

GOING PLACES

MAY 2023

Evolving the family business at Aski Holistic Adventures and Big Eddy Lodge

Saskatchewan
outfitters survey builds
case for industry

Precision niche marketing
key to attracting more
visitors

Redberry Lake Biosphere
Region reimagines
tourism possibilities

SASKATCHEWAN'S TOURISM INDUSTRY NEWSLETTER

TOURISM
Saskatchewan
CANADA

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COVER IMAGE
Michela Carrière, owner of Aski Holistic Adventures, and Solomon Carrière, co-owner of Big Eddy Lodge

Past issues of *Going Places* are available on Business.TourismSaskatchewan.com/going-places.

Saskatchewan comprises lands covered by Treaties 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10, the traditional lands of the Cree, Dakota, Dene, Lakota, Nakota and Saulteaux peoples, and the traditional home of the Métis.

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Refreshed Saskatchewan Travel Guide available for bulk orders



The 2023 *Saskatchewan Travel Guide* has a stylish new look. Tourism Saskatchewan undertook a complete makeover of the guide, which is now an 88-page publication. A new format organizes content under four new travel zones: Living Skies & Badlands, Prairie Life & City Lights, Unlimited Lakes & Parkland, and Northern Lights & Waterways (see page 10 for travel zone details). Articles align with current industry trends and consumer demand for a more authentic, storytelling approach.

Stories contain in-depth, detailed information, along with helpful tips, side trips, and QR codes that take readers to corresponding online content. The double-page travel zone conceptual maps feature main cities, communities and highways, along with all provincial, regional, and national parks. A traveller index lists the contact information/websites for businesses, attractions, and operators included in the guide. Past research has confirmed that consumers appreciate having conceptual maps and indexes, as they provide useful trip planning information.

Tourism Saskatchewan is accepting bulk orders from operators who wish to display copies of the 2023 *Saskatchewan Travel Guide* and share the guide with visitors. Order your FREE quantities by completing the bulk order form (available on Business.TourismSaskatchewan.com in the Marketing Your Business section) and emailing it to bulkorders@tourismsask.com. The 2021-2023 Official Saskatchewan Road Map and 2023 Saskatchewan Fishing & Hunting Map are also available to order.

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

Investing in niche markets key to growing Saskatchewan's visitor economy



Tourism Saskatchewan has some big goals to fulfil. *Saskatchewan's Growth Plan* sets an ambitious target of \$3.6 billion in annual tourist expenditures by 2030. By the third quarter of 2022, our industry blew past the forecast of \$1.8 billion for the entire year. When the final numbers are in, we expect travel spending to be approximately \$2.2 billion in 2022.

To help the industry reach the \$3.6 billion target, Tourism Saskatchewan is investing in the province's strengths as a destination. This focus aligns with our mandated responsibilities and with the following strategic priorities:

- Market Saskatchewan's tourism experiences and stories; and
- Strengthen Saskatchewan's tourism experiences.

Diversifying our province's portfolio of market-ready and export-ready experiences across a number of unique aspects of the industry will both minimize the risk of downturns in the economy and support emerging engines of growth.

Tourism Saskatchewan is focused on strategic actions to grow the visitor economy, build on our province's strengths, and heighten its competitiveness as a destination. There are areas of our sector where substantial investments made now are speeding recovery and delivering immediate returns. For example, getting events back on track is fundamental, and we know that hosting major national and international sports events is key to tourism growth. An economic impact study of the 2022 Grey Cup Championship and Festival showed that activities generated a \$25.7 million boost to the province's GDP.

Outfitting is a lucrative niche industry in Saskatchewan – one that attracts high-yield U.S. visitors seeking unparalleled fishing and hunting adventures. WestJet's new flights linking Saskatoon and Minneapolis/St. Paul are a huge gain for outfitters. Tourism Saskatchewan and Destination Canada are investing in a significant marketing campaign to promote these experiences to American anglers and hunters. Additionally, the new route should open doors to more business events for Saskatoon and the province overall.


Ensuring convenient and efficient direct connections to our province is a vital part of strategies to bring more international visitors to Saskatchewan. This issue of *Going Places* highlights niche trends and markets on which Tourism Saskatchewan is placing strategic focus and investment – culinary/agritourism, astrotourism, Indigenous tourism, nature-based wellness, and snowmobiling.

All of these areas underline Saskatchewan's strengths and qualities that distinguish our province from other destinations. Furthermore, research confirms that we have what many international travellers are seeking – opportunities to explore nature, enjoy authentic experiences, and be immersed in local cultures and traditions. Ultimately, investing in our diversified set of strengths should result in strong returns now and in the future.

Jonathan Potts

Create travel offers to entice visitors

TRAVEL OFFER



Elk Ridge Resort Mid-Week Stay & Play Golf Package
Elk Ridge Resort | Elk Ridge Resort Golf Course
Elk Ridge, Prince Albert National Park, Waskesiu Lake
May 7, 2023 to Oct 1, 2023

STARTING AT:
\$339

BOOK NOW

Travel offers are an important component of Tourism Saskatchewan's marketing campaigns. They encourage visitors to plan and book in advance. For operators, travel offers are a way to increase business outside of peak season or on days that see fewer customers.

Tourism businesses and operators can list their experiences for free on TourismSaskatchewan.com. The website features the popular Travel Offers section, where potential visitors can shop for packages and exclusive offerings.

Now is the time for operators to design fall and winter travel offers and get them listed.

The website FishHunt.TourismSaskatchewan.com also has a section for packages created by Saskatchewan outfitters. They can be easily searched by location or category – Fishing, Big Game and Game Bird. Posting offers on this site is a free service, as well.

A travel offer can include a packaged deal (accommodation, transportation, meals, etc.);

value-added incentives, such as equipment rental or meals included in the price; or discounts for a specific amount or percentage.

Advice about creating and posting travel offers is available at Business.TourismSaskatchewan.com.

Email information.updates@tourismsask.com to inquire about posting offers.

Evolving the family business at Aski Holistic Adventures and Big Eddy Lodge



Michela Carrière, owner of Aski Holistic Adventures

The Saskatchewan River Delta is the largest inland river delta in North America. Its meandering channels and tracts of wetlands create a distinct, unparalleled ecosystem. The delta is where rare plant species thrive, millions of birds come to nest, and wildlife and fish are abundant.

Evidence of human history dates back 3,000 years. Today, Cree and Métis residents continue to draw their livelihood from the land and water, and recognize the importance of the natural environment to spiritual and cultural well-being.

The Carrières have lived on the delta for generations. Looking back at their history, there is a pattern of guiding, hosting guests and introducing them to the land and surroundings that continues today.

Solomon Carrière, owner of Big Eddy Lodge, shares stories of his grandfathers – York boat captains who assisted guiding expeditions to the far north. His grandmothers managed multiple roles as caregivers, artisans and hostesses “who always supported their families in creating livelihoods on the lands and waters around them,” he said.

Solomon’s father and uncles began guiding visiting bird hunters in the 1930s, taking a hiatus to serve in WWII. After the war, the outfitting business expanded and Big Eddy Lodge began welcoming anglers, hunters, photographers, and scientists conducting research on the area’s delicate ecosystem.

Solomon began guiding when he was eight years old. He and his wife Renée took over the business in 1982. “We were fortunate to have three children, all

of whom were raised and home-schooled in the wilderness and homelands surrounding Big Eddy Lodge,” he said. “As a family, we have made these wilderness lands our home, and it has provided for us a wonderful livelihood filled with unique experiences.”

