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Adventure Tourism in Canada

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A Brief Overview

A holiday offers a break from the routine of everyday life. For some people, the best kind of break involves the luxury and relaxation offered by a beach-side resort or a Caribbean cruise. For others it involves an educational experience or a cultural immersion. And for many others, the best kind of holiday is one that is steeped in adventure. Not surprisingly, the commercial tourism industry has adapted over the last several decades to cater to the needs and desires of travellers searching for adventurous experiences.

People have different ideas of what makes an ideal adventure experience, and the adventure tourism sector of the global tourism industry is correspondingly diverse, offering everything from short parasailing excursions and bungee

jumps to multiday river expeditions and guided ascents of Mount Everest. This diversity of offerings reflects, in part, the impressive overall size, and continued growth, of the global adventure tourism sector. In 2014, the adventure tourism market was estimated to be worth USD 263 billion (UNWTO, 2014). It exceeded USD 900 billion in 2020 and it is expected to reach USD 1.16 trillion by 2028 (ATTA, 2020).

The economic potential of adventure tourism is significant. Adventure tourists tend to spend more money on their adventure experiences than other tourists do on their travels and activities (ATTA, 2022). However, as global competition in this lucrative market increases, Canada is at risk of falling behind. According to the *Adventure Tourism Development Index* (2020), Canada ranks seventh globally among developed coun-

tries with strong potential for adventure tourism competitiveness. Since 2016, though, it has fallen from the top five in North America and Europe as a top potential destination for adventure travellers. New government initiatives like the *Federal Tourism Growth Strategy* and other provincial and municipal equivalents aim to correct this decline by increasing public and private investment in the Canadian tourism industry. The main objective of these strategies is to unleash tourism's potential to drive economic growth and job creation in all regions of the country. As one of the most lucrative and fastest-growing sectors of the global tourism industry, the adventure tourism sector will play an important role in the continued growth of Canada's tourism industry.

This chapter provides some context for understanding these recent developments. It begins with a brief discussion of what adventure tourism is and how it developed as a unique sector of the tourism economy. This is followed by a short section describing the current adventure tourism landscape in Canada and another that summarizes some of the current challenges and issues facing the adventure tourism sector and individual operators across the country.

What is Adventure Tourism?

There are multiple and competing definitions of adventure tourism. Most are exceedingly broad and do very little to define precisely what adventure tourism is or what it involves. For example, Destination BC, the destination marketing organization for the province of British Columbia, defines adventure tourism as “activities that present the participant with risk and challenge” (Destination BC, 2014, p. 1). They divide these activities into two broad categories: hard and soft adventure. Hard adventures like whitewater rafting and heli-skiing require more experience, better physical fitness, and a greater degree of risk and challenge than soft adventures like wildlife viewing or gondola rides. Although risk and challenge are essential components to the adventure experience, they do not in themselves adequately explain nor define what adventure tourism is and what it involves.

The Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA), a global lobby group for the adventure travel industry, offers another broad definition of adventure tourism. According to the ATTA, adventure tourism involves “a trip that includes at least two of the following three elements: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion” (UNWTO, 2014, p. 10). While this definition requires that only two of the three components be experienced, trips incorporating all three tend to afford tourists the fullest adventure experience—for example, a trip to Peru that involves trekking (physical activity) through the Machu Picchu trail (natural environment) and genuine interaction with local residents and/or indigenous peoples (cultural immersion). Based on the ATTA's definition of adventure tourism, though, a walking tour (physical activity) of ancient architectural ruins in Rome (cultural immersion) would fall under the label of adventure tourism.

