



THE
25

BOUTIQUE
B & B

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TOP OF THEIR GAME

Earlier this year we reported Devon luxury B&B "The 25" had been voted into the worlds top 10.

Since then, the property has been named "Unique B&B of the Year" at the AA B&B awards.

We catch up with co-owner Andy Banner-Price for the story behind their success.

The 25 Boutique in Torquay was opened just three years ago by owners, Andy and Julian Banner-Price, yet has already shot into the limelight, formally recognised as the best in the UK and one of the best in the world.

The owners have physically been at the property almost four years because they bought a running guest house and then, during the off-season, turned it into a boutique B&B called The 25.

For seven years before that, they owned a hotel in North Wales - Plas Dinas, just outside Caernarfon - where they did the same thing, turning an existing business around and transforming it into a successful hospitality business.

The Welsh property was five-star gold, but in contrast to the six-bedroom operation in Torquay, it was a large country house set in 15 acres with a restaurant. The venue also ran functions such as weddings.

The 25 is purely bed and breakfast. "Part of our reason for moving to a less demanding environment was so that we had a greater quality of life," says Andy.

He admits running a business without additional events operations comes at the expense of a smaller turnover.

"We are never going to get rich on just six bedrooms, but it is now more about quality of life," he says. Speaking on a glorious sunny day he says: "When guests are checked in and settled on a gorgeous day like today we have the freedom to go down to the seafront and enjoy a beer or a gin and tonic in the sun, or take our dog for a nice walk.

"There is no point in working yourself to death and never having time to spend and enjoy the money you earn. You may get to retirement age and find you no longer have your health. Running a B&B is often called a lifestyle business, so we are trying to enjoy the lifestyle. You never know what's around the corner, so it is important to make the most of life," he says.

A perfect solution, and at least they can say they have under their belt the experience of

running events and wedding receptions.

Asked if it has always been their ambition to get into the top league, Andy says: "We haven't necessarily been aspiring to win awards, but when we left our last property, which won a gold award and won ninth-best B&B in the UK and seventeenth best in the world in the Traveller's Choice Awards on TripAdvisor, we knew we wanted the next one to be top of its game too. You can't apply for the AA awards and are put forward by the inspectors," he explains. "Because of the product we have produced, various people suggested we put ourselves forward for the regional awards, and when we did we were lucky winners."

TRAINING COMPANY

He says it was always a long-term ambition of his to set up a training company that would train prospective B&B owners and run some of those courses over the winter. He says: "I've now set that up, and having the awards adds weight to the fact that if anyone is attending a training course they may as well get that training from someone who knows what you are talking about, and the awards underpin that proven experience.

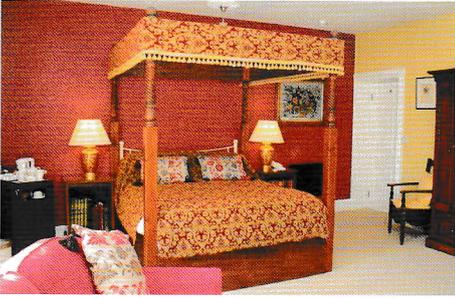
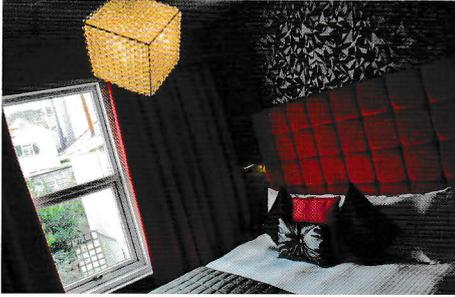
"We've set up the website and we are ready to go on those, with the first training course this November when we are closed to guests for the winter," he adds.

In keeping with their target, narrowing their focus onto bed and breakfast and away from other time-consuming business elements, the owners have chosen not to operate a bar, although they do have an honesty bar enabling their guests to indulge in alcohol without troubling the owners. Being an adults-only property, they have no issues with under-age drinkers.

The honesty bar features a small selection of beers, wines, premixed cans and soft drinks that people can help themselves to.

Indicative of how honest the visitor to a luxury B&B is, he says: "In 10 years we have only ever had one issue. At our last business although we would have a proper bar at weddings and other events, in the B&B itself on a day-to-day basis we also had an honesty bar. On one occasion we had some university students who hired the whole place to do some presentations to their lecturer and one of the students on his way out thought it was a good idea to take all our gin with him."





He says he believes that if people are paying for rooms at this kind of price point they are unlikely to be the type of person looking to steal a bottle of beer. "It's the same as with things like your hospitality tray and complimentary toiletries," he says. "Ironically the less charge, the

more likely it is that a guest will take with them everything that is classed as complementary."

The issue of gaining a license to serve alcohol on the premises was not an issue for them, says Andy. "I first got my license 10 years ago. It was a one-day course with a multiple-choice questionnaire at the end. There is a bit of going back and forth when you enter a new property but once that is done and it is in place then you just renew once a year when the council bill you."

They reject a bar in their abode for much the same reason they eschew event management. "I know other B&B owners who only have small places and yet have a bar. The owners are almost never seen together because one of them has to always be around all evening just in case someone happens to want a drink. It seems absolute madness to me."

He says: "We enjoy interacting with our guests, but our guests are very self-sufficient because they have everything they could possibly need. Every room has an iron and ironing board for example, so they don't need to go and find us if they need to iron a shirt. If they want a drink



they have drinks available. If they have forgotten their toothbrush it doesn't matter because there is a spare one in the room. We've tried to cover off absolutely every reason why they would need us, so in the event we do decide to go out one evening, it's unlikely we'll get a call."

TORQUAY'S ATTRACTION

So what drew them to Torquay from North Wales? "Initially we didn't even know where Torquay was. We'd heard of it, but I thought it was in Cornwall, much further south. As our parents live in the Midlands, we didn't want to be too many hours' drive from them," he says.

At one stage they were going to move



to Harrogate, but the sale fell through. "It was then on looking again that I saw on a map where Torquay really was, so we came down to look at the area and explore and we just fell in love with it.

"It ticked all the boxes. Because we were only offering bed and breakfast, it had to be in walking distance of lots of great places to eat, and Torquay is becoming a real foodie area with many superb restaurants. It is obviously a tourist area so there is plenty of business. At the time we moved here there was a lack of good quality five-star accommodation. There was some to be found but there was still plenty of room in the market for more. There was nobody here doing a boutique product, so even though there was a lot of competition we felt there was a gap in the market."

When they first saw the property it just felt right, he says. At the time it featured 10 guest bedrooms, but the two of them could see how they could reallocate the space and create some suites and rooms with much larger bathrooms. "We ended up with six really nice rooms," he says.

They initially moved in during the middle of season, so they ran the rest of the season as it was before closing up that November and embarking on their initial renovations, replacing the plumbing systems, installing new electrics and creating the bedrooms. "The following year we closed for a further three months when we did all the public areas," he says.



LESSONS TO B&BS

Andy's job before he entered hospitality was running customer services for high-end car manufacturers. He says: "That experience has helped me treat every guest as an individual and try to see things from their point of view: to think what would I want or expect? There are times when things do go wrong, or you don't quite gel with a guest. We are quick to react and put things right and rather than treating everyone in a blanket way we try and treat everybody individually. Some people want lots of interaction and chats, while other people want to be left alone."

Not all guests will be on holidays and may be staying for another reason like a funeral, he says. "It's about recognizing all people are different and knowing how to adapt your service so everyone leaves having had the very best experience possible," he concludes.