Learning the business

Daughter Michela recalls how she and her siblings helped their parents. “As young as eight or nine, we were assisting my mom in the kitchen, preparing meals for up to 20 people hunting at the lodge,” she said. “We would mix bread and cookies, and were cooking and baking all the time – learning how to take care of people. Eventually, as we got more skills and responsibilities, we were in charge of cleaning the cabins and keeping the yard immaculate. As I got older, I was involved in transportation – taking guests in and out by motorboat or snowmobile.”

At 15, Michela took on another role as a canoe guide. Her first expedition experience, part of a convoy of large voyageur canoes, presented challenges that would shape her character and outlook. “I was an assistant guide, responsible for helping one team paddle across a massive lake. It was windy and the trip took 10 hours, but we made it across. If I’m ever going through a hard time, I think back to that first experience and remember how I made it through a difficult situation. I was just a teenager, but I did it.”

Curiosity leads to a career

Growing up on the delta was ideal for a child with an instinctive curiosity about plants and nature. From as early as she can remember, Michela was fascinated by the flowers, trees and mosses around her home. She assembled her own collection of plants and wondered about their special properties.



Top: Big Eddy Lodge

Bottom: Saskatchewan River Delta

At age 13, some of the answers came to her in a book about Cree traditional medicines harvested from the land. She eventually studied biology and horticulture at the University of Saskatchewan, and focused her studies on the medicinal use of plants.

In 2016, Michela was cast in the documentary television series *Merchants of the Wild*, which followed six Indigenous youth on a 25-day canoe journey across northern Ontario. Involvement in the show provided another life lesson. She realized that she had the skills, leadership and drive to create a unique new tourism offering at Big Eddy Lodge.

"Right after the show, I hit the ground running and started business planning," she said. "I took some business classes and formulated the whole plan for Aski Holistic Adventures."

Michela won a business start-up competition in 2017, which assisted with the purchase of equipment, including an 18-ft. tipi, and enabled the launch of a new tourism operation that blended outdoor adventure, land-based teachings and wellness. A year later, Aski Holistic Adventures was presented with the Saskatchewan Indigenous Experience Award – Outdoor at the International Indigenous Tourism Conference, held in Saskatoon. The business went on to become a Saskatchewan Tourism Awards of Excellence nominee in 2019 and recipient in 2020.

The name says it all

Finding the perfect name was a lengthy process for Michela. Including a Cree term was first and foremost, and she was inspired by the word *aski*, which means land/earth. Next came looking closely at the offerings and finding words that reflect the experiences and the promise made to visitors. "I wanted something to really describe *aski*," she said. "It's outdoor adventure, but not the extreme kind. I needed to tone it down, so chose holistic – reflecting a slower pace and activities in nature that can involve all skill levels. And I like the acronym – AHA. You come out here to have your 'aha' moments."

One location, two businesses

Big Eddy Lodge and Aski Holistic Adventures complement each other on multiple levels. When the lodge is full with anglers and hunters, Michela may take over the cooking and help with housekeeping. Year-round, she manages marketing and social media activities for both businesses. When Aski Holistic Adventures is hosting groups onsite, Solomon lends his expertise as a guide and world-champion paddler.

"We all have different skills," Michela said. "My dad is an amazing wilderness guide and has so much experience with making trails and maintaining them. My mom is great at coming up with ideas to bring people together. She is a great planner, and I have skills in executing the plans. My sister is also involved in the marketing. There is balance in the business relationship. We can all work together and really appreciate and see the value in each other."

"Renée and I always hoped that one of our children would take over and evolve the business," Solomon said. "All our children, and now our grandchildren, call Big Eddy Lodge home and contribute their work and ideas for its future. But Michela has turned her vision of tourism into a holistic land, water and wilderness adventure business. She has a remarkable skill set, one that is steeped in Indigenous culture, Cree language and her lived history on this territory."

Expanding and diversifying

Like many tourism operators, the Carrières shifted their focus and goals in 2020-2021. One of the first projects was to create a large garden on the property (not a simple task in a marshland) and build a greenhouse. New infrastructure also included an additional cabin and an outdoor kitchen for use year-round. The lodge can now accommodate nearly 30 people indoors, and more during the summer when the tipi and camping areas are available.

Through Tourism Saskatchewan's Diversification Program, investment has been made in equipping the lodge to offer bird watching tours. Solomon is a renowned expert in bird calling and navigating the delta, which is home to hundreds of species of migrating and wintering birds. These new tours are designed to appeal to different markets and bring new visitors to the area. Enhancements to support the tours include an additional trail system and an outpost to allow for longer, more remote excursions.

IN CONVERSATION

Tourism HR Canada's Heather Elder shares tips and tools to attract and keep employees



Heather Elder is the Director of Marketing at Tourism HR Canada, an organization dedicated to building a world-leading tourism workforce nationwide. It leads human resource development activities that support a globally competitive and sustainable tourism sector in Canada, with a dynamic, resilient workforce at its core.

In an interview with Tourism Saskatchewan, Elder addressed some of the current issues confronting tourism employers and discussed approaches that can turn challenges into opportunities.

Workforce challenges, particularly a serious deficit of workers, have been top-of-mind for some time. How critical is the issue now?

It's absolutely critical, and we expect it to get worse as summer approaches. Labour market information for April tells us that the sector is down about 125,000 workers compared to the same period in 2019. Each of the five industry groups within tourism – accommodations, food and beverage services, recreation and entertainment, transportation, and travel services – has been affected differently by the pandemic, and recovery rates continue to fluctuate.

On the demand side, tourists are starting to come back to Canada; however, we haven't reached those record numbers we were achieving prior to the pandemic. Destination marketing organizations are launching great campaigns to entice visitors to Canada. But other countries are doing the same and there's heavy competition out there.

How are some employers addressing current challenges? What is important for them to consider in order to recruit and keep valuable employees?

Tourism HR Canada encourages employers to try a variety of approaches and consider different demographics and audience groups. There's not a one-size-fits-all method. When reaching out to these groups – newcomers to Canada, Indigenous populations, people with disabilities, youth, even people looking at phased retirement – it is important to tailor attraction and retention practices. If you want to reach new Canadians, it helps to know where they are looking for information. Are there specific newsletters, online resources or job boards where employers can advertise positions? To reach Indigenous peoples, consider approaching band councils. If your business is close to an Indigenous population, is there a way that you can help with transportation if that is a barrier to employment? Consider, too, how to make the application process as accessible and inclusive as possible.

Some employers are really thinking outside the box in terms of pay, benefits and different perks for employees. These may include free memberships or equipment use within the company, helping with childcare or housing, or sending staff on familiarization visits to other nearby tourism businesses. Employee sharing is another option. If you are a seasonal operation, there may be a way of partnering with another seasonal business to keep staff employed year-round.

What are some resources that can help tourism businesses in their efforts to attract and retain workers?

Tourism HR Canada has a number of resources to help employers diversify their attraction and retention practices. We also have a free downloadable guide, *Now Hiring*, that addresses changes in the nature of work and workplaces. It offers checklists and a lot of actionable items employers can use.

Hiring International Talent is our series of infographics that educates employers about the various immigration pathways and eligible programs.

We just relaunched our *Discover Tourism* website, which received support through the Government of Canada's Tourism Relief Fund. The renewed resource speaks to six different audience groups – job seekers, students, educators, career advisors, employers, and employees.

The site features interactive quizzes, career pathways and lots of videos – content will be continually added. It speaks to job seekers and students, and it reaches out to people who are already working in the tourism sector but unsure of how they can build a career in the industry. We want to show them that this can be an avenue for a life-long career; it doesn't need to be temporary or a stepping-stone to something else.

