



DAVID THOMPSON COUNTRY VISITOR FRIENDLY ASSESSMENT

FINAL REPORT (NOVEMBER 23, 2017)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Overview

Expedition Management Consulting Ltd. was commissioned to undertake a Visitor Friendly Assessment of David Thompson Country from July to November 2017. The main objective of the assessment was to analyze how the region presents itself to visitors – its ambience and visual appeal, wayfinding and signage, customer service, public services and amenities and visitor information services. Based on this assessment, a practical action plan was developed that will lead to tangible improvements in the visitor friendliness of David Thompson Country.

Situational Analysis

The David Thompson Country Tourism region has long been a destination for visitors seeking wilderness experiences. Clearwater County defines the border of David Thompson Country; while the Town of Rocky Mountain House and Village of Caroline are gateways to the backcountry. The municipalities have long recognized the value of tourism to the economy, and significant investment has been made in plans and policies that directly or indirectly impact tourism development.



Tourism Supply

Tourism in David Thompson Country is built on businesses, services and amenities that support the visitor experience and serve visitors. Much of the tourism supply is enjoyed by residents and vacation property owners. When locals support what visitors enjoy, a region is in a strong position to leverage the positive social and economic benefits of tourism.

David Thompson Country's tourism supply offers a wide variety of attractions and experiences, most of which are related to the rich history and the nature-based assets. A range of accommodations, restaurants and services support tourism, while several boutique shops and tourism festivals and events enhance the visitor experience.

Current Target Markets

David Thompson Country has yet to complete a detailed market analysis to define target markets. Travel Alberta, however, uses the Explorer Quotient (EQ) Traveller Type to identify Free Spirits as the primary target market and Cultural Explorers as the secondary target market

for Alberta. The region has the experiences that Free Spirits and Cultural Explorers seek, therefore, we propose the region utilize the following primary target market as a starting point for discussion:

Youthful adventurers from the Edmonton region and Central Alberta seeking off-the-beaten path experiences in town or in the backcountry beyond.

Competitive Advantage

David Thompson Country's competitive advantage is a combination of its accessibility to regional markets, and its seclusion. The wilderness experience is less prescribed and less structured which sets the region apart from nearby destinations that draw from the same geographic markets. It is these wilderness activities along with cultural experiences that will continue to distinguish David Thompson Country as a destination.

Visitor Friendly Assessment

In July 2017, the assessment team spent two full days in David Thompson Country tourism region and experienced the destination from a visitor's view of point. During the tour, the team recorded what they saw through photographs and notes. Each team member focused on their area of expertise but also took a holistic view of the tour and commented on all five visitor friendly categories. Upon completion of the tour, the assessment team evaluated the visitor friendliness of the region using five key assessment categories:

1. Overall Ambience/Community Visual Appeal
2. Wayfinding/Signage
3. Public Services/Visitor Amenities
4. Quality of Service/Professionalism
5. Visitor Information



The assessment team highlighted seven key strengths and five main growth areas as follows:

Key Strengths

1. There is a fair amount of information about the region on many online sites making it easy for the visitor to plan before visiting.
2. There are vast areas of natural untouched wilderness areas that attract adventure seekers and cultural explorers who seek holistic outdoor experiences the region can offer.

3. The Region generally comes across as visually appealing and friendly to visitors.
4. Businesses have recognized the importance of tourism in the region and are increasing efforts to enhance customer service, information and their capacity to leverage the opportunities of increased visitorship.
5. The Nordegg area is a popular location in the region for camping, hiking, mountain biking, cross country skiing, artists and photographers.
6. Located near and en route to two of Canada's most famous National Parks, Banff and Jasper, offering a less commercialized tourism and recreation experience.
7. Generally warm and welcoming customer service staff.

Main Growth Areas

1. The online information is extensive, however, the term "David Thompson Country" may not be as well known, it would be useful to consistently use the same verbiage on all online portals.
2. Rocky Mountain House is the only full-service community in the region. There may be an opportunity for Nordegg or Caroline to increase visitor-like amenities & attractions.
3. The directional and wayfinding assets vary throughout the region, and it would benefit all communities to collaborate on enhancing both highway and urban wayfinding. See examples in Appendix E.
4. There is a lack of basic tourism amenities for the travelling public (e.g. public washrooms, showers, and rest stops).
5. There is limited diversity in programs, activities, entertainment, restaurants and accommodations.

Action Planning

Specific and actionable initiatives (99 in total) were developed within each of the five assessment categories that will improve the visitor friendliness of David Thompson Country. With input from the committee, each initiative was assigned a priority, cost rating, initiative lead and timeline for completion.

The following action items have been identified as the top priorities. These are organized in order of priority.

1. Develop a consistent and comprehensive signage program (vehicular and pedestrian) that includes directions to key amenities, facilities and services.
2. Develop a new comprehensive map for each community and the overall region that includes the development of consistent symbols and/or language-based system to help locate key visitor attractions, sites and amenities.

3. Re-develop the regional visitor guide to reduce clutter, enhance readability and further the regional brand (Refer to Appendix E for more information).
4. Develop a Program, Festival and Event Plan that will facilitate more daytime and evening entertainment options for visitors. The plan should also address the need for increased festivals and events, public interpretation and public programming related to local culture and history.
5. Review and enforce community standards and bylaws to address unsightly premises. (e.g. property maintenance, tree planting, fences, other landscaping).
6. Develop a plan to enhance basic tourism infrastructure within each community. Work with the Government of Alberta to provide roadside pull-outs, waste receptacles, washrooms, picnic areas and trail head signages along the David Thompson corridor.
7. Gather and share base level visitor data with all tourism partners (Municipality, Businesses, Operators) to support customer service.
8. Offer cross training to all VIC staff to learn about and understand offerings in each community and the DTC region.
9. Work with downtown business owners in Rocky Mountain House to expand the hours of operation to align with the evening and weekend special events (e.g. Farmers Market).
10. Replace benches, picnic areas and playground at the park adjacent to the Rocky Mountain House VIC.

Next Steps

1. Obtain commitment from Councils in the Town of Rocky Mountain House, Village of Caroline and Clearwater County to work regionally to improve visitor friendliness.
2. Establish Regional and Local project committees to work on specific action items.
3. Begin implementation of the action plan. Particular focus should be directed towards the “quick wins” and the “top recommended” initiatives to achieve successes early and build momentum.
4. Evaluate action plan initiatives and re-align priorities at the end of year 1.

Conclusion

The Visitor Friendly Assessment provides valuable information to David Thompson Country; a practical action plan, and a starting point to improve visitor friendliness. The plan will guide municipalities in David Thompson Country to enhance all aspects of their visitor friendliness. The successful implementation of this plan will ensure the David Thompson Country tourism region continues to be a destination of choice for tourists seeking wilderness experiences, and will contribute to the vitality and growth of the local tourism industry.