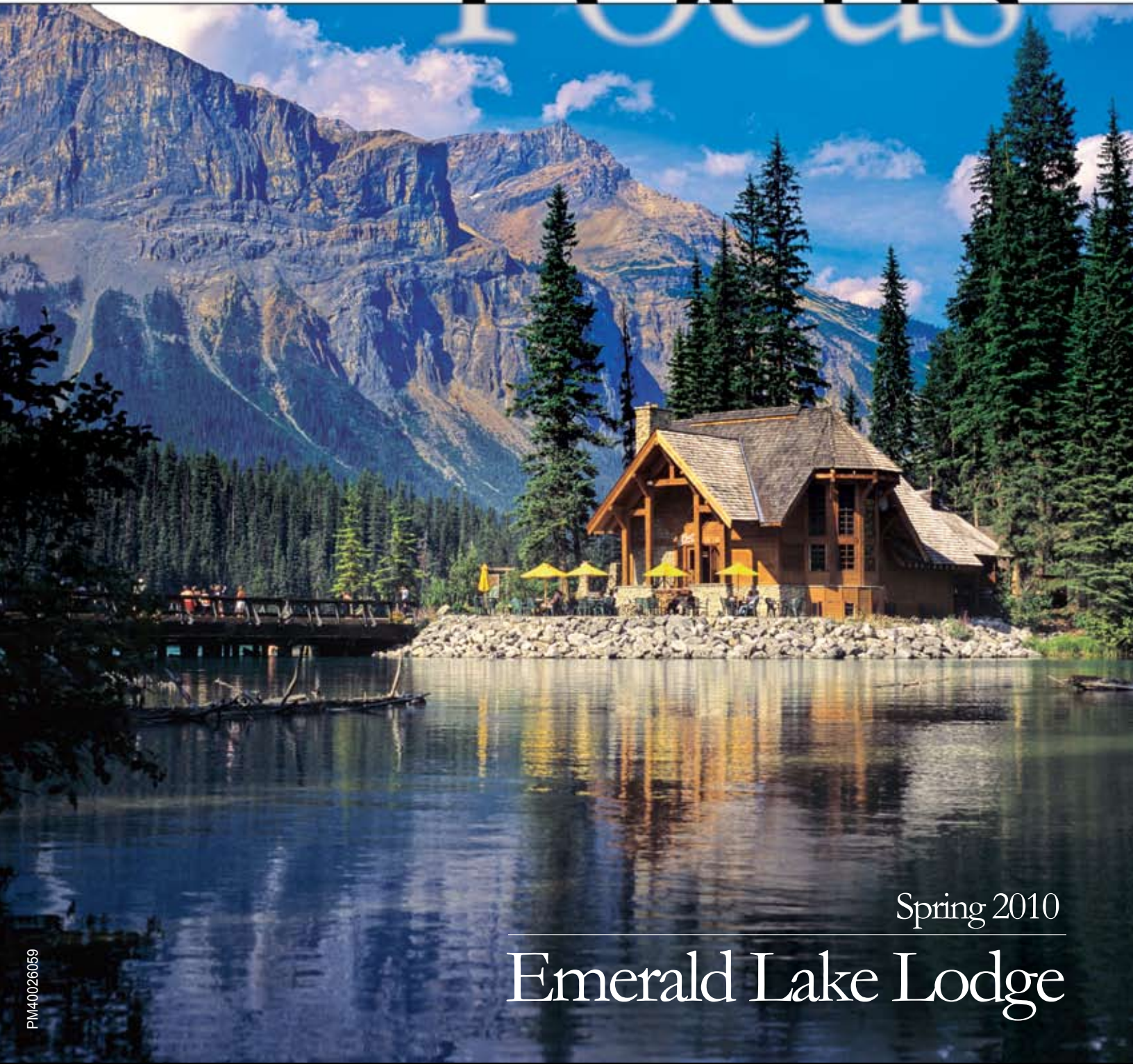


# InnFocus

BC Hotel Association



Spring 2010

## Emerald Lake Lodge

Beating the Post-Olympic Blues • Calculating Your Carbon Footprint  
Seeing Stars • Purchasing Power • The Gay & Lesbian Tourism Market





# Emerald Lake Lodge

## A Gem in the Family

by Alex Van Tol

Emerald Lake Lodge is a cornerstone in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Resort portfolio of Western Canadian restaurants and hotels.

When legendary mountain guide Tom Wilson stumbled on the shining waters of Emerald Lake in 1882, he figured he'd found one of the most spectacular places in the world. He was right.

Twenty years later, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) welcomed its first visitors to Emerald Lake Lodge. For decades thereafter, its hand-hewn timber frame served as a comfortable place for adventurous guests to spend the night.