Employers can access an HR self-assessment tool, *Employer Compass* video tutorials, and mentorship checklists, along with advice about how to reach different audience groups. We recognize youth as one of the core demographics that works in the industry. It's also important to show how professionals, either coming from other countries or even from other industries within Canada, can apply their skills in the tourism sector. If you're an accountant at another organization, you can also be an accountant at a hotel or restaurant. If your experience is in HR or marketing – these roles exist in tourism.

What are some examples that tourism business can consider to provide opportunities for youth and equip them with skills to take on different, more advanced roles?

Some businesses offer scholarships to people who work with them. Training opportunities are important, whether it is on the job or enabling staff to enrol in classes or online courses – providing the space to do it and compensation to pursue them. Support like that provides incentive to stay with the company. Workers feel valued if they see that their employer is willing to make an investment in their future.

Paid work-integrated learning is another pathway. Tourism HR Canada's Propel Student Work Placement Program connects post-secondary students seeking internships or work placements with employers. The program offers wage subsidies for each qualifying placement. Employers should also consider local high schools – employing students who are looking for experience or co-op placements. These opportunities give students an idea of the skills that they need to work in the sector and the diversity of jobs available in tourism.

Saskatchewan outfitters survey builds case for industry



Northern Saskatchewan

Three years after the outbreak of COVID-19, Saskatchewan outfitters are seeing the return of guests seeking world-class angling and hunting adventures. Outfitting was one of the hardest hit industries during the pandemic and suffered unprecedented setbacks, including revenue losses of over \$100 million in both 2020 and 2021. Figures for last year are more encouraging. In 2022, angling and hunting licence sales to residents of the United States reached 81 per cent of the pre-pandemic baseline.

Saskatchewan outfitters see the bulk of their customers coming from the U.S. Many lodges and camps have welcomed loyal U.S. clientele for decades. Annual trips to Saskatchewan for the exhilarating hunting and angling adventures are a tradition for groups of friends, as well as generations of family members.

“Most Saskatchewan outfitters were unable to bring any clients to their camps during the pandemic and, therefore, had no revenue,” Harvey Kroll, Chair of the Saskatchewan Commission of Professional Outfitters (SCPO) and owner of Hatchet Lake Lodge, said. “We have a history and strong relationships with our clients. Saskatchewan is their preferred destination for hunting and fishing, and this is why outfitting plays such an important role in the provincial economy. We sell packaged products to the U.S. market.”

Guest satisfaction is important in the early stages of trip planning, long before visitors arrive at their chosen destination. Convenient direct air connections between Saskatchewan and Minneapolis/St. Paul always made for seamless travel and were a major route for U.S. hunters and anglers. The suspension in 2020 of the long-running Delta Airlines corridor between Saskatoon and Minneapolis/St. Paul was grim news on top of pandemic-related travel restrictions and health and safety concerns. Industry recovery was difficult to imagine without this familiar, reliable transportation channel – Saskatchewan’s sole direct connection to the U.S.

The SCPO responded by leading a stakeholder committee to gather perspectives and determine a convincing approach to the matter. The committee included Tourism Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Trade and Export Development, Saskatoon Airport Authority, Discover Saskatoon, Hospitality Saskatchewan and other partners. All stakeholders brought important information and experience with air access issues to the table; however, research and data specific to the outfitting sector was still needed to build a case.

“We recognized and understood that outfitting is the biggest definable user group, by far, of air services in the province,” Kroll said. “It’s more than 33,000 clients annually – a significant chunk of business and key to any air service provider.”

Gathering evidence from outfitters

Commissioning a research project to fully assess the needs of outfitters was the logical next step. With support from Tourism Saskatchewan and the Ministry of Trade and Export Development, SCPO contracted Environics Research to undertake a study assessing the needs of Saskatchewan outfitters.

An outfitter survey was launched in August 2021. Participants reported on business activities in 2019, the last full year before the pandemic. The collective voice of SCPO members came through loud and clear. Their input underscored the value of the industry and the importance of re-establishing a direct air connection between Saskatoon and the U.S.

“When the SCPO puts out surveys like this, we tend to get a really good response rate from active outfitters,” Roy Anderson, CEO, said. “Their engagement is appreciated. It shows understanding and recognition, among SCPO members, that their involvement drives research projects and enables us to forward statistical data to decision makers.”

Environics Research delivered a full report in February 2022. Data collected from outfitters was also used by Praxis Consulting to complete an economic impact assessment of air service needs. Both documents highlight the value of outfitting as an important export industry for Saskatchewan. “Outfitting generates travel activity and tourism activity from export markets – almost solely the U.S.,” Anderson said, emphasizing the critical importance of access to Canada via convenient and reliable air transportation channels.

The following bullets create a picture of outfitting clients and what is at stake if they stop visiting:

- The survey determined that 77 per cent of Saskatchewan outfitters serve, almost fully, U.S. clientele – 90 per cent of guests in 2019 came from the U.S.
- Pre-pandemic, outfitters in the province welcomed, on average, over 100 clients each year. These visitors tend to have a high disposable income and spend thousands of dollars on hunting and angling trips.
- Nearly half of the survey respondents anticipate that a portion of their clients will avoid coming to Saskatchewan if convenient direct flights are unavailable. Guests who still choose to travel here, using non-direct routes, will leave part of their spending behind in other cities, particularly Calgary, Edmonton and Toronto.
- Two out of three outfitters predicted a revenue decrease of up to 30 per cent due to the difficulty clients face in reaching the province. Furthermore, the additional travel time and costs would diminish Saskatchewan’s appeal as a destination.

Continued on page 16

RESEARCH AND TRENDS

Precision niche marketing key to attracting more visitors



Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park



kāniyāsīhk Culture Camps



Nipawin area

More and more travellers are planning vacations that appeal to their individual interests or passions. By understanding and tapping into these preferences, tourism businesses can better target specific groups, influence their travel choices and increase visitation.

The phrase niche tourism refers to products, services and interests shared by smaller, but influential, segments of travellers. For example, people who cross the globe to view northern lights in the Northwest Territories or floating icebergs along Canada's Atlantic coast.

Niche marketing is not entirely new to Tourism Saskatchewan, which has a long-standing record of success with campaigns to attract U.S. anglers and hunters. This distinct travel segment accounts for almost 80 per cent of business for Saskatchewan outfitters and over \$120 million in annual travel spending. Between 2014 and 2019, hunting and angling licence sales to U.S. visitors to Saskatchewan grew by over 15 per cent.

Tourism Saskatchewan is developing a niche market strategy to match passionate, high-yield travellers with enticing Saskatchewan experiences. The strategy is a result of in-depth work with the firms Environics Research and Destination Think. Rigorous industry consultation and market research will inform strategies and tactics to attract travellers in the following niche activities:

Astrotourism – Astrotourism is explained as intentional travel to destinations with less light pollution and clear, dark skies; to view cosmic phenomena and activities; or to visit observatories and astronomy-related exhibits, museums, etc. Saskatchewan offers abundant opportunities to gaze at stars and the wonders of the night sky. In the southwest, Grasslands National Park and Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park are designated Dark Sky Preserves, while Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area has the title of Nocturnal Preserve.

Birding – In 2019, U.S. birders spent over \$17 billion on trip-related expenses, and the market is poised for growth. Saskatchewan is ideally positioned to attract a greater share of birding enthusiasts. The province is situated on the North American Central Flyway, a major migration route for birds travelling between summer nesting grounds and milder winter habitat. Its mixed-wood boreal forest supports some of the highest bird species diversity on the continent. Several saline lakes are major stopover and feeding areas. Saskatchewan is home to North America's oldest bird sanctuary and to over 50 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas.

