

# Visiting Friends and Relatives in Alberta Study (2016)

Qualitative Report for Alberta Culture and Tourism

Produced by TNS Canada

Report Date: July 27, 2016



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Report Date: 07.27.2016

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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1. Highlights

For the most part, hosting friends and relatives is viewed positively. It almost always is associated with excitement and the opportunity to show off the host's city or town, their life and their surroundings. Visits are also associated with adventure, escape and luxury. Hosts view the visit as a chance to have an adventure, a break from routine, to reconnect with their surroundings or to indulge in ways they normally wouldn't.

All visits are not without their challenges. While for the most part hosts really enjoy their visitors, there are a few things they dislike such as the stress of entertaining, the expense and the disruption to their everyday lives.

VFR comes in all shapes and sizes and includes:

- **Short visits** – characterized as 2-3 day or weekend trips and action packed. During short visits, the host often accompanies the visitor during "tourist" activities.
- **Long visits** – vary considerably; they can involve a 4-5 day or a 4-5 week visit. They are generally characterized as more relaxed and hosts tend to spend less time with their guests. The longer the visit the more likely the guests are to venture out on their own while hosts continue on with their normal routines. Longer visits do, however, provide an opportunity to see and do things that are slightly further afield and generally include the host.
- **Visits with Friends** - are characterized as more exciting. Friends typically come to go out and do things, and these visits tend to be focused around entertainment as opposed to catching up or spending time together. The host typically accompanies friends on at least some of the activities and very often accompanies them on nearly all of the activities.
- **Visits with Family** – are generally characterized as more relaxed. During a family visit, hosts spend more time visiting with their guests than doing things.
- **Regional Visitors** – visits tend to be less planned. The guest may visit more often and may already be familiar with the host's area; decisions may be made cooperatively or as needed during their stay.
- **Long Haul/International Visitors** - visits tend to be associated with more planning. The guest has come a long way and has likely paid a lot to get to Alberta, thus the host feels more pressure to entertain and to ensure their guests have a good time.

Hosts tend to take their role quite seriously and most believe it involves providing advice and guidance on what to see, where to go and where to eat. In other words, they feel they are ambassadors to their area or local experts and their role is to be the trusted advisor to their friends and relatives.

The number and variety of activities that hosts participate in with guests was quite large. A few things, however, were common among all hosts:

- Short visits tend to involve fewer activities; the focus for a short trip tends to be on one purpose or event.
- Activities tend to focus around "sightseeing."
- In almost all cases, restaurants are a key activity, especially for a short visit.

Many hosts, however, focus on what they know for activities rather than seek out new ones. Planning varies and has more to do with the host and visitor personalities than the type of trip. When undertaken, planning tends to focus on online resources using search engines to find information and review sites to confirm choices. For local events and attractions resources such as “what’s on” calendars, dining guides, local Facebook groups and local newspapers or pamphlets are used.

Most hosts have some knowledge of Travel Alberta and are capable of correctly identifying some of their activities. At the highest level they understand that it is a government agency that is associated with tourism. Most, however, do not actively seek out nor use Travel Alberta’s resources.

Hosts described a variety of ways that Travel Alberta could assist them in hosting their guests. The large majority focused on providing information on events and lesser known attractions. Hosts indicated that they already know what the big attractions are and would like to know more about the lesser known ones or about upcoming events. Specific suggestions included a trip planning site, an aggregator website of travel in Alberta, local attractions and events, itinerary plans, hosting guides and a mobile app.

