Bed & Breakfast Accommodations

OFTEN CONSIDERED A LEISURELY RETIREMENT OPTION, RUNNING A BED AND BREAKFAST INSTEAD DEMANDS TRUE GRITS—FULL-TIME COMMITMENT, ENDLESS PATIENCE, A STRONG BACK AND AN EARLY MORNING FETISH FOR BISCUIT BAKING.

A LABOR OF LOVE

By Ashley Gordon
Photographs by Vivica Bertinot

Mary and Tom Livaudais spent 18 months renovating La Maison du Teche.
Craig Kimball gets up well before dawn to prepare breakfast for his guests at Maison d'André Billeaud in Broussard. The rest of the morning is spent cleaning rooms and washing sheets. By noon he is shopping for ingredients and supplies for the next day's breakfast. He takes a short afternoon nap, and by 4 p.m., he is greeting new guests and preparing cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. He also runs Kimball Catering service, while his wife, Donna, works outside of the home. In the midst of the swirl of guests staying downstairs in the house, the couple lives upstairs with their two young children.

"Having a bed and breakfast is like having an infant," says Craig Kimball, who owns the bed and breakfast. "You have to raise it, never leave it, always attend to it and nurture it. It's a 24-hour-a-day job."

The life of bed and breakfast owners is often secretly coveted by guests who have been pampered for a weekend at one of those grand Victorian homes. But most of them don't immediately realize the hard work, complete dedication and constant supervision the B&B industry demands.

"It's not something that anyone who is afraid of hard work should get involved in," says Leslie Leopacher, owner of Bienvenue House in St. Martinville. "It's no longer this quaint cottage industry where you buy a Victorian and put a few quilts out."

For most bed and breakfast owners, starting a bed and breakfast business was a huge chance. Mary and Tom Livau-

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Stripping and repaint the exterior at La Maison du Teche is typical upkeep of bed and breakfasts.
dais bought a dilapidated old house on Main Street in New Iberia after Tom lost his job of 12 years. Mary, a computer programmer in New Orleans, committed to work while they restored La Maison du Teche, built in 1892. The walls were crumbling, the kitchen was settling unevenly, and there was not one complete bathroom in the house.

“We weren’t as intimidated as we should have been. We were so blinded by the potential of the house,” says Mary.

The house had been vacant for two years, but the couple found that the years of neglect actually preserved its natural appearance; they weren’t forced to undo years of bad paneling and ugly wallpaper. The next 18 months were spent rewiring, installing a sprinkler system, adding bathrooms to each bedroom, installing central air and heat, sanding, painting, cleaning, and scrubbing. Tom crawled under the back of the sloping house and raised it back up with house jacks. At night the couple and their three children polished the original brass light fixtures while they relaxed.

“If we had not been able to do a lot of it ourselves, we would have never been able to afford it,” says Tom. The couple felt like the house was in such bad condition, that anything they did would be an improvement. Now, five years later, cosmetic upkeep such as repainting the porch continues to keep them busy.

“Turning an old house into a bed and breakfast is a wonderful way to support and preserve the home,” says Kimball. “In fact, many of these homes become B&Bs after they have been restored because they can be a money pit.”

To avoid the pitfalls, Joann and Fred McElmore spent 15 years researching the bed and breakfast industry before actually buying a Victorian house and turning it into a business. While Fred was in the military, Joann traveled in Germany along the then-Czechoslovakian border and stayed in bed and breakfast establishments. She would wake up early in the morning and stroll the grounds watching the dairy cows, the fruit trees and the bee hives, and she fell in love. “I could do this,” she told herself. After moving 28 times in 37 years of marriage, settling down and inviting people into her home seemed like a luxury.

“I tell people, we’ve been doing bed and breakfasts for 37 years, we are just getting paid for it now,” says Joann.

After seriously considering five other homes in the Acadia area, Joann and Fred bought the old Erasie Landry home that had been moved from its original location on the corner of Erasie Landry and Cameron Street to its new location on Kidder Road behind Enola Prudhomme’s restaurant. They spent half a million dollars redoing all the floors, adding two bathrooms, a new roof and a deck. Six months later they opened for business; and they founded the Louisiana Bed and Breakfast Association within the first year. Now, after seven years of business, the research and the investments have paid off.

“Fred and I went through great expense with the house and the antiques, and we are never truly finished,” says Joann. “Those interested in the industry really need to do their homework. They need to stay in B&Bs and see what they want to implement. They need to remember that this is a business, and we are business people.”

Even the most business-minded find it difficult to survive in this growing industry. Becoming well-known on the national and international circuit of travelers takes years, and the profit during those first years is very low. Mary in the business today say that buying an already established bed and breakfast is the only way to go.

When Maugie and Pat Pastor bought T’ Frere’s Bed and Breakfast more than four years ago, the house had already been used as a B&B for eight years. At that time, the circa 1880 home on Verot School Road only had two rooms downstairs available for guests. The Pastors turned the two upstairs rooms into guest suites, and added onto the back of the house for themselves. Then they built two new guest quarters behind the residence and opened those in April 1997.

“I wouldn’t buy one that wasn’t already in existence. It takes at least three years to get established,” says Maugie. “We were blessed because we had the opportunity to make a good business better.”

