

Notes from Interview with Glenn Gairdner

26 June 2020

Introduction:

I'm Fiona Rollings, the Association Secretary, and today I'm with our newest Board Member, Glenn Gairdner from Villa Walton, Matamata. Glenn brings over 30 years of hospitality experience with him to the Board – including hotel management, owner / operator of a successful café and extensive experience in people management.

Glenn - can you tell me a little bit about your personal background – who runs Villa Walton with you?

My background has really been in the hospitality industry for 30 plus years (which seems to be adding up pretty quickly). It is all very much service industry and hospitality although I've held a role as procure manager and negotiating supply contracts. Overall it's been about mixing with people.

We have some really cool local people that we contract to help us especially with our gardens as we've got 2 acres of pretty intensive garden,s but also to help us inside the house as well because we all know how much work it is when we've got rooms to flip and breakfast and dinners and everything else in our challenging day's operation.

When you first started with the Association you had a very cute little railway carriage bnb / room in Auckland and since then you've moved to Villa Walton in Matamata. How long have you owned B&Bs and why did you get into the B&B industry?

Mark and I are both in hospitality and so when we were in Auckland we had a farm in Hunua and we decided to run a bed and breakfast during the weekend because we both had full time jobs. But we also had this gorgeous little railway carriage that we converted and had it available every night and a person that flipped it during the week for us. Then we decided we would escape Auckland and we searched all over New Zealand. We went to Queenstown, Wanaka, Hastings, Napier - we'd looked everywhere and then Villa Walton came up. We saw it online, managed to get in the next day to have a look at it and brought it two days after that. I suppose the main reason why is because it is something that is quite unique. Something a bit different. We also wanted something that was close to Auckland. She's a beautiful property and that's why we got into B&Bing. And we just like mixing with people and having people in our home.

Why did you join the Association? You've stayed with us from your first B&B in Hunua and now with Villa Walton.

I'm a really strong believer in surrounding yourself with experts and people that know the industry, that can help and support you because running a bed and breakfast is very different from running a hotel. It is quite unique in that interaction we have with people in our homes. The other part, which is probably the biggest part of all, is advocacy. An individual property will have very little impact when going to a minister or a body, or someone's petitioning to do something. An individual property has very little strength and power but if you align yourselves with an industry body like the Association, which we align ourselves with other bodies and tourism industry associations, then we do have power and we can put our members views across. But for me personally it was to join an organisation that had really strong advocacy and support for the operators.

What is your house and garden style?

Old. It was built in 1904 and is one of the original villas in the area. We were extremely lucky that when we brought the villa the main structural work had been done like the roofing – all the fairly expensive stuff that no one really sees had been done. What we did was totally refurbish the whole property which gives us three fully ensuited rooms inside the homestead plus we have a self contained one bedroom cottage and we also have our own bedroom and own separate lounge. We're very lucky to have our own separate lounge to go and hideaway in. The property is something that is unique and something people couldn't get at home.

You've touched on a point there that I think is really important particularly for new people starting a business - I think it is the importance of having your own separate space and being able to escape.

To decompress. When we were in Auckland we used to hide in the bedroom. We put a comfy chair and a foot stool there so I could actually hide in there and read a book. Whilst we had two lounges we had a very open planned house. Our guests want to interact with their hosts but their host needs a bit of sanity sometimes and be able to sneak away. In the Villa there was an extremely large open dining, kitchen and family room and we just put a dividing wall between dining room and kitchen / family room. And that has been amazing.

What is your favourite / special thing to do for guests? You've owned a café before so I imagine your food is amazing.

Both Mark and I have extensive backgrounds in hospitality and we are both chefs and for us it is easier to do the dinners. Not everybody has the facilities and we don't have children - we just have fur baby dogs and cats birds and chickens and sheep and all that sort of stuff. Mark isn't always here at night, he works in Auckland so I'm here anyway. For us offering dinners is something important. A lot of our customers want it and a lot of our inbound operators like it. Whilst we're rural and only 5-10 minutes away from the centre of Matamata people love after driving for a number of hours, to be able to sit down – it doesn't have to be a big meal it could just be a simply platter, it could just be a cheese board. It really comes down to the individual property as to what they want to offer.

We also offer in the guest lounge, which I'm sure a number of people offer as well, sherry, port, amaretto and we just say help yourself to a glass of that for a nightcap. Really the cost is not huge and people love it. They say in the morning gosh I'm going to go home and buy a bottle of port - I forgot how nice it is. It's just that little extra that doesn't cost a lot but means a lot to the customers.

They are probably the two main things offering a nightcap and dinner.

You've just spoken about splitting off your rooms so you could have your own lounge. Is there anything else you would change about your property / garden if you could?

I think a lot of us would like our rooms to be bigger but that's not always possible. We have a very big barn and it has a fully enclosed concreted floor. We would look to develop that into more of a function space but that in itself opens up a whole can of worms. Do you want to do functions? How big? So what we are doing at the moment through covid, which we are all experiencing and having to relook at our businesses, we're looking at expanding our garden tour business. We do a lot of garden tours here because we have quite extensive gardens and it's something that is relatively easy to do that we can tap in through facebook marketing. There's lots of lots of associations, garden clubs and groups that we can contact so that is probably the initial thing we are working on at the moment.

The bigger picture would be to look to developing the function business if we choose to go down that road. We have to balance up the investment of converting that space between something that is useable and is going to offer that great experience. We're also conscious that we need to remind ourselves of what is our core business and our core business is accommodation. The more you focus on other stuff, which is really important during covid that we all do that and we all look at different revenue opportunities, we can't lose focus that accommodation is what we are all about

Particularly if its your main driver and that's what you've really set your heart on doing. Another thing is time - you end up spending a lot of time with your guests in the morning, if you have a function and guests at night and therefore you will have to manage that time and having some downtime for you.

It is important and as we grow our businesses and become more confident in what the future is then it is nice to be able to give yourself a bit of time off and actually block the house out for a moment. That's where we lucky we have the cottage. The other thing we'd do is look to do more out buildings so that we actually have a bit more privacy inside the house for ourselves. It's really important to give yourself that bit of downtime especially at the moment and the last thing we want to do is stress ourselves out so much that we lose focus of where we're actually going.

Thanks for your time today Glenn.

If anyone would like to contact Glenn they can email him on info@villawalton.co.nz – or check on the website for his contact details.

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