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THE 25 PROFILE

For our first edition of the new year hosts **Andy and Julian Banner-Price** of the incredibly stylish **'The 25'**, a boutique B&B in Torquay, talk to us about standing out from the crowd, guest expectations and hosting a private lunch for HRH The Duke of Cambridge!



Tell us about how you got into the business of becoming B&B hosts and what made you choose Torquay as a destination?

Our first business was a country house in North Wales which we refurbished, taking it from three stars to five. We decided very much on a whim one night to buy a hotel, having no previous experience at all. It was a very steep learning curve, particularly as we had a restaurant too, so I suddenly became a professional chef overnight.

We sold this successful business seven and a half years later, with a view to downsizing. We wanted to remove the need for staff, and only do bed and breakfast, so there had to be lots of good restaurants within walking distance.

The search was on, though it was more about the right building - we didn't mind where it was as long as it was in a tourist location and had parking. Torquay was another random choice as we'd never been there before and didn't

even know it was in Devon!

We viewed three properties over two days, and what was then a ten-bedroom guest house ticked all the boxes. We had the ability to reduce the number of rooms and create five or six large bedrooms or suites with luxurious bathrooms.

Nine weeks to the day we moved in and were checking in our first guests. We ran with the season for pre-booked guests, then closed over winter for five months to completely refurbish and went back to the brick in most rooms,

adding a new plumbing system and new electrics too. We opened as The 25 Boutique B&B at the end of March 2015.

I love the quiriness of your interior design - what was your inspiration?

I do all the design myself, and we do things like painting, decorating and tiling ourselves too. As I wanted each room to be completely different, I was able to explore many different design ideas.

I usually need just one thing to set me down a route of design - it may be a nice wallpaper or a lamp for instance. For the Torre Suite, I saw some black and white striped wallpaper I liked and designed around that. I felt a plain black and white theme would be too masculine so I added a bright citrus yellow accent (which incidentally is a real trend now and available everywhere - when I did it I couldn't get yellow fabric for love nor money!). I was browsing online for something else one day and saw "Frank", our zebra head, and felt it would add the funky final look to the room. The Big Brother set this year appeared to have been modelled on my bedroom! If I ever see ideas or things I like in magazines or on the internet, I save them and may refer back to them years later when I'm looking for inspiration. We still have one room left to completely renovate which is having lime green as the main feature colour and I can't wait to get started on it.

How do you ensure you stand out from

the crowd amongst your competitors?

Torquay is a very crowded market place with over 150 B&Bs and 80 hotels. We have around thirty in our road alone!

We are not afraid of competition and get on very well with lots of other B&Bs locally and we've helped some with advice and guidance on their own business - so much so that we're planning to set up a consultancy and training business alongside the B&B.

Moving to the area, we knew we needed to be different to stand out and be noticed. By being 5-star certainly helped, as this cuts out 90% of the market. We then chose our unique boutique look so that we stand out within the 5-star market. No one else in Torquay, or Devon for that matter, has the style of rooms we do.

Is the use of social media an important advertising tool for you?

We are big users of social media and add posts to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram almost daily.

I'm not sure it gets us that much new business as such, but it does build relationships. It's scary how much complete strangers know about us when they arrive to check in, if they've been followers for a while.

It also helps keep us at the forefront of people's minds. If it's their anniversary next week and they're thinking of going away somewhere, it's useful for them to see a post on their feed later that day with what's

happening at The 25, or maybe a local event or restaurant to encourage them to revisit.

What tips could you give other B&B's to keep occupancy high during the winter months?

We close during part of the winter for some well earned time off, but also to do refurbishment. We still have a long list of jobs to complete this year, on top of refreshing all paintwork and so on.

Torquay is very seasonal and it's definitely much quieter in the winter. It's useful being viewed as a more special place to stay as events like birthdays and anniversaries fall in the winter months too.

We stopped doing winter pricing several years ago. If people want to come, a small discount isn't going to make any difference either way so you may as well get your full prices. Winter is the most expensive time to be open as you have all the heating and lights on.

We have become quite strict in summer too and the months when we know we will be busy we never discount (apart from direct bookings and repeat guests) and have a four-night minimum stay.

Since you have been in the hospitality industry do you feel that guests' expectations are getting higher?

Things have changed dramatically in the last ten years, partly because technology moves so fast, and partly due to cheaper home improvements.

As the saying goes, "Guests want better than they have at home when they go away". Years ago, this used to be easier as guests didn't have much at home - you'd be quite posh if you had a TV in the bedroom or an en-suite and your bed was probably a double.

Nowadays, you've probably got a large smart TV with Sky, an en-suite with power shower and a larger bed. This means we need to keep stepping up the product we offer and even in the last two years we've improved and continue to add to our product offering.

By having things like Netflix, Nespresso coffee makers, iPads, super king beds, mood lighting and bathroom TVs, it can still make the guests feel special. We also have



