

Getting away to Gananoque

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CREDIT: Photos by Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen
(130-year-old Victoria Rose Inn.)



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The family lives in a modern home, just behind the inn, but sometimes Gabriel, 7, and Felix, 5, get a chance to play on the baby grand in the inn's living room or sample the jujubes set out for guests.



It's safe to say that when Susanne Richter dreamt about ditching her high-pressure Glebe lifestyle for a quieter time running a country inn, she wasn't picturing buckets of water and huge pieces of drywall crashing down around her head.

CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen
The gardens behind the inn are planted and maintained by their grandmother.

She and her husband, Bernie Latremouille, had barely begun their new life when the ceiling came crashing down, literally.

"We had been running the inn for just two or three weeks and we were so exhausted that we had just dropped into bed. I remember wanting to have a shower before bed, but being too tired to even stand up.

"Then, about 11 p.m., we got a call from a guest who had come back late from dinner and found water dripping in the front hall. I pulled the sheets up over my exhausted head in the hopes that Bernie would just deal with it. He ripped off the sheet and informed me that we were in this together."

The parents of two young boys, the couple who had bought the Victoria Rose Inn in 2005 with hopes of giving the family a more rewarding lifestyle, stood in the front hall of their million-dollar investment and watched helplessly as water poured from the ceiling.

"Bernie suggested that I go find towels," says Susanne. "I responded that I wasn't going to use hotel towels to clean the floor, only to be told that we should have the towels ready for the guests in case the Jacuzzi -- which was by now vibrating loudly from above -- come crashing through the floor."

It didn't -- most of the guests never even knew there was a problem -- but the couple spent most the night mopping up water and poking down drywall.

"Bernie found a broom and poked great big holes in the ceiling to relieve the pressure and prevent the whole front hall ceiling from coming down. Chunk after chunk of soggy drywall fell to the floor, while some guest or guests were splashing around above us in happy ignorance."

It's also safe to say that things are going more smoothly now.

As they passed their second anniversary on July 1, "I couldn't help but think that we'd come an awfully long way," says Susanne.

Not only has all the plumbing been replaced, and holes in the roof and in some of the walls repaired, the ambiance is now polished and chic, where once it was fusty and filled with dried flowers.

Susanne describes selling their Glebe home and buying the inn in Gananoque as "a lifestyle choice" -- one she's still weighing.

"So many people say this is something they've always thought about doing. They say how lucky we are, but luck actually has nothing to do with it. It's not like we were fabulously wealthy. We just decided to take the equity out of our house in the Glebe and dump it into here. It's something anyone could decide to do.

"It was a matter of saying 'OK, we're here in the Glebe and we're doing the \$100,000 kitchen renovation just because everyone's doing it. But do we want to keep living this life, do I want to go back to that job, just to sustain this lifestyle?'"

Susanne and Bernie decided to step off the fast track and try an alternate route. They are remarkably frank up about the ups -- and the downs -- of their decision.

"It's not like we were unhappy with our urban existence," says Susanne. "And it's not like this is perfect. There are still frantic moments. But I think, overall, we have a greater wholeness to our lives. The sense of anxiety, of rushing here and there, has been brought down."

When the couple were first contemplating a change and saw the inn listed on the Internet, Susanne says she was not interested.

"It was pink and it had a restaurant. I never wanted to run a restaurant. I really wanted to move to Key West, but that wasn't practical."

But they visited the 130-year-old home at Easter 2005, put in offer, sold their house in the Glebe in May, and by July 1, 2005 found themselves running an eight-room inn with restaurant.

"It was pretty fast," says Susanne. "We just walked in and were running it the next day." The couple's sons, Felix and Gabriel, were just three and five years old at the time.

"When we think of that summer, it was a summer of exhaustion. The inn was full when we took it over. We had no idea what we were doing, but we kept it going that first summer with the existing staff."

The inn was "decorated in pink and blue, had dried flowers everywhere and it smelled gross," says Susanne.

On Oct. 30, 2005, the last guest checked out. On Nov. 1, they started ripping the place apart.

Five months, \$200,000 in materials and 20 pounds later for Bernie, who did almost all the renovation work himself, the inn was ready to reopen.

The pinks and blues are gone -- replaced by historically correct taupes that Susanne, who had worked for the Canadian Conservation Institute and Canadian Museums Association, discovered by taking a razor blade to layers of paint behind a fireplace.

The restaurant is gone and four lovely new rooms have been added. All 12 are now tasteful and luxurious, several with working fireplaces and Jacuzzis (all of them water tight).

