



Great Canadian featured in The Record

Posted July 23, 2014

Article by Terry Pender from:

<http://www.therecord.com/news-story/4645085-kitchener-tour-company->

[has-come-a-long-way/](#)

Kitchener tour company has come a long way

KITCHENER — When Larry Hundt was a student at the University of Waterloo in 1969, he hired buses to carry students back to their homes in the Greater Toronto Area on Friday evenings and return with them on Sunday nights.

"It was a crazy market at the university at the time," he says. Hundt was so busy hiring and scheduling the buses — as well as running movie nights, a record store and ice-cream shop on campus — that he quit university to take care of business.

"By the time I hit third year, I had not gone to classes come mid-November, so I figured it was time to leave before they threw me out," he says.

That was the early beginnings of [Great Canadian Holidays & Coaches](#). Hundt co-owns the Kitchener business with his wife, Lorna Hundt. From their headquarters on Manitou Drive, they oversee a thriving company that offers holiday tours across North America and coach rentals, and also does repairs and maintenance on cars, trucks and buses.

After leaving university, Hundt worked for a bus company, organizing and selling holidays — one-day tours, sightseeing trips and vacations across Canada and the U.S. "Business just skyrocketed," he says. By 1976, he was so busy the bus company hired an assistant to administer the deals he closed. That assistant was Lorna. By July 1977, Hundt and a friend from his university days partnered to start their own tour business. Lorna soon joined them.

"Lorna was the driving force in pulling all the important programs together," he says.

"He's the idea guy and I am the activator," she says.

By 1984, Hundt and Lorna decided it was time to launch their own business. They opened Travel Ventures in an old house-turned-office on Schneider Avenue in Kitchener. Later, the company moved to Manitou Drive. It moved to its current location in 2008.

Like the scenery rolling past a holiday coach, the business kept changing.

"I don't think any day was the same," Hundt says.

Lorna, who focuses on the tour side of the business, adds that "the world is big. The world changes; there is always something to learn." The Hundts' two daughters also work for the company. Andrea Hundt-Lorentz is the brand and marketing manager and Michelle Hundt-Tupman is director of tour operations.

Tour destinations include baseball games, NASCAR races, New York City, California, other cities in the U.S. and all over Canada.

Combination coach tours and cruises are also popular. There is a department focused solely on trips to casinos.

"We are a tour company, first and foremost," Hundt says.

The company, named the Motorcoach Operator of the Year by Metro magazine in February, has been running tours to Newfoundland for 30 years. This past spring, the Hundts travelled to Newfoundland on their own to do some research and see what's changed since they were last there. The veteran holiday planners added new sites, stops and routes to the popular tour package.

"The notes that I have just from this holiday in Newfoundland are staggering," Lorna says. "Thank God we are married to each other because nobody else would accept that. We've tried travelling with other couples and they don't get it. They say: 'Will you just sit down and have a drink?' "

The Hundts met up with one of their coaches on the west coast of Newfoundland and briefed the driver on changes to the tour that included great views of icebergs. The planning is so detailed that stops are planned according to the position of the sun so photographers have the best possible light.

"For instance, in Arizona and Utah with the parks, if the sun is not on the rock it looks black," Lorna says. "With the sun, it looks red, a huge difference for satisfaction."

Until 1990, Great Canadian hired coaches from other companies. It worked with a dozen companies because of Ontario regulations that carve the province into zones. Only a company with coaches based in a zone is allowed to pick up and drop off passengers inside that zone. Fed up with the restrictions and varying levels of service, the Hundts started buying their own fleet of coaches in 1990.

Great Canadian now operates 53 coaches. They are stationed in London, Kitchener, Toronto, Oshawa and Niagara Region. The company's market stretches from Windsor to Peterborough, and from Niagara/Fort Erie to Owen Sound.

The Hundts hired local artist Dave Sopha to paint murals on the sides of the coaches with different Canadian themes — including musicians, actors/comedians, great Canadian inventions, fallen soldiers from the war in Afghanistan and Canada's 20 largest ethnic groups.

Now, images are created by one of their daughters on vinyl sheets that are applied to the coaches. Andrea designed the company logo — Corporal Mackenzie, a beaver in a Mountie uniform.

About six months before the stock market crash in 2008, the Hundts bought the former Beckermann Kitchens plant on Manitou Drive. The 81,000-square-foot building, situated on five hectares of land, includes a huge garage, showers, storage space and dorm rooms for drivers. There is a lounge for clients waiting to start a tour.

The Hundts planned to rent out half the space to help pay for the mortgage. But then the economy tanked so Hundt's entrepreneurial instincts kicked in. He decided to turn the garage into a source of income. It includes a 29-metre-long mechanic's pit that allows mechanics to work on two tractor trailers or two coaches at the same time.

Today, the garage houses a tire franchise, body shop and repair shop for cars, tractor trailers and buses. There is a fuelling station on site. The Hundts have a deal with GO Transit and a private ambulance company for parking vehicles, refuelling, cleaning and repairs. Clients

can leave their cars there while taking a coach holiday and have their vehicles repaired or maintained while they are on vacation.

The company does detailing for Freightliner, Peterbilt and Kenworth. Rigs are parked and fuelled there. Some school buses are stored on site too.

"We took our business and diversified it, so we are no longer dependent on the tour business and the coach business," Hundt says. A large section of the roof of Great Canadian's facility is covered with solar panels. A wall of forced air, called an air curtain, keeps the cool air inside and the hot air outside while the large door to the truck garage is open. Cisterns capture rainwater that is used to wash motor coaches. Old tires are mulched and laid down in flower beds in front of the building so that weeds can be controlled without using herbicides. Earlier this year, the company won the Greater Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber of Commerce's environment and sustainability award for its environmental initiatives.

The business certainly has come a long way in 30 years.

"It's pretty exciting to see this growth because it is four or five other businesses we are developing here, from the auto centre, the detailing, body and paint shops, the fuel and parking," Hundt says.

"But it's all working nicely together."