

FEATURE

HGTV designers renovate Cape Breton resort

Cathy Donaldson | FOR THE TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

CAPE BRETON, N.S. • When I heard that two of the world's most famous interior designers planned to remodel a hotel in Louisbourg, near my hometown of Sydney, N.S., my jaw dropped.

Why would Colin McAllister and Justin Ryan (a.k.a. Colin and Justin) choose this seaside community of about 1,000 people to make their first foray into the hotel business? And how would the celebrity reno impact the town, or the island of Cape Breton for that matter?

For those not immediately familiar with their names, you may recognize C+J from one of their shows on HGTV Canada: Colin and Justin's Home Heist, Cabin Pressure or Great Canadian Cottages. The couple is also known for their line of interior products sold at Winners and Marshalls, regular columns in a long list of publications, expert advice chats on Cityline, bestselling books like *Escapology: Modern Cabins, Cottages and Retreats* and interviewing gigs at red-carpet events.

After regular visits to Nova Scotia, the pair – originally from Scotland – pondered buying a hotel in the province. They eventually fell in love with and purchased Point of View Suites, not far from the entrance to the Fortress of Louisbourg. Previously owned and operated by Tom and Linda Kennedy,

Point of View featured a large building with 20+ bedrooms, a beach house, two restaurants, a private beach and other amenities on a five-acre, ocean-facing site.

Last October, McAllister and Ryan began renovations to transform the property into a luxury boutique destination. In early June, they held a grand opening to unveil their creation: North Star.

I was a bit of a stalker in monitoring their progress on the project. I kept an eye on their social media channels and even visited my parents in Sydney in March so we could drive by the hotel for an exterior glimpse of the makeover.

My keen interest lies in a strange protectiveness of the Louisbourg area. While sometimes mocked for being overly foggy and/or drizzly, it's a sacred place to me. As a child, I loved walks with my parents along scenic Gooseberry Cove or the spectacular Lighthouse Trail. I tagged along with dad to buy fresh-off-the-boat lobster from fishers on Havenside Road. I enjoyed school trips to the Fortress and played in the chilly, summer surf at nearby Kennington Cove. As an adult, any chance to watch waves crash against the rocky Louisbourg shoreline or soak up some coastal tranquility soothed my soul.

This spring, when I learned that North Star bookings could be made for dates starting in June, I immediately phoned the cheery Julie MacDonald—gatekeeper of reservations and long-time Point of View front-desk manager—and reserved a room for my mother and me. It would give me a first-hand

look at their redesign and potentially allay any fears that the project would lead to the picturesque village becoming a touristy nightmare.

(Of course, it didn't hurt that both mom and I are fans of Colin and Justin on TV and just plain nosy about how the place turned out.)

Mom and I arrived in Louisbourg on a cloudy Monday afternoon, our spirits brightened by a chat with the infamous Mrs. MacDonald in North Star's cute reception and gift shop area. Room key in hand, we headed to our oceanfront suite in a large building a short drive down the rock lane.

We opened Suite 4 to a peaceful symphony of neutral colours and textures that, thankfully, seemed to pay tribute to one my favourite parts of the world. A glance around the room felt like opening a window to nature: crisp, white bedspreads and quality linens evoking a sea of calm and rest; wicker headboards, baskets, lamp-bases and accessories heralding the many forests in the region; soft lights illuminating walls of a serene white which posed no competition to our majestic views of the Atlantic.

The layout of the open-concept, bedroom-kitchen-dining space adds interest to the airy setting. Two queen beds are arranged perpendicular to each other, flanked at their respective feet by a wooden bench inlaid with a geometric design. Flooring, rugs and other furnishings in off-white and light beige shades maintain the aura of relaxation, with black accents popping up on the requisite TV, a small-scale (and funky!) Galanz fridge, and the all-important kettle, which we quickly filled to rejuvenate with a tea fix.