## 1.2. Opportunities

The results of the focus groups provide us with some preliminary insights into potential opportunities that Travel Alberta and destination marketing organizations may leverage in the VFR market. These opportunities will of course, need to be validated during the quantitative phase. More specifically:

- Hosting friends and relatives is a good opportunity to increase tourism receipts. VFR can be presented from the “a change is as good as a rest” perspective or a “re-discover your area” perspective. VFR can be invigorating, a mini-vacation or an opportunity/excuse to indulge, all of which can be leveraged by Travel Alberta and the Alberta tourism industry to increase tourism receipts.
- Limited short getaways are a good opportunity to leverage. Hosts are more likely to accompany their guests thus increasing tourism receipts.
- Opportunity appears to be stronger for visiting friends than for visiting family. These visits are more about doing things than spending time together and thus more likely to increase tourism receipts.
- Opportunity is stronger with out-of-province visitors than in-province visitors. Hosts are more willing to do things with out-of-province visitors and are more likely to provide the transportation which most likely means they are accompanying the guest(s). More specifically, hosts feel their visitor(s) came a long way and really want to show them a good time so they make an extra effort to show them the bigger, more iconic tourist spots.
- Regular or repeat visitors provide less opportunity – they have seen the sights and such visits are more characteristic of being immersed in people’s daily lives rather than undertaking “tourist” activities. There is, however, potential to identify and encourage visits to smaller, lesser known attractions or low cost activities for this segment. While this type of service may be of interest to this segment, it would likely have less impact on tourism receipts.
- Longer visits offer some opportunity as well. During a longer visit, hosts are more likely to plan a trip further afield with their guest(s). These trips often include accommodations – thus offering increased tourism revenue. As well, an opportunity exists for Travel Alberta to develop a resource for the visitor to show themselves around while the host is at work or otherwise occupied. A walking or activity guide that outlines things to do while the host is at work or attractions that can be covered in the hour or so it takes for the host to run errands may be fruitful.

- Hosts tend to fall back on the “tried and true” rather than seek out new options or ideas. There is an opportunity to educate and inform hosts about less popular or well-known activities and attractions. Finding new and different ways to engage with hosts will motivate interest in (re)discovering Alberta among these important ambassadors.

## 2. Foreword

### 2.1. Background

Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) represents a considerable share of all tourism in Alberta. However knowledge of the VFR market is limited. According to Statistics Canada, VFR was the primary reason for 44%<sup>1</sup> of total overnight trips to Alberta in 2014, it also accounted for 29% of all overnight tourism spending in the province.

VFR accounted for 43% of overnight trips among in-province travellers and is the main reason for travelling to Alberta for more than half (57%) of Canadians visiting from elsewhere in Canada (2014). Furthermore, in 2014, VFR accounted for one quarter of overnight visits from the U.S. and approximately one-third (32%) of overnight visits from overseas countries to Alberta.

Given the size of the VFR market, Alberta Culture and Tourism and Travel Alberta wish to gain a better understanding of VFR travel in order to leverage this market to its full potential and optimize marketing strategies.

This research not only offers Alberta Culture and Tourism and Travel Alberta the occasion to better understand the VFR market, but also to widen their perspective with regard to how this market is defined, potentially yielding new market opportunities.

### 2.2. Research Objectives

The overall objective of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) in Alberta study is to obtain an in-depth look at the VFR market in Alberta. More specifically to gain an in-depth understanding of:

- The existing VFR market in Alberta, (i.e., friends vs relatives visits, main reason for visiting).
- The type of vacation experience(s) and activities participated in during a VFR visit along with any differences between types of visitors.
- A profile of a typical friends and relatives visit to Alberta, including but not limited to: travel patterns, destinations visited, mode of travel, length of stay, repeat visitation, party size, party type, inclusion of a bigger trip.
- Any differences that exist between short- and long-haul VFR trips and Canadian and international VFR trips.
- The role of hosts in relation to being a host or guide to visiting parties.
- How new Albertans shift from being newcomers to the province to being guides of the province.
- How Travel Alberta/ Alberta tourism industry can make hosting friends and relatives easier for the host?
- How Travel Alberta/ Alberta tourism industry can facilitate awareness and product knowledge to Albertans that can be shared with VFR?