In the late 1970s, the O'Connor family stumbled across the lodge, just 12 kilometres off the highway from the little hamlet of Field. It had fallen into disrepair. Not ones to bypass a diamond in the rough, Pat and Connie O'Connor snapped it up, adding it to their real estate portfolio. But the history and beauty of the place stole their hearts, and it

soon became much more than just an investment - it became a labour of love. It took them a while, but by 1986 Emerald Lake Lodge was once again welcoming guests to its 15 acres of montane serenity.

All these years later, popular opinion proves Tom Wilson knew a good thing when he saw it: in 2009, *Condé Nast Traveller* readers agreed it's still one of the best places on the planet. Except now the lodge is open year-round, there's hot running water, and the cuisine is to die for.

"It isn't without its challenges," suggests Lodge Manager Allison Fraser of being a remote property. Being a historical site - and one that runs completely off the grid - there's a lot to look after. With its own generators, water, and sewage treatment, it's a pretty self-sufficient setup. "My maintenance department is really on the ball!" laughs the South African native.

The lodge employs about 110 staff in high season; 90% of them live in an onsite residence, which Allison manages.



Allison Fraser, Lodge Manager

“One of the challenges is finding qualified staff who want to come and live out here,” she says. “It’s very difficult to find people of a certain caliber. I train constantly.” Prior to the recession, Allison says there were times when her payroll turned over three or four times a year. “Things seem to have calmed down,” she states. A few staffers are in it for the long haul, including the executive chef and the director of maintenance, each of whom has been with the resort for over a dozen years.

Even though living in the sticks can be a tough sell, staff stand to make good money in the summer season. “We have a pretty big international mix,” Allison explains, including a large UK, Dutch, Belgian, German, Swiss, and US base. “However, the majority of our guests come from Alberta, mostly out of Calgary,” she notes. Many of these are corporate groups or weddings. “Emerald Lake Lodge is such a romantic destination. We have a lot of weddings,” Allison reports. “And we are very good at doing weddings.” So good, in fact, that the wedding and conference market takes up the slack for the shoulder and off seasons, says Larkin O’Connor, Development Manager for the family’s resorts. Pre-planned functions help to stabilize staffing levels too. “We’ve seen a big increase in winter weddings,” states Larkin, in part because the seasonal cost differential appeals to couples. Plus, Emerald Lake’s microclimate means it’s usually several degrees warmer than the next closest resort town of Lake Louise, Alberta. And let’s not forget that people still fall in love and get married - economic downturn or not. “Weddings are recession-proof,” suggests Larkin.

But with such a remote location, surely you’d expect some trouble keeping heads on beds? Not so much, according to Allison. “We have a huge amount of repeat business,” she notes. “A lot of our business comes from word-of-mouth, or from functions and weddings.” Larkin adds that media exposure, like travel articles and the

2009 filming of *The Bachelorette* onsite, helps keep people flowing in.

Another thing that sets Emerald Lake Lodge apart, along with other resorts under the Canadian Rocky Mountain Resorts (CRMR) mantle such as Painted Boat Resort on the Sunshine Coast and Deer Lodge in Lake Louise, is its focus on high-end food. Beautiful game meats are sourced from CRMR’s own elk and bison ranch operation south of Calgary, overseen by Larkin’s older brother. The family just set up a bakery in Canmore as well to produce the resort’s baked goods.

If CRMR can’t find a product that meets its own standards for quality, reveals Allison, it’ll manage it in-house. At press time, the group was preparing to open its own laundry operations in Calgary for just that reason. “Our desire is to offer high-end terry and linens,” affirms Larkin, but CRMR found its materials being destroyed by brutal industrial laundry operations. “Unless you go with tough materials, you’re just wrecking stuff,” describes Larkin. “It’s a quality initiative rather than a savings for us. If we can keep that [quality] internally, and do our own linens and deliveries, we’re that much more stable,” he suggests.

It’s exactly this focus on quality that appealed to Allison when she made a permanent move to Canada three years ago. “When I did my research, I chose the O’Connors simply because I found they were so passionate about the business,” she explains. “It’s a lifestyle choice. It’s a passion, not a job. That’s why I chose to work for them.” As a proven leader in management, Allison was a great fit for CRMR. “I was with Southern Sun for almost 20 years, and was truly lucky to be moved all over the world,” says Allison. But before she had even left South Africa, she swore she wanted to live in the Rockies one day and work at a lodge overlooking a lake. “My family all thought I was crazy!” she states. But now, she’s living her dream. “I think there’s massive potential in this country for someone who’s ambitious and wants to work,” offers Allison.

Making the leap from opening hotels in Rwanda, Dubai, and the Seychelles to overseeing a remote cluster of cabins on the continental divide certainly was a change, notes Allison, but she wouldn’t trade the beauty of her surroundings. “It keeps me sane,” she affirms. “I don’t know how.”