Nature-based wellness – Saskatchewan's wide-open spaces, parks, boreal forest, lakes and waterways offer bounteous opportunities to connect with nature and engage in therapeutic wellness activities. The Global Wellness Institute estimated the value of wellness tourism, pre-pandemic, at \$720 billion. Rapid growth of 20.9 per cent annually is predicted, with the market reaching \$1.1 trillion in 2025. International wellness travellers spend up to 35 per cent more on trips than typical international tourists.

Indigenous tourism – Historically, international visitors have demonstrated a high level of interest (37 per cent) in Indigenous experiences, and there is growing demand among Canadian travellers. Research undertaken by the

Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada and Destination Canada revealed that one in three Canadians is interested in Indigenous tourism experiences. Growth in this industry helps to create sustainable employment in Indigenous communities and enrich travel experiences through sharing culture, history and traditions.

Culinary/agritourism – Food brings people together and is a way to tell stories. Saskatchewan is home to more than 40 per cent of Canada's cultivated farmland. There is significant potential to elevate and expand agritourism experiences in the province. These range from working guest ranch vacations to farm tours with hands-on activities, product sampling, and garden or orchard meal settings. Popular farm-to-table and grain-to-glass experiences further showcase the bounty that is nurtured and grown here.

Snowmobiling – Saskatchewan is known for its snowy winters and opportunities to enjoy outdoor adventure and activities that foster friendships and benefit overall health and wellbeing. The province has more than 10,000 kilometres of groomed snowmobile trails, built and maintained by Saskatchewan Snowmobile Association clubs and members. In the east central area, the popular 1,000 Miles of Snow takes riders into 12 communities and offers exhilarating experiences. Snowmobile enthusiasts in Canada and the U.S. spend over \$35 billion chasing their passion each year.

Niche travellers value sustainability

The identified activities highlight Saskatchewan's strengths as a destination for travellers who have a genuine desire to connect with nature and explore local culture. They also present opportunities to benefit from growing consumer trends toward sustainable travel. Passionate travellers spend more money per trip, travel more frequently, and stay longer when destinations offer sustainable tourism experiences.

- **Low environmental impact** – Tourism Saskatchewan's niche areas of focus are considered to have a low environmental impact, which allows them to grow without detriment to the environment. They invite travellers to appreciate and respect the importance of Saskatchewan's biodiversity, and encourage long-term ecological and environmental stewardship.

- **Hands-on tourism experiences** – Immersive tourism experiences are highly valued, particularly by younger generations who want to be engaged in travel in different ways. Agritourism, for example, fosters greater appreciation of the food we eat, along with where and how it is grown. The industry can provide additional revenue for farmers and producers, and create new employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

- **Reconciliation** – Indigenous tourism introduces guests to authentic and often profound experiences that incorporate traditions, storytelling, history, spirituality, and land/nature-based practices. The experiences and activities enrich Saskatchewan's tourism assets, bridge cultural understanding, and expand business and job opportunities for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous participation and experience development are important to all of the niche market categories that are a focus for Tourism Saskatchewan.

Tourism shows steady recovery in 2022

There was definitely a mood shift among much of the tourism sector in 2022, and optimism remains high as the industry proceeds on a steady track to recovery.

Statistics Canada figures show that visitor spending in Saskatchewan reached \$1.83 billion in the first three quarters of 2022. Based on this amount, the total for the year is estimated at \$2.2 billion – in line with spending in 2019.

Domestic visitation a strong, steady force

Saskatchewan's tourism industry has always been more self-reliant than those in other provinces. Gains in 2022 were strongest among local residents. According to the Conference Board of Canada, almost 40 per cent of total visits to or within Saskatchewan last year were overnight stays, either in hotels or with friends and family. Of those, approximately two-thirds were visits by residents of the province.

After slow growth in 2021, domestic visitation to Regina and Saskatoon increased by 72 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively. This upward trend was driven by growing comfort with travel to major cities and the return of festivals and events.

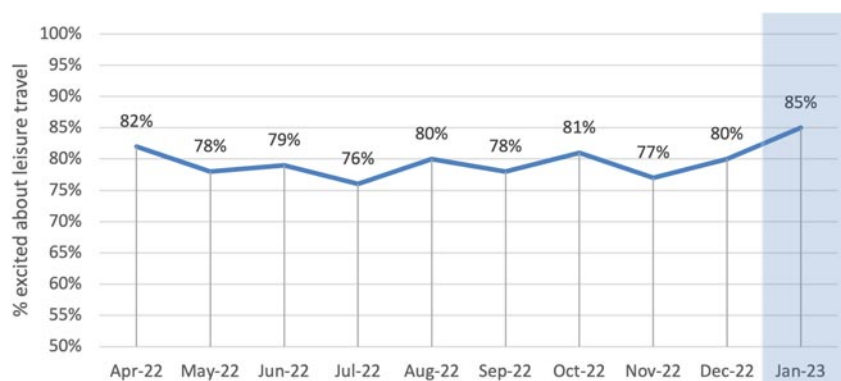
An economic impact study by Sport Tourism Canada highlighted the success of the 2022 Grey Cup Championship and five-day Grey Cup Festival, held in Regina in November. Grey Cup activities delivered a \$25.7 million boost to the province's GDP.

International visitation on the rise

Overseas visitation and traffic from the U.S. have increased significantly since 2021, but still remain below pre-pandemic levels. Restoring overseas markets is hindered by economic recession in Europe and weak travel sentiment in parts of Asia.

Persistently high inflation could continue to slow recovery in U.S. markets in the short-term; however, visitation may rebound by the end of 2023 as economic anxieties ease. According to Destination Canada, Americans' level of excitement for leisure travel is at a three-year high, jumping from 77 per cent in November 2022 to 85 per cent in January 2023 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Americans' excitement for leisure travel. (source: Destination Canada)



Swings in seasonal labour

Tourism employment is generally measured at its peak, in August of each year. In 2022, almost 70,000 Saskatchewan residents held full- or part-time jobs in tourism – close to the total in 2019. The province's job-related recovery progress ranked third among Canadian provinces.

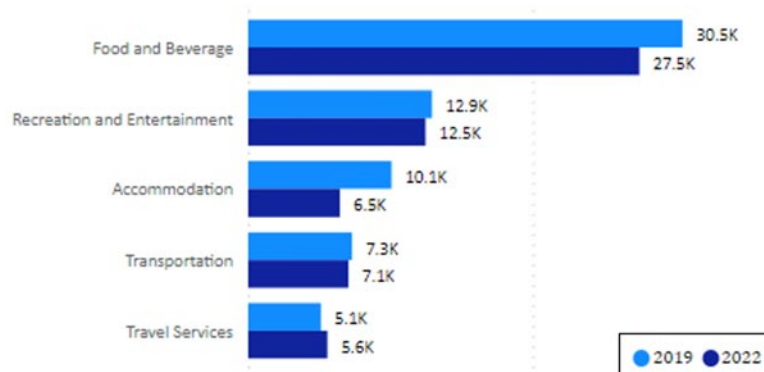
Employment reached pre-pandemic levels in September and October of 2022, then fell short during winter. Backslides during the winter months highlight the seasonal nature of tourism employment and associated challenges. Saskatchewan ranks seventh among Canadian provinces in tourism employment winter recovery; however, all provinces, except Manitoba, experienced similar declines.

Tourism subsectors – accommodations and food and beverage services – continue to fall short of pre-pandemic figures. Employment in the accommodations industry in 2022 was 36 per cent below 2019 levels, while

the difference was almost 10 per cent for food and beverage services (see Figure 2). The figures indicate that people who left these industries during the pandemic have not returned in large numbers.

To address industry labour challenges, Tourism Saskatchewan is working closely with partners, including Tourism HR Canada and tourism training and education organizations in other provinces. Forming a united front helps leverage resources and implement effective strategies for long-term job stability.

