

Pincher Creek Hutterite Colony

ROUTE: From the south end of Calgary, drive south on Highway 2 for 145 kilometres and then go west on Highway 3 to access Pincher Creek. From its intersection with Highway 6, at the north edge of Pincher Creek, take Secondary 507 west for 1 kilometre and then go right (sign) on a gravel road for 2 kilometres to the Pincher Creek Hutterite Colony.

DRIVING DISTANCE: About 200 kilometres one way.

NOTE: Group tours of the Pincher Creek Hutterite Colony are available, for a reasonable fee, every day except Sunday and usually include lunch or dinner with colony members. Tours must be booked in advance. Phone Rosa at (403) 627-4021 or 627-4254.



Hutterite tour guide Rosa Gross

There are some 170 Hutterite colonies in Alberta, covering a large and growing chunk of rural landscape. Yet most Albertans have only a fleeting acquaintance with the distinctively-clad Hutterites. This tour offers a rare, intimate glimpse into the everyday lives of this fascinating and often misunderstood religious group.

It's largely because of such misperceptions that the Pincher Creek Colony decided to unveil the usually private world of these communal colonies. "We're normal people," says guide Rosa Gross. "We're not that different from everyone else."

Well, they are a lot tidier, for one thing. The tour of kitchen, dining areas and even livestock processing areas reveals a world of immaculately-scrubbed surfaces. There's also a clear segregation of well-defined duties along gender lines – with men making the

major decisions, women undertaking domestic duties and the two sitting separately in the dining room and in church. The prescribed dress code has men (bearded if married) in dark clothing and the women in ankle-length skirts and polka-dotted scarves.

Despite the conservative dress and old-world customs, colony members warmly greet visitors, which include several hundred German tourists a year (among themselves, Hutterites speak an Austrian dialect of German, though standard German is used in church services). Their polite children exude innocence and joy, whether at play or in their one-room school, which provides education, following the Alberta curriculum, to the age of 15. Though some pursue further education, most are subsequently assigned specific jobs in the colony.

The Pincher Creek Colony, established in 1926, also embraces modern farming technologies. There are three new combines in the yard and computers monitor various livestock operations – including a dairy and barns for chickens, hogs and domestic geese, ducks and turkeys. It all adds up to a large, prosperous farming operation that embraces 8,000 acres of owned and a few thousand acres of rented land, most of it under cultivation to produce grain and hay crops and vegetables. What's not used to feed the colony of 112 people is sold to markets in Alberta and B.C. One section of colony farmland is also rented to a company that operates 60 large windmills.

An Anabaptist (meaning adult baptism) Christian sect formed in Austria in the 1500s and named after leader Jacob Hutter, the Hutterites moved several times around eastern Europe to escape religious persecution, finally leaving the Ukraine in the 1870s to settle in South Dakota. Their pacifist ways and German tongue, however, were very unpopular during World War I and they soon moved to the Canadian prairies, though colonies have since been established in mid-west and western U.S. states.

As in all Hutterite colonies, the Pincher Creek members live communally (though in separate, familial houses) and own all property and goods collectively. Typically, when a colony reaches a population of up to 150, about half its members are chosen to break off and form a new colony. In 1956 and again in 1970, Pincher Creek formed offshoot colonies in the state of Washington but is likely at least a decade away from another division.