

Post-Tribune

Guests Give B&B High Marks For Comfort, Setting

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The owners of Songbird Prairie Bed and Breakfast in Porter County, west of Valparaiso, have some very satisfied guests to thank for being named one of the 10 best B&Bs in the Midwest for 2008 and 2009.

Barbara Rivera, who owns and operates the inn with her husband, Efrain, is grateful for the award because of the way it's chosen.

"What's so cool about this one," she said, "is that comments from the people who have stayed here are how the award is decided."

Nearly 50,000 independent reviews, submitted to BedandBreakfast.com, were used in the judging. The Web site is the leading online B&B directory and reservation network worldwide.

The coveted award joins numerous other recognitions Songbird Prairie has received since its opening eight years ago. Most recently, it was named Porter County's 2008 Hotel of the Year, and it was picked as one of the Top 10 Romantic Inns in 2008 by American Historic Inns Inc.

One guest wrote, "It was an all-around perfect stay at the Songbird Prairie B&B. Our room was most comfortable, breakfast was superb and the unexpected snow added to this picture perfect setting with the beautiful array of birds, especially the cardinals."

If you stay at Songbird Prairie, expect to be surrounded by birds. Overnight guests can choose to stay in the Warbler or Purple Finch suites, with queen-sized beds, or the Cardinal, Bluebird or Robin Suites, with king-sized beds. Work has been started on another room, the Goldfinch Suite, which will be ready next year.

Each room features Ethan Allen furniture, European linens, whirlpools with Dead Sea bath salts, robes and slippers, and a working fireplace. When guests are out for dinner, Rivera places double chocolate truffles at each bedside.

The sun room seats 16 and is the perfect place to watch the birds that flock to eat at one of the many bird feeders just outside the windows. Rivera serves a variety of suet and black oil sunflower seeds to attract as many species as possible. A hidden microphone allows those sitting inside to hear the bird noises as well.

Over six acres of walking trails lure guests outside. A few weeks ago, a couple discovered pileated woodpeckers, as well as several other bird species. In warmer weather, guests can also enjoy a fire in the outdoor firepit.

The Riveras, who live on the lower level of the inn, bought the land in 1998 after searching two years for the perfect location.

"We fell in love with the property," Rivera said, because it was near a university town, had woods and hills, was off the beaten path but still close to U.S. 30.

"And the birds, of course," she added.

The property was home to a dairy farm from the early 1900s through the mid-1960s. It also has an apple orchard and 450 acres of land behind it.

Customers have come from as far away as California, New York, Florida, Australia, England and Germany to stay at Songbird Prairie.

"We see many local people too," Rivera said, "because it feels like they're away, even if they're still close to home."

Rivera is up most days at 6 a.m., making scones and getting the entree ready for the three-course hot breakfast.

After setting the table and serving the food, she starts cleaning up the kitchen. After guests check out, she spends at least an hour cleaning each room. By 4 p.m., she has to be ready to greet any new guests registered for that night.

For dinner, Songbird Prairie partners with six Valparaiso restaurants: Bistro 57, Bon Femme, Mezza, Don Quixote, Dish and Strongbow Inn.

Guests can dine out or choose to have a catered dinner in their room or in the dining room, which seats eight.

As part of providing a "total relaxation experience," Rivera frequently schedules in-room massages through Gail Grieger of Touch for Life in Valparaiso.

The Riveras each bring unique skills to their inn. Efrain has been in the restaurant business for 38 years and currently is general manager of Panera Bread in Schererville. Barbara's talents include gardening, design and catering.

"We have wedded our talents," she said, "to make the people who stay with us feel as if they are invited guests rather than paying customers."

If you go

--Check www.SongbirdPrairie.com for specials throughout the year.

-- Rooms range from \$169 to \$249 per night, depending on amenities.

-- The inn is open to the public for meals, with a minimum of four or more guests. Advance reservations are needed. Call 759-4274 for availability.