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<sup>1</sup> This figure only reflects those visitors who reported VFR as their **primary** trip purpose. Some of the remaining 56% will have stayed with a friend or relative in Alberta and reported Pleasure, Business or Other as their primary trip purpose.

The results of this research will complement existing Statistics Canada research and will be used to better understand the nature and size of the VFR market in Alberta. It will also be used to identify approaches to promote and support VFR in Alberta along with guiding Travel Alberta's marketing efforts in the VFR market both domestically and internationally.

### 2.3. Defining VFR

To better understand the VFR market, it is useful to take a broader approach to understanding VFR.

A VFR trip gets classified as such if the visitor identifies visiting a friend or relative as the primary purpose of their trip. However, personal relationships between residents and visitors influence more tourism activity than the conventional methods for quantifying VFR suggest. Visitors categorized as 'pleasure' and 'business' by trip motive, but who stay with a friend or relative or even spend time with a resident they know could also be considered a segment of VFR. The influence and role of residents in all tourism activity should therefore be considered in order to fully leverage this target. Doing so has the potential to increase both volume and activity.

For example, 2010 Statistics Canada data for the Toronto CMA indicated that 49 per cent of all overnight visitors were VFR by trip motive alone. However, when type of accommodation was also accounted for this jumped to 61%. The International Travel Survey also includes VFR as an activity and when this was included, the proportion jumped to 65%.

Personal relationships between residents and visitors are prevalent in 'pleasure' and 'business' tourism and although the influence may be less, the potential opportunity should still be considered.

It is also important to note that VFR turns residents into domestic tourists who consume hotel nights and activities themselves, an impact that is seldom accounted for. Residents as hosts are often obliged to recommend, and participate in local tourism activities, and can use the visit as justification to take time off and enjoy their region with their guests, showing off what they are proud of, and finding new experiences that may be repeated and promoted in their personal networks.

For new Albertans, hosting may offer the chance to explore and connect with the local culture, and seasoned hosts may look for alternative and diverse activities to entertain repeat visitors. The effects of hosting on resident behaviour and perceptions on Alberta as a destination, both during and after the visit are also worth considering.

For the purposes of this research, VFR was defined from the host's point of view, not the visitor's. Recruited respondents had hosted friends or family for a minimum 2 night stay in the past 2 years.

### 2.4. Methodology

The research project involves two phases:

- 1) **Phase One:** Focus groups among Albertans and new Albertans who have hosted at least one friend or relative in the past 2 years. Details about each group including sample structure, cities and dates of the groups are outlined below.
- 2) **Phase Two:** Online quantitative research among 2,100 VFR hosts in Alberta.

In order to have a wide variety of opinions, three distinct groups of hosts were recruited to participate in the focus groups:

- **Group A –Albertans hosting regional friends or relatives:** people who were born and raised in Alberta or in a different province of Canada/other country and have been living in Alberta **for more than 5 consecutive years** who have hosted friends or relatives **visiting from regional areas** (Alberta, Saskatchewan, BC) in the past 2 years.
- **Group B –Albertans hosting non-regional friends or relatives:** people who were born and raised in Alberta or in a different province of Canada/other country and have been living in Alberta **for more than 5 consecutive years** who have hosted friends or relatives **visiting from other Canadian provinces (other Canada) and/or internationally** in the past 2 years.
- **Group C – New Albertans:** people who are currently living in Alberta however in the past 5 years have been moving to/from Alberta and a different Canadian province or people that were born and raised in a different province of Canada/other country and have been living in Alberta **for less than 5 consecutive years** who have **hosted friends or relatives visiting from anywhere** in the past 2 years.