Working towards a more precise definition of adventure tourism requires first explaining what tourism is and how different forms of tourism are categorized. Tourism generally involves the commercial organization and operation of travel for purposes of leisure and business. The tourism industry consists of five operating sectors: accommodation; transportation; food and beverage; travel services; and attractions, entertainment, and recreation (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2011). The attractions, entertainment, and recreation sector is itself comprised of five individual categories of “things to do”: cultural attractions (i.e., museums, art galleries, archaeological sites, etc.), natural attractions (i.e., national parks, beaches, northern lights, etc.), events (i.e., festivals, sports events, trade shows, etc.), recreation (i.e., golfing, hiking, sightseeing, etc.), and entertainment (i.e., theme parks, shopping malls, casinos, etc.). These categories are often used to define the type of tourism the tourist is participating in. For example, a golfing holiday may be labelled as “golf tourism,” a visit to a music festival as “festival tourism,” and a wine tasting tour as “culinary tourism.” Based on this method of classification, then, adventure tourism involves a combination of recreational activities and natural attractions; or, more precisely, the commercial organization

and operation of guided and non-guided tours and activities where the principal attraction is an adventurous form of outdoor recreation (Hudson, 2003; Buckley, 2006; Varley, Taylor, & Johnson, 2013; Huddart & Stott, 2020).

Set against a natural and scenic backdrop, outdoor recreational activities like hiking, dog sledding, whitewater rafting, jet boating, sea kayaking, skiing, and mountaineering, provide adventure tourists with an “extraordinary” experience (Priest, 1990; Varley, 2013). The outdoor adventure experience tends to elicit a strong emotional response in the form of the excitement and thrills that accompany an activity like tandem skydiving, or the peace and serenity that go along with kayaking on a calm and picturesque river or lake. What makes outdoor recreational activities adventurous is the heightened level of risk the participants and providers assume (Krein, 2007).

Risk involves the natural, human, and operational hazards associated with the delivery of a particular adventure product, as well as the perceived risk, or sense of danger, felt by the participant. Some adventure products like a mountaineering trip or a whitewater kayaking excursion are inherently risky because of the hazards associated with taking tourists up remote mountains or down wild rivers. Activities like bungee jumping and canyon swinging are among the safest adventure activities because of the controlled environment in which they are offered. In the case of so-called “extreme” activities, such as tandem skydiving, the degree of perceived risk is often much greater than the actual risk involved. Whether real or perceived, however, risk must be managed, mitigated, and manipulated by the operator and guide in a way that enables the tourist to feel both safe and in danger (Holyfield, 1999; Fletcher, 2010; Urry, 2013).

The popularity of an adventure tourism product is inversely related to its level of difficulty (Buckley, 2007). The most popular commercial adventure activities by volume of participants are unskilled, low-risk, group-based tours that take place in accessible adventure destinations

like Whistler, British Columbia, Banff, Alberta, and Mont Tremblant, Quebec. Conversely, as the technical difficulty of an activity increases, as the level of prerequisite experience increases, and as the location becomes more remote, the product tends to be riskier, costlier, and of a longer duration. For example, a zipline tour in Whistler with Ziptrek Ecotours requires no prerequisite skill, lasts about two hours, takes place in large groups multiple times per day, and costs about CAD 200 per person. In contrast, a canoe trip down the Thelon River in Nunavut with Jackpine Paddle requires some paddling skill, lasts about two weeks, takes place in small groups only once or twice per summer, and costs more than CAD 10,000 per participant. Not surprisingly, more people go ziplining in Whistler in a single afternoon than descend the Thelon River in an entire summer.

Development of Canadian Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism was not recognized as a distinct sector of the global tourism industry until the early 1990s, but its historical roots reach back over two centuries. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a new way of looking at and appreciating wild nature emerged out of the Romantic movement in Europe. Rather than being seen as something to be tamed or cultivated, wild landscapes became places of great natural beauty and playgrounds for the European leisure class. Mountain villages like Chamonix, in France, developed into popular tourist destinations as visitors flocked to see the Mont Blanc massif and walk on the fabled Mer de Glace glacier. This new interest in wild and sublime nature spilled over into North America. A version of the Grand Tour that was so popular among the European elite took hold in North America. The Adirondack Mountains, the St. Lawrence River Valley, Niagara Falls, and the Algonquin Highlands became popular tourist destinations along the expanding railway network in eastern North America (Jasen, 1995).

