

## NORTH AMERICA



# Daring plans on course in Canada

SUZANNE MORPHET with an insight into making change

"I am right here," says Gordon Sebastian, leaning closer to a class photo hanging on the wall of his former residential school in British Columbia. He points to a younger version of himself. "I gotta be, maybe 11," he says. "That's grade five."

Gordon is now 73 and gives guided tours of the mission school he attended throughout his childhood. Constructed by the Canadian Government in 1910 and operated by missionaries of the Catholic church until 1969, St Eugene was one of more than 130 residential schools in Canada where Indigenous children were taken, often against the will of their parents.

But instead of turning their backs on the school, some of the former residents of St Eugene dreamt up a daring plan: turn it into a luxury resort complete with golf course, spa, casino and RV campground.

This year the Ktunaxa (k-too-nah-ha) Nation and Shuswap Indian Band, which collectively own the resort in south-eastern BC, are celebrating

the 25th anniversary of the first part of that dream — the par 72, 18-hole golf course. It was designed by Les Furber, one of Canada's most celebrated golf architects, and set the bar for the rest of the resort, which was developed in subsequent years.

Pulling into the parking lot on a mid-May morning, I'm struck by the peace and beauty of the place, the Rocky Mountains framing one horizon, a meandering river running along the other. A red roof and a small cross top the three-storey brick Mission Building. Steps lead up to an imposing doorway, which surely must have intimidated young children arriving for the first time, some who likely had not set foot inside any structure other than a teepee.

The horror of residential schools was documented by Canada's national Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 2000s. Children as young as four were separated from their families, forbidden from speaking their language and often physically and sexually abused. Thousands never returned home, dying from malnutrition, disease and indifference.

So it's surprising to learn that Gordon and other elders wanted to save St Eugene after it had sat desolate for 30 years. "In the beginning, a lot of them didn't want the building," says Leanna Gravelle, the director of the Ktunaxa Interpretive Centre that's located on the first floor.

"They wanted it blown up. They wanted it torn down. But many other nations who did that, they didn't get that sense of peace or healing or closure."

Continuing my tour with Gordon, I learn that my room on the third floor was once part of the senior boys' dorm, housing 12 to 15 boys. In the dining room on the main floor, Gordon recalls eating bad food. "I remember sour milk, lumpy porridge, cold porridge."

Originally a farm school, the early residents of St Eugene were required to work: the boys in the fields and barn, the girls indoors



Above, this statue in front of the St Eugene Mission Building honours all the children who attended residential schools in Canada. Above left, golfers enjoy a round at the St Eugene golf course.

learning housekeeping. By the time Gordon arrived in 1957, the cows and pigs were long gone, and there was time for music and recreation. There was even a swimming pool on the second floor of the barn. (Knowing this makes me feel better when I enjoy the resort's pool and hot tub later.)

Gordon's generation was cut off from their culture, but not the outside world. "So when President Kennedy got shot, we all came down here and watched it," he says, showing me what was once the TV room. Reflecting on his years here, he says "my time was good, yeah".

Still, he acknowledges it wasn't good for everyone. Turning the former mission into a high-end resort would help recover what was lost. "The whole thing was, 'take back what was taken away'," he explains. "Bring the world to us, share it."

Carrying out that vision wasn't easy. The First Nations owners were able to buy the mission for \$C1 from the Canadian Government but needed to find lenders and backers to renovate the interior and build additional accommodation and amenities. For a while, the resort operated under the Delta hotel brand.

Today, St Eugene Golf Resort & Casino is a compelling place to stay for a few days, as I'm doing, or for one night on your way elsewhere, as Nicola Eastwood from Melbourne is doing with her stepmother from Kalbarri. I meet them in the hot tub where a few of us are talking about reconciliation — the process of creating mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

"In Australia, we're stuck. We haven't had healing," Nicola laments. "There's a lot of things that start, but then nothing

happens." Nicola has special insight into Australia's situation since she helped represent 71 Indigenous people in a class-action suit in Darwin in 2017. They had been taken from their families as children and placed in the Retta Dixon Home, run by missionaries, to be assimilated into mainstream culture, similar to what happened here in Canada.

Given her expertise, Nicola is impressed by what she sees at St Eugene. "It shows reconciliation, correct? And it also shows that, you know, you can have this without ramming it down somebody's throat."

It's true. Except for the photos on the walls and a statue of two children at the entrance and a smaller one inside, it would be possible to come here and not discover the ugly history behind the beautiful building. Visiting the Interpretive Centre, watching a video about the story of St Eugene, and taking a tour with a former resident are all optional.

Some former residents still refuse to set foot in St Eugene, but the resort has brought the First Nations pride and prosperity. Nicola is full of admiration. "What you've got is a success story here," she says knowingly.

**Suzanne Morphet was a guest of St Eugene Golf Resort & Casino, with support from Cranbrook Tourism. Neither have influenced this story, or read it before publication.**

## fact file

- St Eugene Golf Resort & Casino is open year-round. Winter rates from \$C135 (\$152) and summer rates from \$C165. Fly from Vancouver to the Canadian Rockies airport in Cranbrook, then it's a 10-minute drive, or fly to Calgary and drive for three hours. [steugene.ca](http://steugene.ca)



Gordon Sebastian points to himself in his classroom photo from grade five at the former St Eugene residential school. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet