



'Hotel Impossible' crew enjoys shooting in Grand Lake

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OFF / BEAT

GRAND LAKE, CO COLORADO

In the last show of its second season, “Hotel Impossible” was filming this past week at the Western Riviera motel in Grand Lake, and I had the chance to catch a glimpse of their work on the last day.

Promising I wouldn't reveal the actual details of the renovation in order to not spoil it for viewers who plan to tune in and watch the show sometime in March on the Travel Channel, I witnessed the “reveal” take place, when owners Mike and Jackie Tompkins first saw the improvements show workers has made to their property.

I happened upon Jackie and Mike at the motel just before the sound guy came in to mic them for the final “act.”

During the entire production process, Jackie and Mike were only told where they should be at what time, and rarely were given talking points to prepare themselves. There were no make-up or wardrobe crews or lines to learn.

The couple would simply be told they'd be meeting with Anthony Melchiorri, the star of the show, the individual who has been to countless hotel, motel and resort properties and knows just about everything there is to know about the hospitality industry and is willing to share his knowledge on a TV show growing in popularity.

As far as the “reality” of the show, Mike said he found it to be as realistic as it could. Melchiorri would not talk to Jackie and Mike at all unless the crew was taping.

Even when they tried to make small talk with the hotel-management expert, he informed them he is not allowed to talk to them unless the cameras are rolling.

At times during the reveal, certain segments of action had to be redone. For example, Mike, Jackie and Melchiorri conducted do-overs of walking toward the “reveal” three different

times before the couple got to see it. The first time someone was not supposed to be in the shot, the second time a door had to be closed, and the third time was a charm.

During the filming a few minutes after the reveal, Mike or Jackie were asked to repeat something they said because the sound hadn't picked it up properly, or TDS Construction owner Duane Sanderson of Winter Park had to walk in several different times to be introduced on camera because the first few times were flawed in some manner.

Somehow, all the takes would be masterfully edited for the final version to appear as if it all happened seamlessly. Needless to say, kudos to Jackie and Mike for being able to speak on camera with no rehearsal and no script to follow, and to be so patient waiting for cues throughout the process.

When they finally saw the renovated space, I could hear their authentic "wows!" from several feet away.

The entire Travel Channel crew stayed at the Rapids Lodge in Grand Lake for the week.

The Ludwigs, owners of the Rapids, had Melchiorri stay in the nicest room they have, a one-bedroom condo unit that has recently been redone overlooking the North Inlet.

"I told Anthony when I took him to his room, 'I don't know what is more intimidating, to be the place they are critiquing or the one where he is staying,'" said 50-year hotelier Lynne Ludwig.

"Prior to them coming, we were a wreck," she said.

They went about aiming to perfect rooms by fixing things, wiping things and touching up paint. Lynne erected a sign out front welcoming the 18-person production crew to the lobby area, and she and husband Tom stayed up until their guests' first arrived at midnight in order to greet them personally.

She even put extra hangers in Melchiorri's room, and made sure there was an iron and ironing board – having heard ahead of time it was his usual request.

Lynne was then horrified when Melchiorri sent for a new iron because the one in his room didn't work, and he wanted a full-sized ironing board rather than the tabletop one. She fears the outlet didn't work, because the iron worked when she tried it herself in another location.

But Melchiorri had only positive things to say about the Rapids and the Ludwigs' hospitality when I sat down to chat with him after the final day's taping.

He also had nothing but glowing and rave things to say about Grand Lake and the community he'd come to experience.

"I will go on record saying it's the most beautiful place I've ever been," he said. "I was blown away. Grand Lake is a piece of art. Every single time you turn around there is either frozen lake with a beautiful cloud over it, or there's a part of the lake that's not frozen with a sun over it, or there's a mountain by itself or a formation of mountains. I've not seen the same landscape since I've been here.

“And then you take this beautiful town of Grand Lake that looks like the back lot of a Hollywood studio and you incorporate that with just beautiful open-hearted people that know each other – it’s my favorite place, and it is the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. And I thought Alaska and Hawaii would be tops, and this surprised me.

“I’d rather come here in the winter rather than the summer,” he continued. “In the summer you can get a lot of this stuff in other places. You can get the beautiful landscape, you can get the lake, but in the winter I imagine this place is even more beautiful. It’s atypical of most places.”

The star, host and expert of “Hotel Impossible,” Melchiorri had spent the prior day snowmobiling in the U.S. Forest, reaching mountaintops for spectacular vistas, and ice fishing on Grand Lake – two activities he said he’d never done. On Saturday, he had joined the Hotel Impossible team in racing a bed sled down Grand Avenue during the town’s quirky Winter Carnival. Spectators watched as low-lander sound and camera guys attempted to run a sleigh in front of them to film the race. And, since the cameras could not capture the race and the crowd all at once, some of the crowd was asked to cheer again after the race – fabrication or just a repeat of reality?

TDS Construction out of Winter Park was praised up and down for completing the motel-renovation project in four days, and they would have completed ahead of schedule if it weren’t for having to wait for certain supplies to arrive, according to the show’s lead designer Blanche Garcia.

“They’re the fastest contractors I’ve ever worked with,” she said. “We were very impressed. I was impressed.”

“It was a lot of fun, but nerve-racking at the same time. It was a tight, tight schedule,” said TDS owner Duane Sanderson, who swears the Super Bowl on Sunday had little bearing on how fast they worked.

It was not your typical job. The project was filled with interruptions to accommodate camera crews setting up to capture work that was being done, an old building with galvanized plumbing, not to mention the pressure of being on TV.

“I’m anxious to see what the one-hour version actually looks like,” Sanderson said.

TDS’s crew of 10 guys included many local contractors: Thomas Mason Painting, H.B. Woodworks, Grand County Plumbing and Heating, Power to the People, All Phase Finish Contracting, and Mountaintop Drywall.

And Garcia shopped for décor and supplies at many local stores, including Grand Lake’s Grand Valley Flooring, Bronze Elk, Cabin Quilts and Stitches and Whispering Pine, and the Ace Hardware in Granby.

And as for the Tompkins, they were headed on a plane on Tuesday back to Washington, D.C., where the couple has been living on and off for Mike’s principle job as a patent attorney.

Jackie said she’d probably sleep on the plane in recovery from the emotional roller coaster

she'd been riding the past few days.

Asked if they'd do it again: Absolutely, they said.

They've already incorporated some of Melchiorri's suggestions.

They also recognize the show's national exposure and what that may do for their business and for the overall community of Grand Lake.

Monday night at a "Hotel Impossible" function at the Western Riviera Event Center to which town dignitaries were invited, on camera the show gifted to the town/chamber expert professional help with its marketing, such as advances in web presence and social media.

I'm only guessing, when a national audience online and via cable sees TV personalities wearing moose hats huffing and puffing their way down the snow-covered street pushing a bed on skis, Grand Lake's Winter Carnival may be a bit more popular next year.

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