The nature-based tourism frontier expanded into western Canada with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. The CPR built lux-

urious hotels in newly established national parks like Rocky Mountains (Banff) and Glacier, and it even hired a team of mountain guides from Switzerland to lead Canadian and international visitors on hiking and climbing tours throughout the mountain parks (Hart, 1983; Robinson & Slemon, 2016). Additional guiding and outfitting services developed in and around other popular and accessible tourist destinations across the country, such as the Temagami and Algonquin regions of central Ontario, but a fully formed nature-based tourism industry would not emerge in Canada until after the Second World War.

In the 1950s and 1960s outdoor leisure pursuits gained increased popularity across a much broader demographic in Canada. The post war period brought to many Canadians an unprecedented degree of personal prosperity and freedom: the economy was booming; new technologies and labour laws provided Canadians with more leisure time; and the automobile provided a greater degree of mobility than ever before. Consequently, Canadians started to spend more of their free time in search of leisure and adventure outside of the city. An “outdoor recreation boom” swept across Canada’s urban centres, creating a nationwide demand for “recreational resources” like national and provincial parks, campgrounds, motels, ski resorts, wilderness resorts, and guiding and outfitting services (Killan, 1993; Wilson, 1991).

Federal and provincial authorities responded to the increased demand for nature-based travel and tourism services and infrastructure by expanding the provincial and national parks systems and by dedicating more funds to tourism development and marketing. The private sector responded, in turn, with the establishment of guiding and outfitting services. Many of Canada’s most successful adventure tourism outfitters to date were established in the wake of the post war outdoor recreation boom, companies like Canadian Mountain Holidays, Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing, Yamnuska Mountain Adventures, Canadian River Expeditions, Blackfeather Adventures, and Wilderness Tours.

The Contemporary Landscape

Since the 1970s the adventure tourism sector has developed with relatively little support and intervention by federal and provincial authorities in Canada. The expansion of the provincial and national parks systems facilitated the growth of private and commercial forms of outdoor recreation across the country. However, unlike in New Zealand, where federal authorities guided the development of that country’s adventure tourism sector, federal and provincial authorities in Canada have taken more of a hands-off approach. Consequently, the Canadian adventure tourism sector is mostly self-regulated. Rather than abiding by a set of federal regulations and safety guidelines, Canadian operators tend to set their own safety standards, best practices, and certification processes, often in conjunction with trade associations like the British Columbia River Outfitters Association or guiding organizations like the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides and Aventure Ecotourisme Quebec. The trouble with this general lack of federal and provincial oversight is that it produces a wide degree of variance in the quality of adventure tourism experiences across the country, as well as in the calibre and training of guides working in the sector. Both have potentially dangerous ramifications for properly protecting people and the environment from harm.

Despite the lack of government oversight, the adventure tourism sector in Canada is thriving. Supporting this statement with economic statistics is challenging, however. Not every province and territory in Canada differentiates between tourism and adventure tourism spending. Further complicating the matter is the fact that different definitions of adventure tourism are used to estimate or calculate the economic impact of the sector. Calculations that include revenues generated from private travel for purposes of outdoor recreation will inevitably be greater than those calculations that focus exclusively on commercial adventure tourism activities. Global estimates of the value of the adventure tourism sector (see above) tend to include all independent travel related to private or commercial out-

door recreation activities, revenues from packaged adventure tours, revenues associated with fixed-site adventure activities (i.e., ski resorts), and most of the revenues generated by ancillary businesses linked to adventure tourism, such as recreational equipment, adventure-branded clothing and apparel, and a significant proportion of the amenity-migrant property market (Buckley, 2010). This formula has not yet been applied to calculations of the value of the adventure tourism sector in Canada. However, provincial authorities in British Columbia have used a similar formula to calculate the value of their adventure tourism economy. The last sector-wide study in BC found that annual adventure tourism revenues exceeded CAD 1.2 billion. Those revenues supported 2,200 businesses and more than 21,000 employees (Destination BC, 2014).