LOCATION	DATE	TIME	PARTICIPANT
Calgary	April 5 <sup>th</sup>	3:30-5:00pm	Group A
Calgary	April 5 <sup>th</sup>	5:30-7:00pm	Group B
Calgary	April 5 <sup>th</sup>	7:30-9:00pm	Group C
Canmore/Banff	April 6 <sup>th</sup>	5:30-7:00pm	Group A
Canmore/Banff	April 6 <sup>th</sup>	7:30-9:00pm	Group B
Lethbridge	April 7 <sup>th</sup>	5:30-7:00pm	Group A
Lethbridge	April 7 <sup>th</sup>	7:30-9:00pm	Group B
Edmonton	April 26 <sup>th</sup>	3:30-5:00pm	Group A
Edmonton	April 26 <sup>th</sup>	5:30-7:00pm	Group B
Edmonton	April 26 <sup>th</sup>	7:30-9:00pm	Group C
Red Deer	April 27 <sup>th</sup>	5:30-7:00pm	Group A
Red Deer	April 27 <sup>th</sup>	7:30-9:00pm	Group B
Grande Prairie	April 28 <sup>th</sup>	5:30-7:00pm	Group A
Grande Prairie	April 28 <sup>th</sup>	7:30-9:00pm	Group B



## **2.5. Interpretive Notes**

### **2.5.1. Projectability**

Although qualitative research in general, and focus groups in particular, are highly valuable for providing insight into the needs, attitudes and opinions of a particular group of interest, the results cannot be statistically representative of any wider group of individuals than those who participated.

### **2.5.2. Confidentiality, Release of Individual Comments and Reporting**

TNS Canada is a Gold Seal Accredited member of the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA), and as such, is bound to strictly enforce its guidelines and code of conduct. This code of conduct states explicitly that all reasonable measures must be taken to preserve the anonymity of research participants and that no attributed individual comments may be provided without express consent of the individual. Furthermore, MRIA guidelines also stipulate that qualitative reporting may not include percentages or precise proportions and as such, qualifiers such as a few, some, several and/or many will be used.

# 3. Detailed Findings

## 3.1. Living In Alberta

Living in Alberta is viewed positively by both Albertans and new Albertans. Life in Alberta presents 2 main benefits:

1. Employment and financial opportunities
2. Access to nature and an active lifestyle

While both Albertans and new Albertans recognize these benefits, there is a difference in the way that they are represented in each group. For Albertans, there is a sense of pride naturally associated with being an Albertan. New Albertans, however, sometimes feel a need to justify/rationalize their decision to live in Alberta and rely on these two key benefits to help with this. Regardless of whether the benefits of living in Alberta are a source of pride or a justification, showcasing them often plays a role in visits from friends or relatives.

## 3.2. Perspectives on Hosting VFR

For the most part, hosting friends and relatives is viewed positively. It almost always is associated with excitement. Hosts are excited about the opportunity to show off their city or town, their life and their surroundings. This is their chance to show their guests around and to see familiar surroundings through a new lens or through the eyes of others.

When thinking of visitors, hosts immediately feel excitement and anticipation. They think of how they can entertain their guests, they think about the fun they are about to have and the planning involved.

Visits are also associated with adventure, escape and luxury. They view the visit as a chance to have an adventure or do something they normally wouldn't do. The visits are a welcome break from the routine – like a mini-vacation for themselves. The visit can be described as invigorating – hosts get to see things through a different lens and thus have a new appreciation for the every day. VFR visits are also an excuse to indulge – to have more elaborate meals, to go out for dinner, to indulge in ways that they normally wouldn't and to try new things.

VFR visits are also associated with reconnecting, not only with the visitor but with their surroundings. Hosts view visits as an opportunity to rediscover the place they live.

Visits are not, however, without their challenges. While for the most part hosts really enjoy their visitors, there are a few things they dislike:

- The pressure they feel to entertain their guests in a way their guests will enjoy.
- Identifying things to do with repeat visitors.
- The additional expense or the impact on their budget.
- Visitors in their space and/or disrupting their routines.

