

Signature Experiences Case Study

The Canadian Signature Experiences Collection

October 2016



1. OVERVIEW

The Canadian Signature Experiences® (CSE) collection is a qualified inventory of Canadian visitor experiences that best exemplify Canada's tourism brand. The role of the collection is to *capture the attention and imagination of consumers around the world to entice them to visit Canada now*¹.

The collection is based on unique and exceptional travel experiences that are engaging and immersive and provide the opportunity to *discover, learn and enjoy Canada in ways that are personally relevant and aligned with their motivations to travel*². To qualify, the experience must meet a range of mandatory criteria and must appeal to one or more Explorer Quotient® traveller segments and be aligned with the country's brand and unique selling propositions.

Originally launched and managed exclusively by Destination Canada in 2011, the collection has grown from 48 experiences to almost 200 and is now co-managed with the provincial and territorial marketing organisations. The cost of running the programme is essentially staff time.

The collection has had marked success in presenting the 'video' of Canada to the traveller. Its achievements reflect the integrated nature of the programme with the brand strategy and supporting programmes, including the Explorer Quotient segmentation toolkit and the national, provincial and territorial emphasis on developing experiential tourism and related capacity. It provides significant support for travel trade and media activities, and has strengthened working relations between business operators and Destination Canada. At the political level, the collection has garnered distinct value to Destination Canada as it is clearly seen as contributing directly to the implementation of *Canada's Federal Tourism Strategy* and to the strengthening of industry's export readiness.

However, the programme's success and growth has created management issues and careful planning is needed to ensure that the collection remains relevant and fresh, particularly as Destination Canada builds its direct digital communications with the consumer. Furthermore, the membership in the collection has had the unintended consequence of becoming an

Signature Experiences Collection® Case Study – [Tranquility Cove Adventures](#)

The idea behind this experiential Prince Edward Island business is to offer visitors something different, a hands-on adventure. It is not just about food but helping visitors catch it themselves and bring visitors to this part of Atlantic Canada through the great culinary choices the area has to offer – lobsters, clams, oysters and local produce including potatoes.



They mainly attract families, people of all ages. Visitors who enjoy outdoor adventures and don't mind the rain or the wind.

The Collection has brought international exposure to the business.

¹ Destination Canada, 2011, Experiences: A Toolkit for Partners of the CTC.

² Ibid.

aspirational standard for businesses and has generated latent demand that cannot be fully met under the current programme structure. Indeed, establishing the collection on the basis of a membership model has resulted in expectations from the members that can add to the administrative challenges. Moving forward, storytelling will become increasingly important in creating the story of Canada in the digital realm, as will more clearly defined key performance indicators.

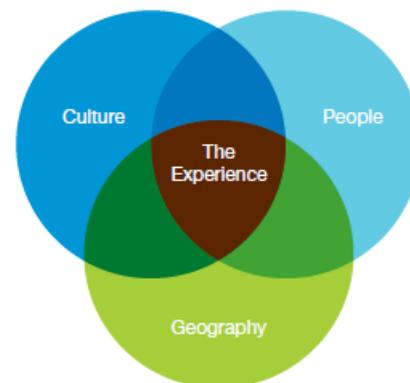


2. THE CANADIAN SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES® COLLECTION

1. History, development and performance

▪ Project history

The Canadian Signature Experiences® collection was launched in 2011 by Destination Canada. The programme recognises the market demand for experiential travel and is a qualified inventory of experiences that deliver internationally on Destination Canada's **Canada. Keep Exploring brand** promise. Today there are 186 members offering saleable visitor experiences across the country that encourage visitors to venture off the beaten tourist path and *dive deeper into Canada's natural environment and/or authentic, local culture*. These experiences are designed to provide a *series of memorable travel activities, revealed over time, that are inherently personal, engage the senses and make connections on an emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual or social level*³.



The Canadian Signature Experiences collection is at the heart of the brand.