That evening, we checked out The Bothy, North Star's dining room. We weren't sure what to expect as we knew the dapper designers had modernized the Point of View's dining facility, a large quonset hut made of corrugated metal, semicircular in design.

Mom and I were impressed with both our meal – a delicious seafood, mushroom pasta prepared in a light cream and Ouzo-lemon sauce prepared by Chef David Akers – and the venue itself. Instead of what we thought might be a cold vibe, the dining, entertainment and bar areas were surprisingly cozy, with wood heartily featured and vignettes of black, leather sofas and floor lamps lending a contemporary touch.

Perhaps the biggest stunner of the evening came in the form of our waiters, none other than Colin and Justin themselves. The twosome provided excellent service and had us in stitches throughout the night, making lighthearted jokes about this and that as they tended to our table and many others. It was nice to see that the upbeat characters we've come to know and love on screen were just as warm and authentic in person.

The next morning, mom and I sauntered back to the reception building and its breakfast room (also its lunch and brunch spot), a pretty setting with seafoam-coloured walls and driftwood accents. Again, the Scottish dynamos and superb, local staff displayed top-notch hospitality, kindly delivering a marvelous feast highlighted by oh-so-light-and-tasty fishcakes. Swoon.

As mom and I glugged down our second cups of tea, McAllister – sporting casual wear and trendy spectacles – settled into the chair next to me for the interview I'd requested, graciously staying almost an hour to chat about North Star and my main query: "Why Louisbourg?"

"We always had an inkling to have a hotel and Justin loved this property," McAllister explained. "We just love hotels and hotel design."

He went on to talk about the couple's life journey, from their meeting in the mid-1980s in Glasgow, Scotland. He reminisced about their first home together, a ground-floor apartment in rough shape but affordable. After spending virtually nil to renovate it through efforts like dumpster diving, they sold the unit, doubling their money. They later revamped another apartment, with that project featured on Scottish TV and in the country's national newspaper, The Herald.

Even though neither had backgrounds in journalism (Ryan studied psychology; McAllister took local government), the publicity led to them writing regular articles for The Herald and its Saturday magazine.

Before long, they were interviewing style-setters 'at home'.

"Print is super important to us because that's where we come from," said McAllister. "We were so lucky. We always went out only to write about lovely things. So many other people say negative stuff. We were like, "Let's just celebrate the great things in the world, the great people doing great things."

Stints in television soon followed, first on the BBC home staging show, Trading Up, and then on House Call, Real Rooms and The Million Pound Property Experiment. The latter prime-time show had five million viewers, sold to 62 countries, led to a book and resulted in the rising stars being poached by another channel to shoot How Not To Decorate. With several of the programs airing frequently on HGTV Canada, 'Colin and Justin' soon became household names on this side of the pond.

During a visit to Toronto for a home show appearance in 2006, the pair were stunned to discover their fame here.

"We thought no one would have a clue who we were," said McAllister with a laugh. "We're driving along the highway and see a huge billboard for How Not To Decorate. Then we went down to the subway, and I'd be on (a poster on) one door and Justin would be on the other. We were like, "This is weird."

Thousands of people would come to our appearances wearing kilts and football shirts and bringing us presents and nonsense. We were like, "Canada is fabulous!"

Enamoured with this country, the couple purchased a condo in Toronto and began splitting their time between that locale and a home in Scotland. Over the years, they added a cottage in Haliburton, Ont., to their list of properties, more TV to their résumés, Escapology and other print work, and North Star.

(They are also currently working with a U.K. company on a TV show about the Cape Breton project.)

While the couple thrive on juggling tasks, trying to overhaul and reopen a hotel during a pandemic has not been easy, said McAllister. The weather has been equally challenging.

“The hotel would normally be boarded up for the winter and protected from the elements,” he said. “Because we were in working, it wasn’t. When the first big storm came before Christmas, all the sliding doors failed. Water poured in everywhere to all the rooms below, rooms that had already been painted.”