## **3.3. Visits**

### **3.3.1. Characteristics of Visits**

#### ***Short Visit***

Short visits tend to be characterized as 2-3 day or weekend trips. The terms “short-getaway” and “escaping from routine” tend to surface frequently. Short trips are viewed as “time sensitive” and hosts tend to view them as action packed. Hosts will typically accompany their guests in activities during short visits. Not unexpectedly, these trips tend to involve regional guests, i.e., guests who live in Alberta or in a neighbouring province or territory.

#### ***Long Visit***

Long visits vary considerably. They can involve a 4-5 day or a 4-5 week visit. There is quite a lot of variability in what hosts have experienced in this realm. A few things however, are common regardless of the actual length of the long visit. Longer visits are consistently characterized as more relaxed. Hosts feel they have more time, so there is no need to rush around nor to spend every minute with their guests and if the weather is bad, there is time to wait for it to improve. The longer the visit the more likely the guests are to venture out on their own while hosts continue on with their normal routines. Longer visits are more about integration into the daily lives of their hosts and sharing family experiences. In some instances, hosts view longer visits as an opportunity to see and do things that are slightly further away from home. As such, longer visits can involve longer outings/trips with their guests where overnight accommodation is required.

#### ***Visits with Friends***

Visits with friends are characterized as more exciting. Friends typically come with the intention of going out/doing things and these visits tend to be focused around entertainment as opposed to catching up or spending time together. Visits with friends are more about having fun and partying compared to a visit with family. Generally, visits from friends are shorter, more active and more intense. They tend to be jam packed. The host typically accompanies the friend on at least some of the activities and very often accompanies them on nearly all activities.

#### ***Visits with Family***

A family visit is generally characterized as more relaxed. During a family visit, hosts spend more time visiting than sightseeing/partaking in activities. This visit is about re-connecting. Activities that they do engage in tend to be ones that allow for spending time together and catching up such as having dinner together and going to parks. A family visit tends to last longer than a visit with friends and tends to involve the family member immersing themselves in the day to day activities of the host more than getting out and exploring the area.

#### ***Long Haul/International Visitors***

A visit from long haul/international guests tends to be associated with more planning, and with more pressure. The guest has come a long way and has likely spent a lot of money to get there thus the host has more pressure to entertain and to ensure that they have a good time. This type of visit is also associated with a willingness (and in some cases an eagerness) to do more with the visitor when they arrive.

### 3.3.2. Planning

Planning for VFR tends to vary. There are two main planning scenarios when it comes to hosting VFR:

- Plan as you go – these hosts do less planning. Travellers and hosts simply discuss wants, needs and options once the guest arrives at the host's home and then decide what to do based on what is going on at the time.
- Advanced planners – these hosts place more value in planning. They tend to take the perspective that their visitor is only here for a short period so they need to maximize their time and ensure that they have the best experience. In some cases they want to do something further afield and need to book accommodations or travel.

Even among advanced planners, there is often limited or no research to explore new activities other than well-known, "tried and tested" activities. Many of these planners feel they already know what their guests will want to see. Planning may include activities such as booking tickets, booking accommodations and mapping routes.

Planning can be a joint task that is shared with the host and visitor or it can be a task that is exclusively undertaken by one or the other. Some hosts express some reluctance around planning while others take ownership. It seems planning has more to do with individuals than types of visitors or length of trip.

Hosts use a variety of tools to plan their visits. Almost everyone, however, uses the internet. Google is popular and search terms include:

- "Interesting things to do in ..."
- "Classic hikes"
- "What's on this weekend"

Online reviews, such as Google Reviews or Trip Advisor, are also popular as are local websites that describe local events or attractions.

Many hosts take advantage of local resources for planning such as newspapers, radio, visitor centres, dining or accommodation guides, tourist maps, pamphlets, Facebook groups, blogs or email lists.

While not as popular, some hosts use books to conduct their research. These books tend to be more specialized and include titles like: "A Hundred Hikes in Kananaskis" and "Ski Tours in Kananaskis."