Figure 2. Average annual employment by tourism sub-sector (source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey)



Hotels reach pre-pandemic occupancy

Average annual hotel occupancy in the province increased to 56.1 per cent in 2022, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Moose Jaw and Prince Albert were top performers, with both cities reaching 67 per cent annual occupancy. Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) also increased, reaching \$69.29 last year, compared to \$65.98 in 2019.

Throughout the pandemic, hotel occupancy in Saskatchewan stayed on track with the national average. Last year, it dipped six points below national levels. With U.S. visitation and business travel expected to rebound in 2023, Saskatchewan hotels' performance should steadily improve.

Expectations for 2023 and beyond

The momentum in travel demand will continue, but the tourism industry faces headwinds from rising travel costs. Near-term increases in visitor spending will be pushed by price increases in the sector, due to inflationary pressures and travel businesses trying to recoup costs incurred during the pandemic.

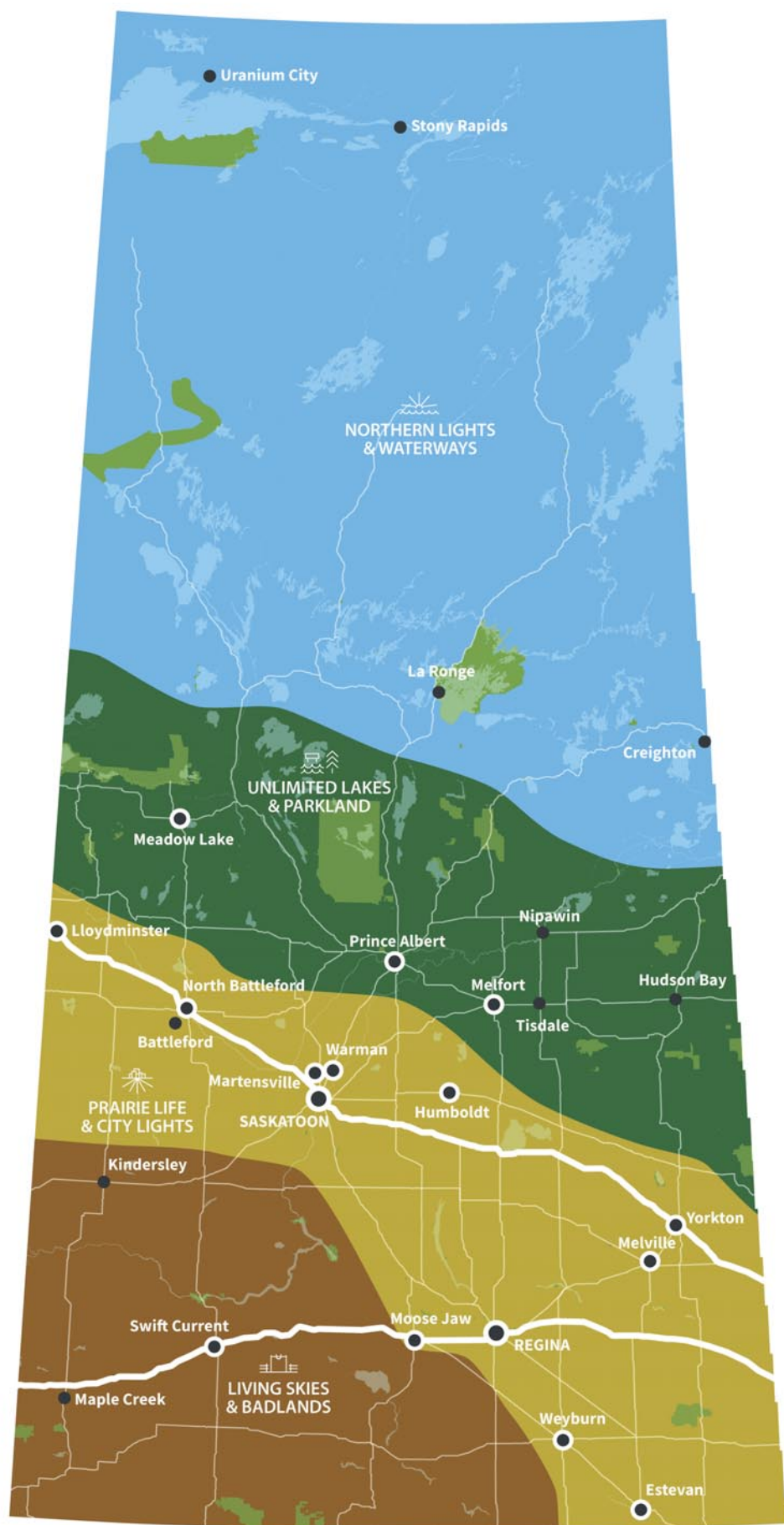
Domestic travel will continue to recover in 2023, with both tourism expenditures and overnight visits expected to return to pre-pandemic highs. The Conference Board of Canada forecasts that 2023 will be a good year for travel in Saskatchewan. Visitation will nearly match pre-pandemic numbers, then surpass them in 2024. Overseas travel will see modest gains this year, and approach recovery in 2025.

Tourism Saskatchewan posts quarterly and yearly Tourism Trends Reports on its online Business Hub, [Business.TourismSaskatchewan.com](https://business.tourismsaskatchewan.com). The reports feature information about Saskatchewan-U.S. border crossings, international air travel, hotel occupancy and average daily rates, tourism employment, average gasoline prices, discretionary spending habits, and average exchange rates for selected countries.

Tourism Trends Reports are part of the Business Hub's Research and Statistics section, which features a range of materials that highlight market research, industry performance and regional profiles. The section also includes research reports from other sources, such as Statistics Canada, Destination Canada and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

MARKETING SASKATCHEWAN

Refreshed travel zones inspire Saskatchewan stories, characteristics and experiences



Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan is a big place. Deciding what to see and where to travel can be daunting for first-time visitors, as well as for residents planning road trips or seeking new discoveries based on their particular interests. A sweeping makeover of the *Saskatchewan Travel Guide* (see page 2), along with refreshed marketing materials and campaigns, make travel planning easier through the categorization of four Saskatchewan travel zones: 1) Northern Lights & Waterways; 2) Unlimited Lakes & Parkland; 3) Prairie Life & City Lights; and 4) Living Skies & Badlands.

Tourism Saskatchewan worked with Destination Think throughout 2020-2022 to determine strategies for long-term growth and sustainability. A brand evolution process involved comprehensive research, industry consultation, and an in-depth Place DNA® examination of the province. This work led to refreshed brand pillars and travel zones.

The travel zone boundaries are influenced primarily by ecological corridors. Several factors shape the character and identity of each: local stories and people, diverse cultures, landmarks and geography, tourism products and experiences, and climate, for example.

The Place DNA® process also identified four overarching pillars that distinguish Saskatchewan from other destinations:

- **Compelling storytellers** – Saskatchewan storytellers are traditional, but also unexpected. They define how others see us and how we see ourselves.
- **Grit and determination** – characteristics that are part of how we speak and live our lives.
- **Connected to land and water** – people here are stewards of the land and water, but also connected by what is grown and harvested, and by the businesses created.
- **Surprising beauty** – Saskatchewan's beauty surprises visitors. It is obvious in the breathtaking landscapes, geographical features and living skies, but also expressed through people and experiences.

Tourism Saskatchewan looks forward to working with industry and sharing advice on how to use the identified pillars and travel zones to reach key markets and grow the visitor economy. Watch for *Industry Updates* that highlight available tools and resources.