Source: Destination Canada, 2011, Experiences: A Toolkit for Partners of the CTC

The launch of the revitalised brand in 2007 was a strategic response to a declining market in an intensely competitive global marketplace and to the need to convert a high desire to visit Canada into more immediate action. Anticipating the international media attention that would be gained through hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in British Columbia, Destination Canada embarked on a strategy that would shift the perception of the international marketplace away from its focus on nature-based perceptions and images of vast landscapes to one that highlighted the authentic diversity that could be experienced across the country.

A focus on understanding the customer determined that visitors to Canada were travellers, not simply tourists, and were seeking to explore the essence of the country. Destination Canada partnered with Environics Research Group to learn more about the target audience - a partnership that resulted in the development of a new segmentation tool - **Explorer Quotient® (EQ)**⁴. The research revealed that visitors to

³ Destination Canada, 2015, *Canadian Signature Experiences Collection Application Guide* (update).

⁴ The research on traveller types has been conducted within Canada and in all of Destination Canada's key overseas markets. The data has been aggregated to provide a 'global' profile of each traveller type as well as a comparative benchmark for identifying unique country attributes. The addition of over one hundred experience appeal items into later stages of the research has deepened the understanding of activity preferences and enhanced the potential for creating packages, including the Canadian Signature Experience Collection that will have a strong appeal for specific EQ types. With the 'mapping' of EQ types to postal codes in Canada and the United States of America, the segmentation tool for these markets has been further enriched through linking the EQ types to other market research data sources utilising PRIZM. Where EQ and PRIZM

Canada typically fall into one of two categories: 'learners' - those who want an educational or culturally interesting vacation, and 'enthusiastic indulgers' - free spirits looking for something profound that they can brag about. The segmentation tool is based on an in-depth understanding of the travel and social values of travellers with the greatest propensity to travel and highlighted the importance of focusing on experience rather than location and geographical attributes.

The success of repositioning the brand could be seen in FutureBrand's Country Brand Index, where Canada rose from 12th place in 2006, to 6th in 2007, 2nd in 2008 and 2009 and first in 2010. By 2010 tourism was



Canada's strongest dimension in achieving the number 1 ranking. The clear identification of five unique selling propositions that differentiate and showcase Canada's unique experiences positioned the country as a distinctive, unique and extraordinary travel destination. The development of the Canadian Signature Experiences collection and its launch in 2011 with 48 experiences was an innovative approach to offering experiences that exemplified the new brand. The programme reflected the heightened understanding that high-spending international travellers are seeking memorable travel activities that are engaging and authentic, and provide an opportunity to connect with a destination on a range of levels - physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social. The experiences have been designed to appeal specifically to inquisitive and curious traveller that want to do more than simply see sites - those who want to *fill their suitcases with authentic experiences that touch their hearts and minds, carving memories that last a lifetime*⁵.

The collection creates stand out in the marketplace and is used by Destination Canada and the 13 Provincial and Territorial Marketing Organizations (PMOs) to capture the attention and imagination of consumers around the world, and to entice them to visit Canada now⁶. The initiative is not an accreditation programme and does not promote a single company's full range of products, tour operator packages or self-discovery activities (such as circle routes or trails), nor is it designed to promote provincial or regional travel destinations. Rather, it promotes Canada and highlights what the priority customers are seeking in a vacation destination⁷. While the experiences are showcased nationally and provincially, the members within the collection sell direct to the fully independent traveller, and/or through the travel trade for packaged independent travel and group travel.

▪ **Project ambitions**

This brand alignment and market development programme has clear objectives to:

- Help change international travellers' perceptions of Canada, broaden the view of what Canada has to offer as a destination, and generate increased demand for

(Environics Analytics) are used in combination, marketing organisations and individual businesses can be very targeted in their marketing and in identifying the nature of experience that is most likely to resonate with the traveller type.