The success of adventure tourism in BC has much to do with the province's unique physical geography. A long coastline, multiple ranges of snow-capped mountains, hundreds of wild rivers and lakes, dense forests, and an abundance of wildlife, make it an ideal destination for travelers seeking adventurous experiences. What's more, BC's geography and climate also provide the optimum natural conditions for practicing many outdoor recreational activities, such as skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking, hiking, mountaineering, rock climbing, surfing, paddle boarding, sea kayaking, white water kayaking, and rafting. In fact, the natural conditions in BC are so optimal for many of these activities that the province is often ranked by many travel publications as one of the best adventure tourism destinations on the planet.

Not surprisingly, many of Canada's so-called "adventure capitals" are situated in British Columbia. Adventure capitals are popular destinations that offer a wide variety of skilled and unskilled adventure tours throughout the year. The mountain towns of Whistler, Squamish, and Revelstoke, along with the coastal communities of Tofino and Ucluelet, are among the most popular adventure capitals in Canada. Other Canadian adventure capitals include Banff and Jasper in Alberta, Waskesiu Lake in Saskatchewan, the

Muskoka, Temagami, and Algonquin regions of central Ontario, and Mont Tremblant, Quebec. Access to these popular adventure destinations is made relatively easy by their proximity to metropolitan centres and busy international or regional airports.

The economic success and popularity of Canada's adventure capitals has encouraged other popular tourism destinations to either rebrand themselves as adventure destinations or make a more concerted effort at marketing to adventure travellers. For instance, over the last decade or so, Niagara Falls, Ontario, one of the oldest and most popular tourist destinations in Canada, has rebranded itself as an adventure tourism destination. In addition to its featured natural attraction, its casinos, its wineries, and its theme parks, the City of Niagara Falls and the greater Niagara region now offer popular adventure activities like jet boating, ziplining, and tandem skydiving. Further east, the province of Nova Scotia recently started to market itself as a four-season adventure destination, boasting a wide range of adventure tour products, from surfing, cycling, whale watching, and tidal-bore rafting, to cross-country and downhill skiing, snowmobiling, and ice-fishing. Similar rebranding and marketing efforts are being embraced by municipalities, provinces, and territories across the country.

The Future of Adventure Tourism in Canada

Now that federal, provincial, and territorial governments in Canada have recognized the economic potential of the adventure tourism sector, it is safe to assume that the sector will continue to grow into the future, as predicted. Despite a positive outlook, though, the sector faces many challenges. This concluding section of the chapter highlights four main challenges facing the sector today. Some of these challenges are common to adventure tourism globally, and some are unique to the Canadian context.

The primary challenge now facing the adventure tourism sector in Canada and around the world is recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to taking millions of lives, the pandemic

caused worldwide economic disruption and an unprecedented slowdown in domestic and international travel and tourism. In March of 2020, the Government of Canada imposed border controls and travel restrictions to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Travel to and from Canada was drastically reduced and the number of international arrivals fell by over 50% in a single month (Tam, Sood, & Johnston, 2021). Leisure travel came to a virtual standstill as people in Canada and other countries around the world had to contend with lockdowns and other travel restrictions. The economic disruption caused by the pandemic was disproportionately felt by the tourism industry. For example, by April of 2020 the hotel occupancy rate across Canada was below 20% and tourism spending in Canada that year was cut nearly in half (Statistics Canada, 2021). Many Canadian tour operators survived the economic downturn only through access to government aid and a shift towards local and regional markets. This shift was aided by the fact that many adventure tourism activities take place in outdoor environments and are naturally socially distanced, lessening the likelihood of the transmission of COVID-19. However, despite the resilience demonstrated by the adventure tourism sector during the pandemic, challenging economic conditions are likely to persist for several years to come, with total tourism spending in Canada forecast to return to pre-pandemic levels by 2024 at the earliest (Destination Canada, 2021).

In addition to pandemic recovery, the adventure tourism sector in Canada must contend with several human resource challenges. Adventure tour operators have been dealing with staffing shortages, underqualified guides, and high staff turnover rates long before the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues. Low wages and seasonal work factor into the high rate of staff turnover. Many adventure guides search for “real jobs” after only a couple of summer or winter seasons working in the sector. Those that persevere for more than a couple of years are the ones that piece together year-round work, either by alternating between summer and winter seasons in the same location,

or by heading to an international destination to find employment in the off-season. High staff turnover rates cost operators time and money in terms of hiring and training. Further complicating matters is the recent decline in enrolment in, or outright closure of, many post-secondary leisure and recreation programs in Canada. These developments have decreased the number of qualified applicants for adventure tourism jobs in Canada so much so that some employers have turned to migrant labour pools to fill vacant positions. Staff training and retention are now extremely high priorities for most adventure tour operators in Canada.