Investments in travel trade position Saskatchewan favourably with U.K. travellers



Grasslands National Park

The loss of international travel was one of the many devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the onset, many industry veterans who witnessed travel disruptions in the past offered some advice – “Be patient, creative and stay on the radar in key markets. Visitors will return. Be ready for them.”

With international travel at a standstill, Tourism Saskatchewan shifted its focus in 2020-2022 to encourage local travel and support for businesses, and appeal to Canadians who were eager to explore the country when domestic travel restrictions eased. At the same time, it was important to maintain an influential presence in primary overseas markets – to share Saskatchewan stories and remind travellers of the welcoming experiences waiting for them. By working closely with partners – Destination Canada (DC) and Denkzauber Marketing – a steady stream of stories, imagery and suggestions for post-pandemic trips was fed to travellers in Germany and the United Kingdom, which yield the most overseas visitors to Saskatchewan.

Partnership profiles Saskatchewan in key markets

Tourism Saskatchewan has a longstanding relationship with Denkzauber Marketing, which has managed the province’s promotion in Germany for more than 10 years and now represents Saskatchewan in the U.K. The firm delivers a variety of services, including conducting sales calls and education sessions with tour operators, representing Saskatchewan at select consumer shows, and providing reports on travel trends and industry forecasts. Many U.K. travellers favour the services of travel agents over direct booking, making relationships with travel trade agencies and tour operators doubly important.

Michaela Arnold, Denkzauber Managing Director, reflected on Tourism Saskatchewan’s steadfast dedication and investment, and how the decade-long relationship has heightened interest in Saskatchewan. “At the beginning of our partnership, Saskatchewan was fairly unknown for most trade partners and, particularly, consumers,” she said, stressing the importance of building an inventory of products and experiences that travel trade can sell to customers. “Once product availability increased, we created the *Canada’s Secrets* brand and partnered with other lesser-known Canadian destinations, such as Manitoba, NWT and Yukon, along with Air Canada to foster a strong relationship with the trade and further increase knowledge of Saskatchewan among the travel agencies and travel agents. The knowledge about, awareness of and interest in Saskatchewan over the years has remarkably increased. Our focus is now shifting further towards sales.”

Saskatchewan has what U.K. travellers are seeking

Research published by DC in 2021 forecast potential growth in visitation by U.K. travellers. At the time, 6.2 million U.K. long-haul leisure travellers indicated plans to visit Canada within two years, with 14 per cent interested in visiting Saskatchewan.* Intent to visit Canada was highest among people aged 18-34.

The following are insights into the U.K. market that are particularly relevant to Saskatchewan:

- British travellers favour destinations where they can enjoy uncrowded spaces. They want safe destinations with plenty of outdoor experiences – qualities that Canada and Saskatchewan are well-positioned to deliver.
- U.K. leisure travellers enjoy sampling local food and drink. They are interested in nature-based experiences, visiting historical or world heritage sites, and exploring Indigenous culture while on holiday.
- Tourists from the U.K. spend an average of \$1,500 per trip and stay for approximately 12 nights. Canadians, in comparison, spend \$290 per trip and stay for three nights.
- There is potential to disperse U.K. visitation into shoulder seasons. Travel in late spring and early fall is nearly as popular as during peak summer months.

Is your business export-ready?

Building export readiness among Saskatchewan tourism operators is needed to enhance the province’s appeal to overseas guests and ensure delivery on the promise made to visitors. Expressing a desire to work with the travel trade and welcome their discerning customers is one thing; meeting the criteria for an export-ready business is another.

Tourism Saskatchewan offers advice and tools to help businesses determine their level of market readiness and understand the work needed to become export-ready. A comprehensive, refreshed Export Toolkit is available and consists of seven short courses that introduce tourism business owners to travel trade distribution. The courses plot a pathway to achieving export-readiness and gaining the attention of international visitors.

Access the Export Toolkit at [Business.TourismSaskatchewan.com](https://business.tourismsaskatchewan.com). For more information about working with the travel trade, contact Heidi Wesling at 306-798-3168, heidi.wesling@tourismsask.com, or Patti Peesker at 306-787-2328, patti.peesker@tourismsask.com.

Anticipating the return of overseas guests

In its Fall 2022 *Tourism Outlook*, DC declared that despite near-term economic and geopolitical setbacks, the “rising tide of travel demand will prevail.” According to DC’s research, overseas travel to Canada is expected to have modest recovery this year – achieving 64 per cent of 2019 volumes. In 2024, that figure is expected to rise to 95 per cent, with full recovery predicted by 2026. DC emphasizes several factors pointing to recovery in overseas travel – “A less expensive Canadian dollar (compared to the U.S. dollar), relaxed entry requirements, and geopolitical instability outside of North America will create opportunity for Canada.”

*To date, DC’s 2021 Global Tourism Watch remains the most recent source of information on the U.K. travel market.

Sources:

Destination Canada. Global Tourism Watch – United Kingdom, October 2021.

Destination Canada. Tourism Outlook, Fall 2022.

Destination Canada. Tourism’s Big Shift: Key Trends Shaping the Future of Canada’s Tourism Industry, November 2021.

DESTINATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Redberry Lake Biosphere Region reimagines tourism possibilities



Redberry Lake Biosphere Region. Photos by Neil Zeller.

The Redberry Lake Biosphere Region (RLBR) is in a category all of its own. Its importance is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which granted designation as a UNESCO Biosphere Region in 2000. Despite the UNESCO designation, the region remains one of Saskatchewan's best kept secrets.

The RLBR is one of 19 UNESCO biospheres in Canada, and the only one located in Saskatchewan. Efforts are underway to heighten awareness and curiosity, create transformative visitor experiences, and devise opportunities for local entrepreneurs and artists to be part of the tourism economy. New developments and activities aim for a minimal environmental footprint and to be least disruptive to the land, forest, plants and species of this unique area.

The world network of UNESCO biosphere reserves covers 700 regions in over 120 countries. "Every designated biosphere region worldwide has a core area with some level of protected status," John Kindrachuk, RLBR Executive Director, said. "Most of those in Canada are part of a national park. Ours is somewhat unique in that Redberry Lake has protection as a Federal Bird Sanctuary. The designation covers the Redberry Lake watershed, which is over 110,000 hectares and touches seven Saskatchewan municipalities."

Kindrachuk acknowledged some of the confusion concerning travel to the area and assumptions that it is an entirely protected zone, off limits to development, business and recreational activities. More accurately, the area sees a symbiotic relationship between conservation and commerce. While the lake has protected status, rural communities and farms dot the area. A regional park bustles with activity in the summer. The landscape is a mix of cultivated and grazed land, with patches of natural prairie and aspen forest.

Redberry Lake, itself, is unique in that it reaches a depth of 75 feet – unusual for a saline lake. The water reflects vibrant shades of turquoise and blue, due to the magnesium sulphate composition. The extended area around the lake is a nesting and feeding spot for migratory birds, including endangered whooping cranes. Nearly 200 bird species have been spotted in the area.

The RLBR fulfils a mandate of conservation practices, sustainable development, and capacity building through working collaboratively with partners at the local, provincial, national and international levels. Bringing several municipalities and stakeholders together and finding mutual goals is, understandably, challenging. Kindrachuk stresses that clear communication and consultation have led to greater appreciation of the region's tourism potential, and that recruiting local champions is important.



"There are so many things to see in rural Saskatchewan," he said. "But there is misunderstanding, even at the local level. Some people ask, 'Why would anyone come here?' We are trying to educate them that we have lots here to offer – that activities they consider common can be unique experiences for visitors. Looking ahead, part of the tourism experience will be teaching visitors about the importance of biodiversity – everything from plants to birds to insects and all the species that inhabit the area."