⁵ Destination Canada, 2015, Canadian Signature Experiences Collection Application Guide (update).

⁶ Destination Canada, 2015, Canadian Signature Experiences Collection Backgrounder (update).

⁷ Application Guide.



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export-ready experiences that align with visitor interests as identified through the EQ research;

- Stimulate a sense of urgency to travel to Canada and a greater level of push-through on the consumer path-to-purchase by showcasing compelling Canadian experiences in Destination Canada's marketing, media and sales activities;
- Raise the bar by stimulating innovative product development and packaging, and an increase in the number of small and medium sized businesses selling in international markets and through the travel trade; and,
- Align Canadian tourism operators with Destination Canada's corporate strategy and tourism brand.

▪ **How the programme works**

Admission to the Collection is **free** and is based on an application-driven process. When the collection was first launched, it was entirely administered by Destination Canada. The members became the priority pool from which Destination Canada choose content for advertising, media and trade activities. More recently, in 2015, the selection process has become a co-managed process where the provincial or territorial marketing organisation becomes the first point of contact for businesses with an interest in joining the programme. Following a review of a pre-qualifying survey, the PMO determines whether the applicant meets the programme's mandatory requirements. Assuming success at this stage, the applicant is provided with an application form and an initial assessment of the potential of the experience as part of the collection. Where the business is not quite ready, the PMO may offer coaching and mentoring support to assist the business in meeting the programme criteria.

Signature Experiences Collection®
Case Study – [Halifax Citadel](#).

Halifax Citadel is a Parks Canada National Historic Site of Canada in Nova Scotia. Their 'Soldier for a Day' programme gives visitors the chance to step back in time to 1869 to find out what life was like as a British redcoat.



Parks Canada promote the experience in a promotional video and list it on the Heritage Citadel website. As the budget for promotion is limited, they work closely with Nova Scotia Tourism and other DMO partners to leverage their marketing activities. In addition to being part of Canada's Signature Experience programme, the experience has also been included in the Nova Scotia Experience programme and is promoted in related marketing campaigns.

Further interest in the experience is generated through working with tour and receptive operators who are interested in the programme. 'Soldier for a Day' was originally a six-hour product created for the cruise excursion market, but has been refined and adapted as a three-hour experience to help capture more of the FIT [fully independent traveller] market.

Being recognized as a SEC member is an important honour for them and has reinforced the value of working with partners.

Following submission of an application, the experience is initially reviewed and evaluated by the PMO. Subject to a favourable review, the application is recommended to Destination Canada for approval and the two organisations complete the final assessment. Successful candidates receive conditional approval.

Meeting the mandatory criteria for the programme ensures that the applicant is export ready and has a viable and authentic experience to offer. To be eligible a company must:

1. Deliver a travel experience that meets the definition of a Canadian Signature Experience⁸;
2. Have been in operation for a minimum of two years, delivering travel experiences;
3. Have a website with a clear call to action for sales;
4. Do business internationally, or be actively invested in targeted international marketing activities in one of Destination Canada's target markets;
5. Be working with the travel trade and meet the nationally accepted export-ready criteria;
6. Be the owner, provider and deliverer of the travel experience, and the point of sales for customers; and,
7. Have rights-free, high-resolution images of the proposed Signature Experience.

Official acceptance into the programme requires that applicants work with a Destination Canada-appointed travel writer to create editorial copy and a visitor experience statement that will describe the designated Canadian Signature Experience. This creates consistency in the messaging and its emotional tone. The candidate provides the URL of the designated experience landing page on their company's website, and this goes live the day the designated experience is announced. Experiences are marked with the Canadian Signature Experience member badge and web pages have a clear call to action for product sales for independent travellers, and where relevant for media and the travel trade.

▪ **Supporting initiatives**

The successful growth of the collection can be attributed to the development of supporting resources and the implementation of programmes that aligned with the initiative. These included:

- The [Experiences Toolkit](#) designed to assist small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMEs) in positioning and marketing their products as experiences, rather than commodities.

