

This Vagabond is here to stay

'Hotel Impossible' visit transforms a local landmark — but owner Grant Polson says there is more work to be done

By **KIRBY NEUMANN-REA**

HOOD RIVER — Grant Polson carries bridesmaid dresses across the threshold in the "Hotel Impossible" episode about Polson's Vagabond Motel, which aired June 2 on The Travel Channel.

In a way, a new marriage happened in the past two months at Vagabond Motel on Westcliff Drive.

"Ecstatic," Polson tells host Anthony Melchiorri when the blindfold comes off and Polson first sees the dramatic physical changes to the north side of the Vagabond property, overlooking the Columbia River.

In fact, one of Polson's first amazed words had to be bleeped out as he beheld what Melchiorri and company had done to his struggling business.

An April 4 wedding on the site, put together in just 48 hours, was

the crux of the episode, culminating Melchiorri's week spent in Hood River in which he gave Polson extensive advice on how to improve his 60-year-old business.

"It was a great experience all the way around, and Anthony and I are totally on the same page," Polson said Tuesday.

"It provides us a great direction," he said.

As to the site improvements: "They are glorious," said Polson, who was prohibited from seeing the physical upgrades until the on-camera "reveal" just before the wedding would start.

In the episode he is shown in disbelief as Melchiorri informs him in the office that a wedding will be organized in 48 hours at the Vagabond.

"We've never done an event before," Polson blankly tells the

host.

Two days later, when he sees the drastically improved location, Polson tells Melchiorri, "This will be the first of many."

But leading up to that, in the show, things happen such as a backhoe getting stuck and housekeeper Pam Barajas slumping against a wall with a big smile and sigh of relief moments after she and Melchiorri made the bed and finished up other last-second details just as the bride has arrived on the grounds.

Polson said, "It was a totally great experience. It's all what happened, nothing really staged or anything, all stuff that really goes on."

"It's not like other reality shows where stuff is staged and doesn't really happen that way."

Indeed, he and Melchiorri and others were literally making beds



The wedding venue, the broad lawn on the Vagabond's north side, gets finishing touches on April 3. Below, owner Grant Polson stands at the location in this November 2013 photo.

and preparing the rooms just as the wedding party was checking in.

"Anthony gets his hands dirty; he doesn't just sit back and talk," Polson said.

"Any criticism (Anthony) had was not so much the hotel but for me, and just things I needed to do to make the place better," Polson said. "I'll be more focused on the things I need to do to keep moving this business forward: working smarter, not harder, like the saying goes."

The biggest operational change at the Vagabond is online reservations.

The calls began within the first 15 seconds after the show aired, Polson said. "We got faxes and emails and people calling to say, 'I was crying as I watched,'" Polson said.

So ends the Vagabond's tradition of phone-only reservations.

"This is just the starting point for the improvements we're going to make," Polson said, including continuing the improve-

ments at the event site, and extending it east "where the backhoe got stuck" (see the show), and to the west, around the newly created viewpoint. (The motel added a new 15-room wing, which opened May 1.)

Timbers milled from an oak cut down on the property were fashioned into 4-foot letters "V" and "L" around a new fire pit with one of the best views of Columbia anywhere.

The general contractor was Hood River's Green Home Construction. "In terms of scope, this is the largest thing we've done," Green Home's Tom Reid said. "This was mostly a large outdoor space, which is outside of our usual scope, but what we really specialize in is project management and for us to pull together this many subs in a short amount of time, we've definitely had a lot of experience with that."

Project Manager Theo Davis said, "We had really strong subs and good base of employees

within Green Home, so I knew we could pull it off. I knew there was going to need to be a lot of coordination. But I trusted my subs and I trusted (designer) Blanche (Garcia) and the overall process so it worked."

The crews took a muddy, blackberry-covered patch and turned it into a rocky- and flower-lined grassy bowl with a graceful patio surrounded by hand-milled fencing. The result is one of the larger and most scenic outdoor private venues in the community.

In the "Hotel Impossible" episode, Melchiorri is shown praising the physical beauty of the Gorge.

In an interview during his April visit, Melchiorri said, "It's not only the beauty of the place, but the beauty of the place intersected with the people. Everybody I've met is just nice people. This place backs up the beauty. I will be shouting from the rooftops that people should come to Hood River."



PHOTOS BY KIRBY NEUMANN-REA