The RLBR set ambitious goals for growing the local visitor economy, with a focus on developing a keystone experience that attracts visitors and enables them to stay overnight or longer. Extending their stay means increased spending and more opportunities for local entrepreneurs, artists and people who can offer unique, authentic guest experiences. "It's not just about Redberry Lake, but about building a base location," Kindrachuk said. "With that in place, people can do excursions from here. We are seeing interest from a number of small operators interested in starting their own tourism ventures."

This year is literally a building year for the RLBR, which received funding from the Government of Canada's 2 Billion Trees program to build a tree nursery, greenhouse and maintenance building. The sale of native plants, trees and shrubs will be an important source of income that, along with other revenue streams, ensures stable funding. Building and operating the nursery will also create new jobs in the area.

Construction is underway on a new interpretive centre, made possible by support from Prairies Economic Development Canada, through the Tourism Relief Fund. The multi-purpose building will be used for meetings, retreats, indoor programming, and as a classroom setting.

The RLBR will be further enhanced by sustainable guest accommodations. Geodesic domes are scheduled for completion this summer.

Investment through Tourism Saskatchewan's Diversification Program was pivotal to new Experience the Biosphere programming. The partnership assisted the creation of an online tourism marketplace that allows visitors to create their own itinerary, sampling local cuisine, art and experiences. It also drove the development of Saskatchewan Birding Experience packages that treat visitors to up-close sightings of owls, whooping cranes, songbirds and species that nest in the area. A bird banding station is part of the site enhancements. Guest packages range from half-day tours that include working with a bird banding specialist to overnight and multi-day excursions that involve nighttime activities.

Apprenticeships a win-win-win for employees, employers and customers

Tourism Saskatchewan values its longstanding relationship with the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission (SATCC). The two organizations collaborate on opportunities for front-line workers to earn journeyperson status in two tourism trades: Food and Beverage Person and Guest Services Representative.

The Tourism Apprenticeship Program has been underway since 1996. Its purpose is to strengthen the contingent of tourism journeypersons in the province and, in turn, elevate customer service levels and inspire more people to seek careers in the tourism sector.

There are many reasons for employers to encourage experienced staff members to pursue apprenticeships – increased productivity, greater customer service, higher staff retention, and improved workplace safety, to name a few.

Employing journeypersons heightens business profile and assures clients of quality work and services. Furthermore, tourism journeypersons have the knowledge and skills to train other team members. This advantage reduces the need for external training programs or instructors, and saves time and costs.

“Skilled workers are in high demand right now,” Jeff Ritter, CEO of the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission, said. “Offering experienced staff members and new hires the opportunity to apprentice and achieve journeyperson certification could be the key to recruiting and retaining employees in a competitive labour market.”

Start planning now

Summer is peak season for many tourism operators and businesses; however, it is important to take time to consider the benefits of the Tourism Apprenticeship Program and line up candidates.

Only 12 seats are offered in each tourism trade. Apprentices have nine months, September-May, to complete the required courses. These include *emerit* certifications, Service Best customer service training, and standard occupational health and safety courses (WHMIS, Food Safe, Serve It Right Saskatchewan, etc.).

In addition to completing the required modules and professional certifications, participants must fulfil 3,600 hours of trade experience. People who have been on the job for two or more years may already have the hours needed. For them, it is simply a matter of finishing the mandatory courses.

Take advantage of tuition rebate

The Tourism Apprenticeship program makes training affordable and achievable. Employers may receive support valued at \$1,890 for each employee enrolled in Food and Beverage Person. The total cost is \$660, plus a \$250 application fee.

Likewise, there is support available for employees seeking Guest Services Representative – \$1,890 in program funding, reducing the cost to \$770, plus a \$250 application fee.

Enrol by August 15 to receive an additional \$400 tuition rebate.

In Saskatchewan, tourism trade apprentices are not required to leave the workplace for extended formal classroom training. Most training takes place on the job.

Tourism businesses that have journeypersons on their front line stand out for the quality service provided to guests and for the positive workplace culture that comes with an empowered, loyal team of employees.

For more information about the Tourism Apprenticeship Program, contact Lendee Wiebe, 306-933-5910 or toll-free 1-800-331-1529, lendee.weibe@tourismsask.com.



Anita Makrodimitriou, Journeyperson Guest Services Representative and Food and Beverage Person

One candidate, two apprenticeship journeys

Anita Makrodimitriou is the catering manager at the Park Town Hotel in Saskatoon. She can speak firsthand about what it means to complete apprenticeship in a tourism trade, and then aim higher to earn a second journeyperson designation.

Makrodimitriou joined the Park Town Hotel in 2013 as a front desk agent. Management recognized her potential and suggested that apprenticeship training would be a great opportunity and could open doors to advancement. She completed the requirements for Guest Services Representative in 2017, and was named Outstanding Journeyperson at SATCC's Apprenticeship Awards.

In 2019, she was promoted to the position of Catering Manager. Greater confidence, new responsibilities and support from management and colleagues inspired her to seek more training in the food and beverage industry. Her next apprenticeship journey would be delayed by COVID-19, but in February 2023, she earned journeyperson designation in the Food and Beverage Person trade.

Makrodimitriou is a positive, experienced spokesperson on the topic of apprenticeship in the tourism trades. “It is a great opportunity for people, especially those from abroad who decided to move to Saskatchewan,” she said. “The training has so many great modules and different programs. I was very excited to be a part of each apprenticeship.”

Tourism Diversification Program yields new experiences



Lloyd Lake Lodge co-owners Derrick and Desi Uniat



Chef Derrick preparing lamb shanks



Lake trout prepared Manarola style

Tourism Saskatchewan leads an application-based funding program that supports investment in experiential products designed to enrich the province's travel resources, attract high-yield visitor markets, and drive industry growth. The Tourism Diversification Program helps market-ready tourism businesses to broaden their current offerings, expand seasonal operations, and create enticing travel packages and experiences.

More than 80 projects have received support from the Tourism Diversification Program since it was introduced in 2019. Applicants commit to an equity investment of 30 per cent of the total project cost. Saskatchewan operators have contributed over \$4.6 million to the approved projects. These ventures augment Saskatchewan's tourism resources and boost its appeal and competitiveness as a destination. At the same time, they create more jobs and help grow the visitor economy.

A spotlight on Lloyd Lake Lodge and Dakota Dunes Resort shows how some operators are exploring alternate markets and developing new experiences to attract more visitors.

Lloyd Lake Lodge

Derrick and Desi Uniat's deep connection to Lloyd Lake Lodge was forged early in life. By six years old, they were part of family fishing trips to the lodge each summer. In time, visits became more frequent. "We'd go there five or six times a year," Desi said. "As teenagers, Derrick and I would spend 10 days at a time there during school holidays. Our grandfather would describe it as his 'piece of peace.' To us, it was paradise."

Owning the property was always their dream. The property came up for sale in 2011, at a point in time when they were both ready to take the plunge into lodge ownership and management. After their first year of operation, the brothers were multiple Saskatchewan Tourism Awards of Excellence winners.

By 2015, they began expanding package options to stand out in more ways and appeal to diverse markets. Culinary trips were a logical addition to the lodge offerings, given Derrick's talents as a master chef. He already had a sophisticated menu in place at the lodge. The next step was to design packages that took guests on a complete journey – from experiencing the thrill of the catch to cleaning the fish to preparing mouth-watering dishes.

Three-day culinary adventures now account for 20 per cent of visitors in a season. "The clientele has changed," Derrick said. "There are more middle-aged visitors, more families and more women. We can tailor classes to accommodate different groups and take advantage of what is available from the lake and forest – freshwater clams, morel and pine mushrooms, and wild blueberries, in addition to the fish."

