

## Module 3 – The Rural Tourism Revival

Welcome to autumn in the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto!

This season is one of the best times of the year to visit the region: when the crowds of summer have thinned; when accommodations set off-peak rates; and when Canada's famous fall foliage is on full display, including in beautiful Algonquin Park – one of the top destinations in the world for viewing fall colours.

In this video, we will discuss how traveller intentions have changed as a result of the global pandemic, and how this has impacted visitation to our region. We will also paint a picture of how rural tourism in Ontario differs from urban tourism, and what this has meant for our region.

In many rural areas of Canada, tourism is considered a main economic driver that allows people and communities to thrive. Importantly, rural destinations tend to have less-diversified economies than urban areas, and so tourism perhaps plays a more important role in sustaining these communities than it does in bigger population centres.

In our own region tourism is one of the top three industries, with pre-pandemic measurements indicating that it is responsible for 14% of employment and approximately 9% GDP.

What do we mean by rural? What is considered rural tourism? The World Tourism Organization defines rural tourism as:

“...a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyles and culture, angling and sightseeing.”

Rural tourism is also recognized as taking place in lower-density population areas compared to a nation's urban centres.

Traditionally, urban areas in Ontario, including three of the most well-known – Ottawa, Toronto and Niagara Falls – have had some advantages over rural destinations when it came to attracting visitors.

For one thing, because of their proximity to international airports and the American border, they were likely to be more accessible to international visitors, who are known to stay longer and spend more compared to domestic travellers.

Transportation options within these cities are also more developed, allowing visitors to move around and explore using public systems, rather than having to rely on having a car to disperse into more rural destinations.

From a product offering perspective, these cities are also home to some of Canada's most recognized attractions, including national museums and art galleries in Ottawa; the CN Tower and live entertainment district in Toronto; and, of course, stunning Niagara Falls itself, which is considered a bucket list item for travellers from every corner of the globe.

Of course, these urban centres are often the focus of large-scale promotional efforts by national and provincial marketing agencies, and their budgets for their own promotional activities far exceed those of rural destinations'.

In 2016, we at Explorers' Edge made plans to address this visitation imbalance between urban and rural destinations in Ontario, and we commenced building a business plan to introduce passenger air service into the region.

Our objective was simple: to attract more international visitors and to disperse them throughout our six sub-regions for longer stays and increased revenue.

To our delight, we were successful in partnering with a leading Canadian carrier, Porter Airlines, to introduce a seasonal summer service into the Muskoka Airport in 2019. The first season was a great success and we were looking forward to improving on results in 2020.

But – as we all now know – the project was temporarily sidelined with the onset of the global pandemic, when tourism everywhere – rural and urban alike – came to a complete halt.

But here is something else that happened as the pandemic wore on; two changes in traveller behaviour that affected many rural destinations around the world. The first was that, as social distancing for safety became the global norm, the desire for “open spaces” by travellers became more important than ever. And of course – here in the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto – we are a rural destination that features plenty of “space.”

The second significant change in traveller behaviour was that, with the closure of international borders and the subsequent uncertainty around the safety of travelling to foreign destinations, more and more Ontarians turned to travelling in their own backyards instead of going abroad as they usually did.

This meant that the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto – which remember from the second module – is in close proximity to the nation's largest urban centre, saw a significant increase in domestic visitors to the region, once we were all able to travel again.

By tracking regional and urban YOY (year-over-year) occupancy and RevPAR (revenue per available room) results on a monthly basis, we were able to quantify these observations.

So, the pandemic itself actually resulted in a significant increase of visitors to our rural region – a trend we anticipate will remain steady until we return to the pre-pandemic travel intentions of tourists.

Think of it as a “Rural Tourism Revival” – it’s one good thing to come out of an otherwise terrible couple of years for our regional tourism industry.

But: with increased visitation comes an increased concern for the sustainability of our natural landscapes that we have here; a situation we will discuss further in an upcoming module.

## QUESTIONS MODULE 2

1. What is NOT a feature of autumn in the great Canadian wilderness
  - a. Brilliant fall foliage is on display everywhere
  - b. Off-peak rates are available
  - c. Accommodations and Experience Providers have all closed until spring.
  
2. Which of the following is part of the World Tourism Organization definition of Rural Tourism?
  - a. Tourism products are generally related to nature-based activities
  - b. Bus transportation is usually provided to get to a region
  - c. Accommodations and Experience Providers are open all year round
  
3. Which of the following demonstrates a (pre-pandemic) difference between rural and urban tourism in Ontario?
  - a. Urban centres usually attracted more international visitors because of their proximity to international airports and the American border.
  - b. Urban centres have more developed public transportation systems, making it easier for tourists to do self-guided exploration.
  - c. Rural destinations have much smaller marketing budgets than urban centres
  - d. All of the above
  
4. What strategy did Explorers’ Edge use to attract more international visitors to the Great Canadian Wilderness just north of Toronto?
  - a. Opened promotional offices in the United States
  - b. Developed a business plan to attract a commercial air service provider to its rural airport
  - c. Partnered with federal and provincial marketers to develop more rural experiences
  
5. Which traveller behaviour resulted in increased visitation to the Great Canadian Wilderness just north of Toronto as a result of the global pandemic?
  - a. Visitors sought destinations with more “open space” in order to feel more socially distanced and safer.
  - b. Visitors demanded lower rates from tourism businesses

- c. Visitors booked well in advance to ensure they had their preferred dates for a getaway.