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Get a feel for historic Plains living at the Lodgepole Gallery and Tipi Village

by: Sheri Ziemann / Indian Country Today

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BROWNING, Mont. - An old proverb talks about "walking a mile in someone else's moccasins." Southern Blackfeet tribal member Darrell Norman takes that adage a step further when he encourages guests at his property in Browning (just a stone's throw from Glacier National Park) to "sleep in our tipis."

"Just like a feng shui expert, I had a Blackfeet architect visit my property to find the best location and position for a home. He then designed my house and built it here," said Norman. "I just wanted a place to do my art. Meanwhile, Curly Bear Wagner wanted to do historic site tours and art shows. He had two vans and needed someone to help him expand the tourists' visits he offered. I have 200 acres of land that I bought from him, and I own one of the painted lodges that belong to [our tribe]. So I thought, 'Why not put up some tipis?'"

In the beginning, Norman didn't intend to have guests stay in them - he thought he'd just bring people to see the tipis while on tour. A renowned artist, Norman hoped that visitors would then come into his gallery to buy some of his art. He was the recipient of two of the First Peoples Fund awards from Rapid City, S.D. - the Community Spirit Award and the Artists in Business in Leadership Award.

"Curly Bear continued with his tours, and I continued with the tipi village. He bought a few more tipis, and I'd give him a little bit to use his. Ultimately, though, those fell into disrepair." Later, a Canadian friend of Norman's worked with him and his wife, Angelika, to set up the tipis for folks to stay there.

"I asked other Blackfeet artists if they'd put stuff in my living room, to sell their work," said Norman. He was delighted to get positive responses from numerous artists, including David Dragonfly, Jackie Bread, Leonda Fast Buffalo Horse, Deborah Franscoise, Gale Running Wolf, Ernest Marceau, Neil Parsons, Lollie Last Star, Glenn LaFontaine, Alvin Doney, Leon Rattler, Earl Livermore, Valentina LaPier, Mecille Reevis (a clothing designer), Robert Orduno and Barbara Mitchell.

A native of Hamburg, Germany, Angelika Norman initially came to Glacier Country as a tourist. "I met Darrell in 1997; I came with Trail of the Great Bear out of Canada, which had contracted with the Blackfeet," she said. "They set up my stay here as a tourist. I went back home, and two years later I married Darrell and moved here.

"The landscape here first captured my heart - I think this is one of the most beautiful countries on Earth."

"A couple of years after we married, we decided that we'd have to do something else or get serious," said Norman. "Angelika's great on the computer, doing Web site, brochures, etc. She is also a remarkable photographer. Now we have 10 tipis."

"The Internet is the place where we get most of our bookings, from all over the world," said Norman. "Most of our guests are from the U.S. and Canada, from our work with Travel Montana and Glacier Country. We're featured in some of their publications. In October, we'll start getting bookings for next year - it gets earlier and earlier. We hope things will continue this way. The business has grown - people love to come stay in these tipis, and we serve great Native foods. We have a steady flow of deer, moose, elk and antelope - I'm the chef. I love to cook, providing custom meals for folks."

Another source of marketing for the Lodgepole Gallery is Bill Bryant, who owns Off the Beaten Path. He helped the Normans create the "Blackfoot Journey," which is two nights in a tipi plus traditional meals and more.

This level of success has taken 14 years, and Norman said he can't believe they've been in it for this long. "If you offer something unique, people will come," he said. "There are people who put up tipis for you, but that's not the same as the full service we offer here, with the gallery and everything. You have to be willing to put in the time and effort. If I hired a cook, that would probably cost me \$100 per day."

Norman said they have hired tribal members for cleanup and the maintenance of their grounds. "We can't do it all by ourselves anymore, but that's good," he said. "We really want to have a positive economic impact on our community who spend their money throughout the community." In addition to Norman's gallery, guests can visit the nearby Museum of the Plains Indians and the Blackfeet Heritage Gallery, which is tribally owned.

Anyone who visits the tipis, then steps outside and turns their eyes west to the spectacular scenery of the glaciers, will know they're in a very special place. Norman said, "The tipis have a special meaning to us; we put them up in the spring, and people keep returning, like a camp of folks returning year after year. It's special - spiritual; it's the feeling of the putting up camp like our forefathers and mothers did for us in generations past."

To visit the Lodgepole Gallery and Tipi Village, go to www.blackfeetculturecamp.com or call (406) 338-2787.

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