⁸ Canadian Signature Experiences engage visitors in a series of memorable travel activities, revealed over time, that are inherently personal, engage the senses, and make connections on an emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual or social level. Experiences are the new "currency" that is differentiating tourism businesses and destinations around the world. They are expanding the ways travellers can engage with people, places and cultures. For tourism businesses, embracing experiential travel requires a true commitment to "thinking like a traveller." Most importantly, these experiences are not about packaging and discounts; they're about layering on value that people are willing to pay for. (Program Criteria and Pre Qualifying Quiz).

- A range of on-line case-studies on successful CSEs as training materials. The co-management of the programme through the provincial and territorial marketing organisations.
- The [Explorer Quotient Toolkit](#) aimed at equipping SMEs with packaging and positioning power of EQ, and insight on both how and why people travel. The combination of the understandings gained from this model together with the focus on developing experiences provided the basis for connecting effectively with visitors and matching their needs and desires with unforgettable and relevant Canadian experiences. The EQ toolkit and the associated 'bootcamps' also assists businesses in seeing the value of aligning more closely with Destination Canada's marketing campaigns.
- A range of provincial and territorial initiatives that are supporting the further development of experiential tourism, such as Travel Alberta's Shift programme, Tourism Nova Scotia's EXCELLerator programme, Tourism Saskatchewan's Quality Experience Strategy and Destination British Columbia's Remarkable Experiences programme. These capacity building initiatives are reinforcing the need to focus on the quality, authenticity and uniqueness of visitor experiences as the hallmark of Canada's brand, and have raised industry's awareness of the CSE programme.

▪ **Project achievements**

The CSE programme has grown to almost 200 members and has had marked success in a number of areas:

1. The collection has encouraged brand aligned innovation within industry and has promoted the philosophical shift away from selling products and activities toward developing and delivering unique and memorable experiences at a relatively limited cost – essentially the cost of time to administer and oversee the programme. These experiences now differentiate Canada in the marketplace, help create the 'movie' of Canada in the mind of the traveller and are the basis of more meaningful destination experiences.
2. Through identifying and highlighting outstanding Canadian experiences for international travellers, the programme directly supports Canada's Federal Tourism Strategy (2011) and its commitment to increase awareness of Canada as a premier tourist destination and to position its tourism sector to take advantage of international growth opportunities and increase tourism revenue. This strengthening and profiling of export-ready businesses gives the programme significant political value.
3. The programme has significantly enhanced Destination Canada's working relations with small and medium-sized tourism businesses across the country and has created a win-win situation for both parties. Destination Canada has the opportunity to use the collection to showcase the country through CSE integration initiatives developed and delivered globally, while industry has the ability to leverage the programme in a range of ways. These include increased packaging or cross-promotional opportunities with

other CSE members; strengthened business relationships with the travel trade, and invitations to participate in networking events; and, increased media exposure through hosting media FAM trips. For the members this has provided prestige and marketplace credibility, and has resulted in increased sales and global recognition.

4. From the travel trade perspective, the CSE collection is a valuable sales tool and is used extensively by receptive tour operators in building itineraries and in developing their sales catalogues. Indeed, in many ways it is the activities of the travel trade and media that are now driving the programme. The challenge is to ensure that these activities associate the member badge with the qualified experience rather than with the company or business.
5. Similarly, the collection has proved to be an asset to the PMOs in developing travel trade and media familiarisation trips. Furthermore, while not designed to have a geographical emphasis, the collection has assisted in enhancing the differentiation of provinces such as Saskatchewan where three of the six experiences relate to ranching. This has enabled the province to further leverage this competitive distinction in its related trade and marketing activities.
6. The decision to co-manage the collection with the PMOs has increased buy-in at the provincial and territorial level and has enhanced overall marketing alignment in the international markets.

