

BUSINESS

Ten Nanaimo business partners breathing new life into Island's most remote pub

Holberg's Scarlet Ibis Pub is edge of civilization for outdoor adventurers near North Coast Trail

CHRIS BUSH
NEWS BULLETIN

Buying a pub and restaurant in the midst of a pandemic might be considered a questionable business decision, but a partnership of 12 men, 10 of whom are from Nanaimo, have worked to breathe fresh life into the Scarlet Ibis Pub and Restaurant.

Not only was the business purchased at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's also located in Holberg, B.C., with a population of just 35, and is considered Vancouver Island's most remote pub and restaurant.

"There was eight of us from Nanaimo on a motorbike ride up there. We were on our way to Cape Scott, off-road and stuff, and we

just found it and we had no idea it was for sale," said Roy McNair, business partner.

The idea to actually buy the business was given a bit more serious thought after the group came back to Nanaimo.

"They're sitting around having a drink – guys that enjoy a cocktail here and there and have always probably wanted to own a bar because they don't realize that a bar is actually work – they sat around and said, 'Wouldn't it be cool if...'" and that started the conversation," said Al Friesen, who is one of the 12 partners. Friesen lives in Ontario and handles the marketing for the business.

They went back the following weekend to work out a deal with former owner Patricia Gwynne,



Tim Sangha, a member of the Nanaimo-based business partnership that has owned the Scarlet Ibis Pub and Restaurant since November 2020, presents a carving by Rick Rotar of the business logo to Patricia Gwynne who owned and operated the Island's most remote pub for more than 40 years. (Scarlet Ibis image)

who'd operated the establishment for 40 years and was ready for a rest.

The Scarlet Ibis, named for a brilliantly coloured red bird that inhabits tropical South America and part of the Caribbean, opened in Holberg in 1973. It's located at the head of Holberg inlet, about 49 kilometres of gravel road from Port Hardy and about 35km from

the northwest tip of the Island.

The partners and Gwynne agreed on a price and the ownership transfer happened in November 2020.

"God bless her. She kept this thing going for 40-some years and by herself after her husband passed, she kept it rocking," Friesen said. "The 12 of us, together, still find it a challenge to do all the things that need to be done, so

how one person could do it? Not possible."

The place required some fixing up. The kitchen wiring and plumbing needed replacement or repair. The level of the parking lot was raised and boulders placed to shore up the property against winter storm erosion, a backup power generator was installed and small "adventure huts" and showers were built for hikers and other tourists looking to spend a night not in the wilderness. The business now has a website too.

"Our partners not only have to have some cash, but they've got to have a will to want to do something like this and they also have to have a skill set that enables us to accomplish all the things that need to be done," Friesen said. "We married ourselves to each other and all of us have a special skill set. There's a guy who's a master electrician and a plumber who can do gas fittings and a guy who owns a woodlot, so he could provide a lot of the wood ... other guys knew how to run excavators."

Renovating the property was a huge investment in time, supplies and money, Friesen said, but the business enjoys regular patronage from loggers who work in the area and the adventure motorcyclists and hikers on pilgrimages to Cape Scott Provincial Park.

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Culprits steal firewood in Harewood, one wheelbarrow load after another

STAFF WRITER
NEWS BULLETIN

Nanaimo RCMP investigators, who have just a sliver of information to go on, hope tips from the public will set them hot on the trail of whoever wheeled away about \$300 worth of firewood from the driveway of a

home in Harewood.

According to an RCMP press release, the wood that went missing from the home, located in the 300 block of Seventh Street on May 25, was a mix of already split alder and cottonwood.

The owner told police he heard what sounded like wheelbarrows overnight and

realized, too late, that wheelbarrows were probably being used by the thief or thieves to wheel away his wood.

Anyone with information about the theft is asked to call the Nanaimo RCMP detachment non-emergency line at 250-754-2345 and quote file No. 2022-17531.

photos@nanaimobulletin.com

Island's most remote pub keeps quenching thirst

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“What would be the worst thing you could do during a worldwide pandemic? Buy a restaurant,” Friesen said. “Everybody else was suffering and having


a tough time, but we saw the long-term value in getting this place back to what its old glory had been and, so, that’s what we’ve done.” Staffing can be an issue, but Friesen

said the business has a full-time on-site manager and chef and the partners spend as much time as possible there, especially during the summer.

The Scarlet Ibis has a signature beer

too. Red Bird Logger – a name that reflects the regular clientele who work and live in the area – is brewed at Longwood Brewery in Nanaimo and is only available at the Holberg pub.

photos@nanaimobulletin.com



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