Another human resource issue facing the adventure tourism sector in Canada has to do with the workplace culture associated with adventure tourism. The adventure tourism workplace has long been a space dominated by white men. Women have struggled over the years to gain a foothold in this highly masculine and sometimes misogynistic environment. So too have Indigenous peoples and other racial and ethnic minorities. While many industries have adopted hiring practices and other workplace policies to promote equity, diversity, inclusivity, and decolonization, the adventure tourism sector in Canada continues to lag behind. Of course, many companies are in the process of changing their workplace cultures by incorporating equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization principles into their organizational policies and daily practices, but much work still remains.

One challenge that has long plagued the adventure tourism sector is the threat of over-use, or over-tourism, at popular sites. This problem is often called the paradox of nature-based tourism. The more popular a natural place becomes, the more likely it will suffer environmental degradation; the more environmental degradation a place suffers, the less popular it becomes. Sustainably developing adventure tourism sites has long been a sector priority, but the problem has become compounded in recent years by the digitization of modern life and the rise of social media. Adventure tourists increasingly rely on social media to inform their travel and destina-

tion choices. A single photo on Facebook or Instagram, or a captivating tweet, can offer sudden inspiration for travel and adventure. Yet, for as much as social media benefits the adventure tourism economy, it can also lead to unsustainable growth and environmental degradation as visitors flock to the latest “Instagrammable” site. Take, for example, Joffre Lakes Provincial Park in British Columbia, which features a spectacular trio of alpine lakes surrounded by snow-capped peaks and hanging glaciers. In 2015, the park experienced a 250% increase in visitation after some tourists’ photographs of the scenery went viral (de l’Église, 2019). The subsequent flood of visitors left litter and caused trail erosion. To mitigate these impacts, BC Parks revamped the hiking trail system, making it much more accessible to visitors, and, in turn, further transforming what used to be a “hidden gem” into a crowded tourist attraction. This is one reason why sustainable tourism development of any kind requires careful planning and much forethought.

A list of the challenges currently facing the adventure tourism sector cannot be complete without mentioning the climate crisis. Global heating is affecting the entire planet: sea levels are rising; weather patterns are changing; glaciers and polar ice caps are melting; coral reefs are being bleached; forest fires and hurricanes are becoming more frequent and intense; the list goes on. Adventure tourism operators are not immune to the impacts of climate change. Warming temperatures in the Arctic and rapidly receding polar sea ice have negatively impacted polar bear tourism in Churchill, Manitoba, the polar bear capital of Canada. Warmer winters with less snowfall have taken a toll on Canada’s skiing and snowboarding sector, especially in British Columbia and Alberta. More intense and longer forest fire seasons in western Canada have limited the operating field of many regional rafting, hiking, and canoeing outfitters. Melting glaciers and warmer temperatures in the mountains have added a new level of risk to climbing and mountaineering operations in the Western Cordillera as terrain instability has increased the frequency of rockfalls in the summer and avalanches in the winter. Still, for as much as the effects of the climate crisis

are negatively impacting the adventure tourism sector in Canada, they are also providing some new opportunities for operators and tourists. The most significant opportunity is the extension of the summer tourist season into the spring and autumn months, especially in the far northern parts of the country where frigid temperatures have long hindered tourism development.

Despite these challenges, the future of adventure tourism in Canada remains bright. Public and private investment in adventure tourism is on the rise. So too is the percentage of tourists participating in outdoor adventure activities. The sector is already well established in provinces like British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec, and there is plenty of room for sector expansion, not only in and around major urban centres but also in more remote and rural areas across the country, particularly in the near and far north. As domestic and international tourists continue to seek out adventurous experiences, the adventure tourism sector in Canada will continue to grow.

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