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Life as an innkeeper

More Americans trading corporate jobs for hospitality business

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The Sea View Inn on Pawleys Island, South Carolina

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BOSTON, Massachusetts (Reuters) -- Trading a powerful corporate job for fixing toilets is not everyone's idea of personal improvement. But for Brian Henry it also meant swapping clogged highways for empty beaches and managing his own business.

Worn out after 12 years as an executive at Coca-Cola and Andersen Consulting, Henry, 38, changed course four years ago and moved his young family from Atlanta, Georgia, to Pawleys Island, South Carolina, to run the decades-old Sea View Inn.

The electrical engineer is among a growing number of Americans longing for a slower pace of life who elect to stay home as innkeepers, embarking on second careers that can be as tough as any job but often more fun and fulfilling.

"This is a full time job that is very physical because you are on the front lines managing, marketing and sometimes even washing dishes," Henry said. "You can't be an innkeeper and just manage. You have to do it."

Already half of America's estimated 22,000 small inns provide the primary income for their owners and industry statistics show that more and more younger couples are digging into savings to buy existing properties or build from scratch.

Nancy Stowell White, 43, quit as admissions director at a small private school to buy the Sudbury Inn with her husband, Bill, in Bethel, Maine. Deb and Ken Withrow traded working at large hotels in New York for running Nantucket's Union Street Inn, fulfilling a lifelong dream to own their own hostelry after an exhausting two-year search for the perfect property.

"Innkeeping is a profession that offers a sense of the human touch and contact with people, and it is an alternative career to working for a large corporation," said Nancy Novogrod, editor in chief at travel magazine Travel + Leisure.

It also offers owners perks like squeezing in a swim or hike instead of battling traffic home after work.

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Growing competition

But as Americans fit more relaxation into less time, innkeeping is becoming a competitive and sophisticated segment of the \$113 billion lodging industry, forcing owners to make business plans and spend thousands of dollars to woo guests.

"Today's owners are making a big investment in running a business," said Pam Horovitz, president of the Professional Association of Innkeepers International, a trade group. "The days of renting a spare room are pretty much gone."

The group does not keep statistics on average room rates or how much prices have climbed, but a handful of owners said they have been able charge steadily more over the last five years with several reporting rate increases of up to 40 percent.

Indeed, inns like Nantucket's Union Street Inn and the Inn at Stonington are often booked solid in summer months when visitors pay more than \$400 per night for a room cooled by ocean breezes near sandy beaches.

On Maine's remote Isle au Haut, reachable only by boat, visitors are lured by the ocean and other intangibles. Owner Jeff Burke isn't shy about listing what his popular Keeper's House Inn does not have: No Television, No Fax, No E-mail, No Internet and No Electricity. But he recently bought a generator-driven desalination machine to remove salt from ocean water for use at the inn.

"Finally we have good water here," Burke said, adding he also succumbed after years of avoiding computers and installed a Web-based reservation system. "What people like is the duality we offer between the primitive and the supreme."

Going upscale

At Henry's Sea View Inn in South Carolina, a new roof, fresh paint and attentive housekeepers keep the inn looking fresh. "The area prides itself on being arrogantly shabby but we don't want to take it too far at the inn," he said.

Other owners, competing to deliver the luxuries guests get on business travel, hire decorators and top chefs to offer memorable vacations on a smaller scale. And nearly everyone is label conscious about towels and sheets with men and women alike boasting about thread counts, or the number of vertical and horizontal fibers woven in one inch of material.

"The thread count wars are definitely on in the inn business," said Withrow in Nantucket, describing the elegant sheets and towels used at the Union Street Inn.

Every winter, when their inn closes for a few weeks, the Withrows renovate three rooms, working with an interior designer to choose new fabrics and color schemes. "The trend in inns lately has been to go upscale," Withrow said.

The Inn at Stonington, located on the waterfront in the fishing village of Stonington, Connecticut, even accommodates guests arriving by yacht, offering space at the inn's dock.

Manager Anne Starzec said visitors enjoy the hotel's intimate yet elegant atmosphere, including gas fireplaces and marble bathrooms outfitted with Frette towels and Jacuzzis. "People definitely like the amenities."

Owners who run these inns often do not count on making great riches themselves, at least at first. But as the business picks up many find this is a good way to make a living.

The Whites of Maine bought the Sudbury Inn when it lost \$80,000 every year, but after 5-1/2 years of hard work, including roughly \$100,000 in property improvements every year, the couple now have \$300,000 available for debt service.

And they've fully funded their retirement plan every year since buying the inn. "It is a comfortable lifestyle in a region of the world we both want to live in, and we now own an asset that is producing revenues that are three times larger than when we bought it," Nancy Stowell White said.

"We were prepared to make less money than in Atlanta," the Sea View Inn's Brian Henry said, adding "But every year the occupancy rate has gone up and we didn't take a pay cut." Copyright 2006 Reuters. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

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