This year, Lloyd Lake Lodge will launch another offering – a four-day glamping experience away from the main lodge and into locations that see few visitors. Investment through the Tourism Diversification Program is assisting with the purchase of recreational equipment for deluxe, customizable packages that explore three interconnected lakes on the remote Mirror River system.

"The partnership with Tourism Saskatchewan enabled us to team up with Kiskeynew Canoe Company, in Air Ronge," Desi said. "They custom built four stackable canoes that perfectly suit our needs. It's important to Derrick and me that we purchase Canadian-made and Saskatchewan-made products, as much as possible."

Experienced, local guides lead the expeditions that involve paddling between locations, savouring chef-prepared meals, and sleeping in Deluxe Wall outfitter tents furnished with Persian-style rugs, king-size inflatable beds and luxury linens.

The trips blend traditional outdoor recreation – fishing, swimming, kayaking, relaxing on the beach – with opportunities to understand local history and traditions, while being immersed in the quiet, calm and beauty of this remote part of Saskatchewan. Activities include listening to Indigenous storytelling around a campfire, star gazing, bird watching, and spotting elusive species that make their home in the forest.

"The Tourism Diversification Program provided us with a kickstart to really get this going after so much business was lost during the pandemic," Desi said. "The fact that Tourism Saskatchewan is encouraging reinvestment in this industry that was so beaten up – we couldn't be more appreciative."



Dakota Dunes Resort

Dakota Dunes Resort

Dakota Dunes Resort is another Saskatchewan tourism business that recognized the value in diversifying experiences to attract new visitor markets.

The property is owned by Whitecap Dakota First Nation and managed by Atlific Hotels. It is located on traditional Dakota unceded territory, south of Saskatoon, and complements established tourism developments – the award-winning Dakota Dunes Golf Links and Dakota Dunes Casino.

Guest packages feature a variety of themes, based on the season, upcoming holidays, culinary offerings, and other events and activities. Visitors have options for additional experiences, such as bannock making, storytelling around an outdoor bonfire, and setting up a tipi – Dakota style.

In a successful application to the Tourism Diversification Program, Dakota Dunes Resort proposed developing astrotourism experiences. These new offerings aim to attract travellers devoted to night sky viewing, and entice guests interested in exploring the natural world through the cultural lens of Indigenous peoples.

“Sharing Dakota Star storytelling has been a goal of the hotel for a couple years,” Chris Standing, Adventures Co-ordinator, said. “By meeting with Jim Rock, a Dakota astronomer, we were able to come up with a plan to infuse Dakota knowledge with some western astronomy concepts and modern technology. It’s exciting to learn more about astronomy, telescopes, stellarium software and Dakota sky knowledge. We would like to thank Tourism Saskatchewan for its help with funding, and friends from the Royal Astronomical Society – Saskatoon Centre – particularly Ike Thiessen, who helped us with the telescopes.”

Plans are underway for guided experiences at key times in the celestial calendar, such as seasonal transitions (spring and fall equinox, summer and winter solstice), lunar and solar eclipses, and other events. Resort guests may also have options to enjoy telescope and sky viewing as part of other packages, such as after dark e-bike tours or, in winter, kicksled and snowshoe tours.

Product testing will begin in the summer, and will guide finishing touches on packages and experiences offered to the public.

Dakota Dunes Resort wins Business Innovation Award

In March, Dakota Dunes Resort was honoured by the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada with its Business Innovation Award. The presentation was made at the 10th annual International Indigenous Tourism Conference, held in Winnipeg. Additional nominees in the category were Thrive Tours (Ontario) and Pei Pei Chei Ow Indigenous Cuisine (Alberta).

Dakota Dunes Resort was recognized for innovation and excellence in business operations, while showcasing authentic Indigenous culture and experiences.



Left to right: Marilyn Jensen, ITAC Board Chair; Frank Royal, Whitecap Dakota First Nation Councillor; Gary Farstad, Dakota Dunes Resort General Manager; Keith Henry, ITAC President & CEO.

Saskatchewan outfitters survey builds case for industry *(continued)*

Saskatoon benefits as a staging point

Nearly all Saskatchewan outfitters (94 per cent) report using Saskatoon as a staging point for their clients, most of whom travelled via the previous Delta Airlines route between the city and Minneapolis/St. Paul. In 2019, nearly 35,000 U.S. hunters and anglers flew to Saskatoon by means of this connection.

Saskatoon is an important staging point, where clients await pick-up (often the day after arrival) by their lodge hosts. "Flight costs are not part of outfitting packages," Anderson emphasized. "Clients are responsible for their own flight arrangements, and some use the service of a travel agent. Getting to Saskatoon with minimal fuss and no delays is critical."

After their stay, many guests spend a final night in the city before catching their flight home. Approximately 8,000 clients stayed overnight in Saskatoon at both the beginning and end of their trip to Saskatchewan in 2019. An additional 13,000 clients stayed a single night, either at the start or end of their visit.

The survey indicated that 21 per cent of outfitters would possibly move their staging operations to a different city, such as Edmonton or Winnipeg, due to lack of a direct U.S. flight. Seven per cent said that they might close permanently. Results from the study suggest that Saskatoon could lose \$38 million in overall revenue annually, due to the departure of outfitter headquarters, warehouses and subsequent business.

Visitation climbs in specific months

June, September and November are key months for outfitting activities and see high visitation numbers. In 2019, there were approximately 7,000 round trips in each of these months, and another 5,000 in October. June arrivals are primarily for angling trips; game bird and big game hunting are the purpose of fall trips.

Outfitters offer packaged products that are booked a year or more in advance. Packages vary in duration, and frequently start and end at different times of the week. Previous daily U.S. flights to and from Saskatchewan enabled relatively seamless scheduling and streamlined co-ordination of other details that clients value.

Taking the evidence to WestJet

Following receipt of the reports from Environics Research and Praxis Consulting, conversations at the SCPO board table centred on a change in tactics and making a pitch to domestic carriers. "There was agreement that we could possibly build a stronger relationship, actually sit down at the table with them, because they are here, they are Canadian, and there may be opportunities to influence them," Anderson said.

The next steps involved discussions with WestJet and, finally, meeting face-to-face with executives. Anderson and Kroll travelled to Calgary and, during a two-hour meeting, presented the research findings and addressed questions. "Based on their inquiries, we felt that the meeting was productive. We had all of that data and were able to work through and answer questions, page by page, on the actual specific needs and profile of the outfitting sector," Anderson said. He added that follow-up information, such as point of origin for U.S. travellers, was gathered promptly from SCPO members and submitted to WestJet.

Good news was received in February, when WestJet announced three weekly flights between Saskatoon and Minneapolis/St. Paul, beginning in June. "We were extremely pleased by the announcement and felt that the work of our membership and association had an impact on the decision," Anderson said, also crediting the Ministry of Trade and Export Development, Saskatoon Airport Authority and other organizations committed to the issue.

"It's a positive step forward and represents a significant number of flights, but we have to maintain our strategic work to resolve other challenges," he added. Citing flight frequency, total number of seats versus demand, and adequate aircraft size in peak season as factors to address, Anderson concluded, "There's increased understanding of the needs of our sector. We just need to stay on top of that."

In February, the Government of Saskatchewan reached an agreement with WestJet to support a new direct route between Saskatoon and Minneapolis/St. Paul. Flights will begin in mid-June, and are scheduled on three days each week – Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Tourism Saskatchewan is supporting inbound marketing of the route by investing in a co-branded campaign with WestJet. The campaign targets anglers and hunters, and will appear in in non-stop and one-stop U.S. cities. Destination Canada also contributed to the campaign, as part of its air route support program.

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