He cringed describing an all-nighter spent using new towels to soak up stormwater, wringing them out over buckets before tossing them in the dryer, employing more fresh towels and setting an alarm for every two hours to repeat the process.

“Then we had to order new doors and have the drywall redone,” said McAllister. “There was a period where we had tarps [hanging on door openings]. We were just fighting water the whole time.”

While supply chain issues also posed a variety of problems and trips to IKEA in Halifax became routine, they were able to source some items - such as tables and picnic benches - from local vendors and hire businesses in the area to refinish old furniture. They’ve also found a Sydney firm to help with their website, which, as of press time, was still under construction.

With the multitude of irons in the fire, do the pair ever sleep?

“We like work and it’s because it’s a vocation,” said McAllister. “Because we both love design, we’re super enthusiastic about it. It’s not all sweetness and light. There’s a lot of difficulty in every job. But people here have been so helpful. It was a load of great people involved to make it happen.”

The accidental death of a close friend last year at the age of 48 has also motivated the couple to push through the tough times, he said.

“I really feel like we’re doing this for him as well,” said McAllister. “The simple fact is you just don’t know. You’ve got to live each day like it’s your last.”

Will there be other hotels after North Star?

“We need to get this right first,” said McAllister. “This is a long-term plan, our retirement. We’ll probably give ourselves a winter off and then come back. We need to make money. We need to pay for our renovations first and foremost. There are no guarantees, so we need to make that happen. Then, further down the line, we’d like to add some other buildings.”

With their many projects over the years, do they feel successful?

“The most successful thing is my partnership with Justin,” said McAllister. “He would say the same. It’s because we started a life journey a long time ago. We’re still loving it. We’re not the Waltons, by any stretch of the imagination, but we laugh a lot. You should never lose that ability to be goofy and just get out there and have some fun.”

Later, before a quick photo, I asked Ryan for his thoughts on the Cape Breton experience so far.

“Ultimately there’s a really special connection here,” he said. “It feels so Scottish, familiar. When Colin and I got here, we knew we’d made the right decision. We’ve been homesick for such a long time due to the pandemic and while we do have an ambition to eventually be able to travel more regularly, being here is satisfying and quelling the homesickness to a certain extent.

“It’s been something we’ve always wanted to do, to run a hotel, in some shape or form. When this one became available in New Scotland - Nova Scotia- it was too good to resist.”

North Star bookings can be made by calling Julie MacDonald at (902) 733- 2080.

***Cathy Donaldson** is a Moncton-based travel writer. She was a guest of Destination Cape Breton, which neither reviewed nor approved this article.*



This image of North Star - taken across the harbour on Louisbourg's Havenside Road - shows some of the amenities of the five-acre site: a large main structure that houses its suites; a beach house (lower right); and a private beach.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



Celebrity designers and new hoteliers Colin McAllister, left, and Justin Ryan pose for a photo in North Star's dining and entertainment area, The Bothy.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



North Star's Suite 4 has a beachy décor featuring a mix of neutral colours and textures.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



Suite 4 was just a short walk to the water's edge and to the gigantic 'Heart of the Atlantic,' a sculpture created for North Star by Keith MacLean of Glace Bay.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



A dramatic ceiling, warm lighting and cozy furnishings welcome guests dining at The Bothy.
Photo: Submitted/Cathv Donaldson



While some may associate Quonset huts with industrial uses, this structure is home to North Star's unique dining and entertainment area, The Bothy.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



This delicious seafood mushroom pappardelle, prepared by Chef David Akers, was one of the many choices on The Bothy's varied menu.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



Colin McAllister hams it up as he delivers glasses of red and white to the table. Both McAllister and Justin Ryan rolled up their sleeves and served guests at dinner as well as at breakfast the next morning.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson



A cloudy morning didn't dampen the spirits after their stay in one of the North Star suites, located in the property's main building, shown here.
Photo: Submitted/Cathy Donaldson

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