2. Key learnings

While the collection has grown and has played a significant role in raising the bar and providing industry with a goal to strive toward, it has faced significant challenges:

1. Establishing the collection as a membership-based initiative creates expectations from the members that may be outside the scope of the programme. The CSE collection was originally built with significant dedicated staff resources within Destination Canada. As these resources have been reduced with new and emerging priorities, the capacity to deliver a meaningful programme from the members' perspective becomes more challenging. One staff person within Destination Canada is now responsible for working with the programme, down from an original team of five. The decision to co-manage with the provinces and territories has assisted in addressing this challenge, but it nevertheless has created a perception of dilution of effort and programme significance.
2. The collection was established as a paradigm of what the traveller could do in Canada. It was not intended to represent an aspirational standard for all of industry – rather it was to be a collection of unique experiences that characterised the distinctive personality of Canada. This has created unintended competitive issues, and businesses may not qualify if similar experiences are already in the collection. At the same time, it has generated growth in the total number of CSEs which in turn has increased administrative and management workload. For example, there are approximately seven grizzly bear viewing experiences. Each one has distinctive programming that makes it unique. Other operators may aspire to join the collection, but will be unable to do so unless they can offer something that is particularly unique, and even then the numbers need to be limited to ensure a well-managed collection. This has created latent demand that will not necessarily be met through the collection. In certain cases, aligned provincial or territorial programmes, such as the Ontario Signature Experience programme are helping to address this issue and will encourage the ongoing development of quality experiences within a provincial framework.
3. The programme was established without well-defined key performance indicators. The growth in the collection is indicative of its success, but it has essentially reached capacity in terms of numbers, and there is now a need to determine how to keep the programme fresh without further major growth of new experiences. The internal metrics that are used to evaluate the initiative relate to the reported CSE integrations with media/PR, social media, trade development and consumer direct initiatives, and to CSE participation in Rendez-Vous Canada. In addition, members are surveyed annually and asked to report on the impact of the programme on year-over-year sales, which can vary from 3% to 20% - but other than these metrics, there is little hard core data. Destination Canada recognises that any revisions to the programme will require the development of new indicators.
4. Maintaining the programme involves an annual renewal survey. While this helps to ensure the ongoing integrity of the experiences, there can be problems on the ground with experiences losing their distinctiveness through a range of factors such as ownership transfer of businesses or change in company priorities, or the limited availability of the experience to the general visiting public. As the programme is neither one of quality assurance or accreditation, 'policing' the experience on the ground and



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ensuring that it still exemplifies the essence of Canada can be challenging at times. Co-management with the PMOs and their closer relations with the businesses may help to address this concern.

5. The programme was initiated as a business-to-business initiative. As Destination Canada moves increasingly toward having more direct contact with the consumer as a media organisation, this will require the development of new directions for the CSE collection. Maintaining the relevancy of the experiences for the consumer will become critical, and the role of story in relation to content management will become much more important as Destination Canada seeks to create the story of Canada in the digital world. Businesses that are good storytellers are likely to become more prominent, and the emphasis on developing storytelling skills will need to be further developed within mentorship programmes.
6. The collection is based on a firm understanding of the market segments and their needs and desires through the research-based Explorer Quotient segmentation tool. This comprehensive understanding of the traveller is essential in promoting and delivering experiences that truly resonate with a specific traveller type, readily align with the marketing directions of both Destination Canada and the PMO, and have the capacity to grow the primary markets.
7. The programme promotes domestic travel by default, but has not been designed for this purpose. The collection was established to enhance overseas awareness and understanding of Canada, and business operators need to clearly understand the parameters of the programme to avoid confusion and disappointment with how the qualified experience is being promoted in the marketplace.

DESTINATION CANADA CONTACT

For further detail on the programme, please refer to:

[http://en.destinationcanada.com/resources-industry/canadian_signature_experiences.](http://en.destinationcanada.com/resources-industry/canadian_signature_experiences)