Guests at bed and breakfasts enjoy antique beds and comfortable rooms like this one at Maison d’Andre Billeaud.
Maugie and Pat owned and operated Chez Pastor restaurant in Lafayette for many years, so the hospitality and service industry was already in their blood. Maugie insists that being available and accessible is the only way to maintain business. “Bed and breakfast owners must always be at home,” says Maugie. “That phone call is our only chance to sell ourselves.”

Once the guests are sold on the house’s character and the host’s charm, they often return repeatedly and spread the word. “It’s the things that

But business and publicity weren’t always this available. Three months after opening, the Voorhieses thought they had lost their bed. Coerte, a geologist by profession, was able to support his family through consulting work until the B&B became established. His house, circa 1820 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, attracts guests who desire an authentic Acadian experience. To that end, Bois des Chênes offers swamp tours, and hunting and fishing trips.

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swamp tours, and hunting and fishing trips.

“...a good bed and breakfast in a proper setting with the ambiance of the area will attract guests from all over the world,” says Coerte. “But I am dead set against businesses that call themselves a bed and breakfast but don’t meet the criteria of a B&B.”

This criteria includes a well-defined Lafayette ordinance that Coerte helped write 10 years ago which states that a bed and breakfast house must have been built before the turn of the century or be historically significant, and it must have off-street parking available for each of its guests. The Louisiana Travel Promotion Association also has a strict set of guidelines concerning fire safety standards, food preparation, bathroom interiors and common areas. It inspects its members every two years. Those owners who abide by the official criteria are embarrassed by the 1960s ranch-style houses with a few extra bedrooms that call themselves bed and breakfast establishments. Competition has remained friendly between the official bed and breakfasts, who often send each other business when their rooms are full.

In 1981, Louis and Jeanne Cor- nay’s entrance into the world of evening cocktails, overnight guests and big breakfasts contrasts with others in the B&B business.

The house had been restored for 17 years before their first guest spent the night. Every then, the staff of 12 allowed the Cornays to continue their other careers, and the couple wasn’t depending on the bed and breakfast income to pay bills.

The Cornays bought Chretien Point Plantation in Sunset 20 years ago as a house for their family of six. This Greek Revival-style home, built in 1831, had previously been used as a barn with animals living downstairs and cotton and hayseed stored upstairs. They renovated the house in six months, adding electricity, plumbing, central air and heat, a swimming pool and a tennis court.

After their last child left for college in the late 1980s, the Cornays began opening up their house for tours, dinner parties and wedding receptions. The next logical step was to turn this historical home into a bed and breakfast.

This stately manor, located on 20 acres near Sunset, is built entirely of brick with Tuscan columns.

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money doesn’t buy,” says Coerte Voorhies of Lafayette’s Bois des Chênes. “Word of mouth and publicity in the bed and breakfast business is 24 karat. Whereas advertising is pewter.”

Coerte and his wife Marjorie opened the first B&B in Lafayette 10 years ago and have since been on national and international television 17 times. The house has appeared in countless magazines and brochures, including a full-page article in Southern Living magazine last fall.
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Impressive oaks line the gravel drive. The original Italian and Belgian marble mantle in the parlor is complemented by the Cornays’ collection of fine antiques.

Chretien Point’s historical significance draws international guests, including a recent visit from Raymon Chretien, Canada’s ambassador to the United States. A Civil War battle was fought in the front yard, and the house was used as a hospital for the wounded. One of Jean Lafitte’s pirates was killed on the staircase after an unsuccessful attempt to rob the house. Later, the stairway was replicated in Tara on the set of Gone with the Wind.

“I went into the bed and breakfast business with my heels dragging,” says Louis Cornay. “But now I can say it’s the nicest thing we’ve ever done. Along with the weddings, dinner parties and tours, the bed and breakfast business makes complete use of the house.”

It is the all-consuming nature of the business—after all, the business is also usually the owner’s home—that can tarnish the romantic vision of bed and breakfasts so many would-be proprietors hold.

Owners not only have to be hospitable, they also have to be an accountant, a marketing expert, a chef and a tour guide. “A lot of people think that you open your house as a bed and breakfast, and people beat a path to your door,” says Leonpacher. “But that’s not the way it happens.”

While B&B owners are tied to their home, they say their travels are of a different type. They meet people from all over the world, some

Louis Cornay renovated Chretien Point Plantation as a home for his family before turning it into a bed and breakfast.

The staircase at Chretien Point was used as a model for Tara’s staircase in Gone with the Wind.

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“It is a fabulous way of life if you embrace it,” says Leonpacher. “It’s the love of people, the love of creating solutions for your house, and the love of catering. It’s putting your best foot forward.”

Leonpacher puts her best foot forward with clean, comfortable bedrooms and bathrooms and nine different breakfasts to serve. She has handled the financial strain by becoming creative, such as using old doors as a headboard in one room. She adds special touches such as fresh flowers and notes to her guests’ rooms, and she treats them as company in her home instead of tourists. She can also give a short history of the area or suggestions for where to have dinner.

of whom establish lasting relationships with them and continue to return. Guests travel to Acadiana bed and breakfasts from as far away as Australia and from as close as Lafayette. Some local couples hire a baby-sitter for the weekend, then drive around the corner to get away from it all. “We learn a lot about our state from our guests,” says Kimball. “And we get to see the world through our guests’ eyes.”

For those who enjoy the company of others and don’t mind hard work and keeping busy, the bed and breakfast business is ideal.

“You gotta love it, then everything else falls into place,” says Maugie Pastor.