

'It's living a dream': Young couple open hostel in Magdalen Islands

Lisa Aucoin and Mitchell Wood will work in oil sands in the winter, run hostel 'back home' in summer

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Lisa Aucoin, 26 and Mitchell Wood, 25 have made a dream into reality by flipping what was a restaurant and bar into Auberge Paradis Bleu, a youth hostel on Quebec's Magdalen Islands. (Marika Wheeler/CBC)

Last September, Lisa Aucoin, 26, and Mitchell Wood, 25, were exhausted, riding a bus back from a 14-day rotation working in the oilsands near Fort McMurray, Alta.

Tired of the grind of their routine, they started bouncing around ideas of what they could do instead.

They met as teenagers on Quebec's Magdalen Islands, and have been together for more than 10 years. Seasoned travellers, they wanted to do something related to travelling and meeting people.

"Let's go back home. Let's open a hostel at home," Wood suggested.

“We get the best of both worlds. In the winter we go out and make some money to come back home and spend it on our dream.”

- *Mitchell Wood*

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Aucoin was open to the idea, and three weeks later, the couple was on a plane to the Magdalen Islands, set to visit a building that had been empty for the past four years.

Three months ago, Wood and Aucoin were handed the keys to that building, a former restaurant and bar, and they set to work transforming it into the Auberge Paradis Bleu.

Putting their skills to work

Both Wood and Aucoin are journeymen who work for the Local 1325 Carpenter's Union in the oil sands.

They hired a general contractor to help with the renovations, but also put their own manual skills to work, doing structural work, building bunk beds, and even a couch with pallet wood when the one they had ordered didn't arrive in time for the grand opening July 15.

"I think the oil sand life in camp, the hard work, and determination, and after five days work wanting to go home but you have another two weeks left, it definitely helped us," said Wood.

The commercial kitchen was torn out, the building gutted. Some of the floors were ripped out to the gravel and the walls were nothing but studs.

They spent about \$500,000 on the building and renovations. Now, the hostel includes six-bed dorm rooms, private rooms, a kitchen, a large common area with foosball, pool, air hockey and poker tables, as well as a quiet living room with a plush couch, and lots of floor space for yoga sessions.



Co-owner Lisa Aucoin says she relied on her instincts to come up with the interior design look for the hostel. (Marika Wheeler/CBC)

All the rooms are flooded with natural light from sky lights or windows that look out onto the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Aucoin came up with the interior design herself, opting for a minimalist beach house look with lots of exposed wood, grey tones and turquoise accents.

It's aimed at attracting young people, but anyone can book a stay.

"The guests who come say you guys work so hard because we are always around, there is always something to do," said Aucoin.

"But I'm like you guys have no idea... this is vacation!"

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Building the perfect hostel

Aucoin and Wood estimate they have been to about 30 countries and stayed in about 100 hostels.

They adopted some best practices from those experiences to build what they believe is a perfect hostel.

For Aucoin, that meant having a light and charging station near each bed in the dorms. For Wood that meant open common spaces where travellers don't feel cramped or uncomfortable.

During their travels, the couple befriended Aloha Surf Hostel owners Isaac and Laina Castillo in Maui, Hawaii. Aucoin spent a total of two and a half years at the hostel watching the Castillos closely in their work.





Laina and Isaac Castillo own a hostel in Hawaii and will provide mentorship to Aucoin and Wood. (Marika Wheeler/CBC)

They provided invaluable mentorship to Wood and Aucoin, who don't have much experience running a business, as they came up with the plan for their project.

The Castillos flew out for the grand opening and to provide hands-on guidance for the first three weeks of the hostel's life.

"I couldn't think of a better couple to do it," said Isaac Castillo.

"They have the confidence and know what they are doing, and we are definitely confident in them," said Laina Castillo.

Drawing a younger tourist crowd

Aucoin and Wood hope the hostel will entice more young people to come visit the Magdalen Islands.

"I think the Islands needed something like this," says Wood.

"The tourism is a lot of older people because it's expensive to get to the Islands, and then when you're here accommodation is expensive."

The rates at the hostel vary from \$39 to \$85 per night, depending on the room and number of guests, which is considerably cheaper than most other accommodations in the area.

The only way to get to the Magdalen Islands is by ferry from Prince Edward Island, which costs about \$100 round trip per adult plus about \$200 for a vehicle, or by airplane, which costs hundreds of dollars round trip from Montreal or Quebec City.

When the tourist season winds down in September, Wood and Aucoin will close up the hostel for the winter and head back to the oil sands until next year.





Isabelle Cormier from Quebec City, Que. exchanges tunes with Audrey Keitel from Keene, Ont. after breakfast at the hostel. (Marika Wheeler/CBC)

Six months of work in Alberta secures their living expenses for the rest of the year, so they aren't relying on the hostel's success.

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"It's living a dream, coming home, living the best part of the year on the [Magdalen] Islands," says Wood.

"We get the best of both worlds. In the winter we go out and make some money to come back home and spend it on our dream."

Both expect the hostel to be a success. They are already booked up until the end of August.

"It's crazy!" says Aucoin, "but it's good!"

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