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## MONEY

# Fort Myers' Hibiscus House B&B blooming again

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Published 12:00 a.m. ET Sep. 29, 2014 | Updated 11:41 a.m. ET Oct. 2, 2014

They've sunk more money into the place than they expected. Upgrades also took longer than initially planned.

Still, the hosts of Fort Myers' Hibiscus House voice no regrets about buying the historic home and longtime bed-and-breakfast inn two years ago, and plunging into the hospitality business.

"We've met some wonderful people, hundreds of couples," said David McCurrach, who retired from credit unions and banking.

"I wanted to bring in some income, but also provide people a place ... to recharge, to slow down a bit. I feel we've accomplished that," said Pam McCurrach, David's wife.

She worked 16 years as an accredited interior designer with Ethan Allen home furnishings, and put those skills to work at the inn.

The McCurrachs, who moved here from Tennessee in 2012, spent most of the first seven months overseeing major renovations and redecorating the inn's five bed-and-bath suites and the public spaces.

Guest rooms were phased-in to service, with the last one opening in February of this year.

The McCurrachs bought the home in 2012 for \$300,000, according to county property appraiser records. David McCurrach estimates they've spent between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in renovations and upgrades.

These included such amenities as the 120-vent BubbleMassage bathtub and three stained glass windows in the Bougainvillea Room, and flat-screen TVs as big as practicable in each of the guestrooms.

The couple enhanced features original to the home that was built in 1923, including restoring the wood floor in the Palm Room.

"We wanted to keep that old-home feel, but to update and freshen it," Pam McCurrach said.

The McCurrachs' enthusiasm is infectious. Still, Fort Myers and Naples aren't B&B hotbeds along the lines of the Keys and St. Augustine.

Bill LeRoy, co-proprietor of 14-year-old A-Bayview Bed and Breakfast on the island of Matlacha, thinks that's because winter tourist season "is very short and expenses are too high."

Also, a lot of visitors want beaches and stores, "the Fort Myers Beach-kind of place," LeRoy said, adding that for nature-lovers, he thinks Pine Island-Matlacha "is where you want to be."

### **Plenty of competition**

Despite their homey, friendly vibe, bed-and-breakfast inns across the nation are hardly on Easy Street.

Hosts can burn out over the workload, and yet suffer financially through times of low occupancy.

If they're not ultra-selective, listing their inns on TripAdvisor, commercial B&B directories and industry associations can get expensive.

Increased attention to airbnb and other websites allowing people to rent out rooms in their homes have blurred the distinctions between the two forms of lodgings, experts say.

Adding to consumer confusion, small hotels that serve breakfast as part of the room rate often list themselves as B&Bs on the Internet.

In some areas of the country, laws prohibiting short-term stays in residential buildings are slashing the number of bed-and-breakfasts.

"Airbnb has become such a major force for businesses and people who are looking for inexpensive places to stay, but I'm not sure how much business is taken away from B&Bs," said Heather Turner, a Connecticut-based hospitality consultant whose clients include B&Bs in several states.

The average daily rate for B&Bs nationally is estimated at \$150, while room rates as low as \$50 can be found through airbnb, Turner said.

Rates at the Hibiscus House during local tourism's shoulder season of September and October range from \$129 to \$149 a night, depending on the room.

Innkeepers do complain about an uneven playing field when some airbnb hosts fail to remit the appropriate taxes to their local and state jurisdictions, Turner noted.

Still, B&Bs find a loyal market in people who shun cookie-cutter quarters and who like the personal connections live-in hosts provide.

Fort Myers residents Jason and Julie Zehnder stayed at Hibiscus House for a wedding anniversary shortly after the McCurrachs opened for business.

Since then, one of Jason's brothers chose the inn for wedding accommodations. Jason and Julie plan to return this fall.

Jason said they've been to a few other B&Bs in Florida, adding Hibiscus House stands out for "the great food and the nice people."

Turner, the hospitality consultant, sees two trends in B&B sustainability efforts:

"They're trying to lower prices. Some call that the Groupon model.

"Or, they're keeping their rates, but adding extra value."

Extra value could mean a restaurant discount voucher, champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries on the first night or another guest-pleasing touch.

"Certainly, airbnb has muddied things a little bit," said Ruth Ann Hattori, president & CEO of Professional Association of Innkeepers International.

However, Hattori notices "legitimate B&Bs" advertising on airbnb, adding that she thinks it's made "the idea of a B&B more widely known, especially to younger people."

## **B&Bs at a glance**

From 2013 industry survey:

Performance (in medians)

- **Occupancy rate:** 43.7 percent
- **Average daily rate:** \$150
- **Revenue per available room:** \$58

## About the inns

- **Number of guest rooms:** Typically 4 to 11.
- **Location:** 29 percent rural; 23 percent urban; 5 percent suburban; 43 percent village.
- **Historical designation:** 36 percent have attained this from some organization.
- **Average size:** 5,700 square feet
- **Free WiFi:** At 93 percent of responding inns

## About the owners

- **Seventy-two percent** are couples; 18 percent are individual females; 5 percent are individual males; 5 percent are non-couple partnerships.
- **Seventy-nine percent** of owners live on the premises.

**SOURCE:** Professional Association of Innkeepers International

## Some background

Some Hibiscus House historical tidbits:

The house has gone by many names, including The LI-Inn Sleeps Inn, The Drum House Inn, The Wedding Place, and The Dowling Homestead.

It was built in 1923 by William H. Dowling, owner of the now-defunct Dowling-Camp Lumber Co. of Slater, nine miles north of Fort Myers.

Dowling's widow, Hallie, had the house moved to Fort Myers sometime in the 1940s by having it sawed through the middle and loaded onto two barges at the foot of Old Bridge Road in North Fort Myers.

The barges were heavily loaded and settled to the Caloosahatchee's bottom during a squall. They remained there for several days stuck on sandbars, waiting for a tide to free them.

At some point, the house arrived in Fort Myers. It was reassembled at its present location, 2135 McGregor Blvd., less than a half-mile north of the Edison & Ford Estates.

Source: [www.TheHibiscusHouse.net](http://www.TheHibiscusHouse.net)