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Farmhouse Pottery and Canoe North Adventures, looking at the Silver Linings

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?Unless you're looking for the silver lining,? said Al Pace, ?this pandemic can really get you down.?

For Mr. Pace, his wife Lin Ward, and their two businesses, Canoe North and Farmhouse Pottery, there have been many silver linings. They were stuck at their home and studio on Hockley Road for the summer of 2020, rather than taking clients on unforgettable canoe adventures in Canada's north.

?We couldn't run any of our trips north with the restrictions imposed: no visitors, nobody was allowed to travel north. So, last summer, we stayed here for the first time in 30 years. Last year, we had pottery outside. I put a sign on the property at the road, Mammoth Pottery Sale.

?It was really busy; people were looking for art. One lady said, ?My husband broke my Al Pace butter dish and, now, I'm going to buy a new one!'

?They were looking for something fresh, beautiful. When asked what they did during the pandemic, lots of people said, ?I bought art.'

?For thirty years,? he told the Citizen, ?We left this area for the summer to escort our clients on journeys of a lifetime. Those trips were wonderful but it was great to spend last summer here. Our gardens were beautiful and people had always told us how nice they are.?

Having said that, he and a crew are set to travel north near the end of June, driving to Yellow Knife, thence to fly to Norman Wells, their headquarters in the north, on the MacKenzie River. There is the lodge for Canoe North, a place of storage and very comfortable accommodation, the jump-off centre for their adventure trips. They built this lodge in Norman Wells, several years ago and it is in need of some work, isolating for 14 days once they arrive.

Once it was clear there were no trips in 2020, Mr. Pace and his staff realized it is much more work to cancel canoe trips than it is to organize them.

?Every call we have, takes an hour and is very emotional,? was his comment.

Like so many businesses, the staff all had to work remotely. With the poor availability of internet in this area, the work was quite laborious and slow. However, a colleague in Owen Sound had very good internet; she recommended the man behind the success. This was ?TK? who installed two towers on the Farmhouse property at considerable cost, resulting in full internet and allowing the business to flow productively.

?We can also share this with a few neighbours too,? said Mr. Pace. ?All our files are really big. And now, everyone can keep in touch on Zoom. Wear your Canoe North hat, bring a good bottle of wine and we have a Happy Hour. Those memories we share have inspired future trips.?

The work on the lodge and B&B in Norman Wells this year is another silver lining: ?It needs painting and some improvements. So, we're taking this time to get everything right, heading for next year's season of trips.?

The new theme for 2022 from Canoe North Adventures: ?Celebrate Canada ? hug a Northern River.?

?In September,? Mr. Pace assured us, ?I will put up a sign saying ?Free hugs, minimum three minutes!?

The pandemic persuaded him to sell pottery online for the first time and to this, he purchased a nice light box, giving him the chance to display the colours of his pottery well.

?And people bought online!? he declared. ?I was packing and shipping, going to the post office three or four times a week.?

As well, there has been time for intensive training for his young guides about dealing with possible problems between people: for example, ?We're famous for breaking couples apart to ride in separate canoes. Then, in the evening, when they go to their tents, they have plenty to talk about.?

Throughout much of this, the Federal government has given assistance; that, plus the pottery sales have seen the businesses through without incurring debt, for which they are most appreciative.

Plans, full of caution, are being made for 2022. Already a family of six people have booked a two-week canoe adventure to Horton River, the most northernly river in mainland Canada, where such adventures can happen. Horton River runs through the tundra of the land above the tree line.

Mr. Pace told us, ?It's very remote and the furtherest to get to. Beautiful fly fishing. The father of this family, he and his daughter have travelled with us before, when she was a teenager. This time they're coming, he and his wife, their son and daughter and their partners.?

He admitted, ?It's a lot of money to do this trip because it's expensive to get there, as it is so remote. You could buy a decent car for the price of the six of them going. But what about the experience of them doing this together, this once in a lifetime experience? They could see muskoxen, caribou, grizzly bears, eagles and wolves.?

Flying to Edmonton, then to Yellow Knife overnight starts the journey. A morning flight on to Norman Wells, ?where we meet them at the airport. We have a welcome dinner and in the morning, fly to Horton River. That's exciting too ? many people have never been on a float plane before.?

He outlined, ?Our job is to manage pro-actively, keeping people safe; we want to prevent problems by managing our group by understanding their needs. While still having fun.?

Much of the bonding comes at the end of the day over dinner, a group activity. A glass of wine ? or other beverage ? begins the festivities and the main menus are figured with the fulsome supplies or a freshly caught fish. Yet, every evening, one of the guests brings a surprise hors d'oeuvre and someone else provides a surprise dessert. Conversation flows.

Whatever demands the current pandemic makes, Al Pace and his team are aware and ready. On the chance of doing a few trips this year in August, he is negotiating with the Territories to bring clients on a 14-day canoe trip that will constitute their isolation period, while in their canoes.

?We are cautiously optimistic. We're holding out hope...what's important to us is the well-being of our local northern communities. When we're up there working on the lodge, we'll be keeping our bubble at the lodge,? he assured us.

Such a long time being part of the wider indigenous communities in the north has finally seen Alan Pace and his family arrive to the point where they can and want to invite eight young indigenous people in 2022. There are two points: the hotel style hospitality at the lodge and the guiding of the canoe trips, so, four for each end of the business.

?To fully integrate those kids in our programs: train them, take them on a three-day trip to see who can go on to a two-year program at Thompson Rivers University. Then, a few of them could come to work for us.

?This has come out of the ?ashes' of the pandemic,? said Al Pace.

Farmhouse Pottery will very likely open July 1, 2021 and information about Canoe North can be found at www.canoenorthadventures.com

All that beautiful pottery: www.pacepottery.com