Susanne, who also once worked for Four Seasons hotels in Montreal and St. Martin, has also added some inspired hotelier touches: an urn of Burberry umbrellas near the front door, fresh flower arrangements throughout, a basket of throw blankets near the leather sofa.

A cupboard off a sitting area has a bar sink, premium coffees and teas and for guests, but also big jars of red licorice and jujubes. She's made her own mix of music, with artists such as Feist, Lynn Miles and Sarah Harmer.

"I want it to be stately, but not stuffy," says Susanne.

With the inn now purring along smoothly, her latest project is to create a "history wall" with photos and museum-quality signage to tell the story of each of the former owners of the property and their roles in Gananoque. (Which kind of makes you think that maybe you can take the Type-A woman out of Ottawa, but ...)

It took Susanne and Bernie two years to work out the perfect breakfast. At first, Bernie was in the basement cooking up eggs and improvising on the run when he had no idea what "coddled" or "poached over easy" meant. Now they serve a delicious set breakfast. They've finally found a way to get their croissants to rise perfectly even in humid weather (a proofing oven was required) and they've jazzed up their generous bowls of fresh fruit with bits of orange zest.

For dinner, though, they have never had any doubt about where to send guests. Just down the road is Casa Bella, one of the best restaurants in Canada. The husband-and-wife team who run it, and live above it with their three children, have become their new best friends.

"That first winter, we worked seven days a week renovating the inn," recalls Susanne. "One Sunday, Stev (George) and Deanna (Harrington) arrived at our door with their kids and a meal they'd made for

us. I started sputtering about how we had work to do ... that we really couldn't take a break ... and they said 'nonsense, it's Sunday, sit down, try this.'

It's been a delicious relationship between families -- and inn and restaurant -- ever since.

Stev and Deanna trained at the Stratford Chefs school and both are alumnae of Chez Piggy in Kingston and Sooke Harbour House on Vancouver Island. Their meals are labours of love and local ingredients, with such dishes as asparagus puree topped with homemade lemon-infused creme fraiche, pan-seared Quebec foie gras (Stev also worked at Montreal's Toque) and "the whole hog" main course featuring local heritage Large Black pigs.

But like Susanne and Bernie, they are philosophical about their hands-on, small-town lifestyle. Yes, it's more laid-back in some senses, but it is by no means easy. Now that the renovations are complete, Bernie has returned to his day job working with industrial fire alarms, so he's often on the road while Susanne finds herself alone running the inn and chauffeuring their sons to school and activities in Kingston. And because not even a five-star restaurant can sustain a family in a tourist town like Gananoque that shuts down for the winter, Deanna is running a diner, Bella's Bistro, down the highway on the other side of Kingston -- in addition to being mother of Bella, Olivia and Harry.

"It's certainly not for everyone," says Deanna. "It's 24 hours a day. And sometimes the reality is that you're wrestling a 200-pound pig up the front steps and into the house."

But both young couples are unquestionably passionate about the Thousand Islands area, one that seems poised to become the next hot tourist destination now that Toronto has discovered Prince Edward County.

Susanne grew up on the islands, living in Kingston but spending her summers on the St. Lawrence River with her grandmother and grandfather, who built sailboats.

"People take a boat tour and they say they've been to Thousand Islands, but they haven't actually been to the islands."

Susanne encourages her guests to actually visit some of the 21 islands that make up St. Lawrence Islands National Park, even arranging transportation so they camp one night on an island, then stay in the inn the next.

She's also passionate about dozens of little-known treasures tucked in among the islands. She'd love to tell you about a fabulous bathing suit shop tucked in behind a marina and where to get your nails done for next to nothing. Then there's the beautiful Half-Moon Bay where, for the last 120 years, boats have rafted together on Sundays to hear a non-denominational service conducted from a pulpit on shore. She can also point you to a half dozen excellent waterside eateries, and send you on a tour of some eye-boggling historic island mansions.

"People should see all this before it changes," she says. "It's still real. You go to the little local ice cream place -- it hasn't been Ben and Jerry's. I'd like our guests to go on a boat tour, and see these gorgeous old houses with so much history, and then they come back and stay in one and get a chance to feel what it's like."

Laura Robin is the Citizen's Travel editor.

IF YOU GO:

Where: 279 King St. West, Gananoque

Cost: Rooms from \$145 to \$255 per night, which includes breakfast

Contacts: www.victoriaroseinn.com or 1-613-382-3368 or 1-888-246-289