The hosts who don't plan feel like they already know what they want to show their visitor. They believe they are familiar enough with the area that they don't really need to seek additional information or they have already participated in an experience and know what to expect. These hosts tend to rely on personal experience, word-of-mouth or on advertising that they happen to notice such as billboards or posters about a particular event or attraction.

Visits from regional visitors tend to be less planned; hosts believe that this type of guest already knows what to do. When visits with regional visitors are planned it is likely to be more of a joint effort.

### 3.3.3. Role of the Host

**Perceptions of the role of the host are varied but most agree that the host's role is to be accommodating and** to provide information to the guest(s). For example, hosts should give their visitors a place to stay, give visitors directions, guidance or suggestions on where to go, what to see and do and where to eat.

Some see the host's role as slightly more involved and believe it includes things like:

- sharing their passion or excitement about their area or city
- being the local expert
- showing their guests "the ropes" and the "cool" things in the area
- acting as planner or trusted advisor
- being the tour guide or chauffeuring visitors around
- cooking some meals and generally providing a pleasant accommodation experience

The role of the host is the same for long or short visits as well as visits with friends or family. The role of managing budgets or saving money tends to be more prominent in longer visits, likely a function of the increased costs associated with longer visits. Saving money may involve leveraging contacts to obtain lower costs for various attractions, obtaining coupons or pre-purchasing tickets.

### 3.3.4. Activities

The number and variety of activities that hosts discussed was quite large. Each host has a different and unique version of activities in which they like to participate. A few things however, were common among all hosts:

- Short visits tend to involve less activities - the focus tends to be single purpose.
- Activities tend to focus around "sightseeing."
- In almost all visits, dining in restaurants is a key activity.

Most hosts tend to agree that the activities must be local if the trip is short. Local is defined differently and can range from staying in the city to being a one to two and half hour drive from the host's home.

Activities don't always include "touristy stuff" which is often described as commercial and expensive. As an example, a popular local hiking trail would not be considered "touristy" as there is no fee despite the iconic views and frequent use by non-locals.

Some of the myriad activities that hosts participate in with visitors included:

- Visiting Alberta cities or locations such as Calgary, Johnston Canyon in Banff National Park, Edmonton, Red Rock Canyon in Waterton Lakes National Park.
- Visiting B.C. locations such as Golden, Invermere, Revelstoke, Panorama.
- Visiting specific attractions such as Elevation Place Recreation Centre in Canmore, Creepy Hollow.
- Visiting iconic attractions such as Banff townsite and National Park, Jasper townsite and National Park, the Columbia Icefields, Drumheller, West Edmonton Mall, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park.
- Participating in activities such as hiking, skiing, swimming, cycling, river rafting, golfing, fishing, canoeing, camping, ATVing.

- Attending special events such as a wine, theatre or music festival, or the Calgary Stampede.
- Viewing wildlife, especially bears.
- Participating in other activities such as visiting hot springs, the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, sulphur pools, night clubs, museums and shopping.
- Dining in restaurants or enjoying family meals at home.

Short visits tend to focus on one activity while longer visits provide more opportunity to see and do a variety of things. In visits with multiple activities these might include one or two paid excursions, but there is more of a focus on activities that are low or no cost as it otherwise becomes too expensive for many.

The effect of cost can also play a role in hosts resorting to the “tried and true.” While for some this is just a function of convenience, for many it is rooted in the fact that they want to be certain that their guests are going to enjoy an experience. If it is not something they have experienced themselves, then they have not had the opportunity to investigate it for their guests and they do not want their guests to spend money on something that will not satisfy them.

### 3.3.5. Highlights

Highlights vary based on region however there are a few highlights that are common regardless of region. In particular:

- **The mountains** – the mountains are a big highlight for most visits regardless of length of visit or whether the visitors are friends or family.
- **Banff and Jasper** – both tend to be highlights or “must sees.” The location of the host however can affect whether this is a highlight for a short or a long trip.
- **Restaurants** – eating out at good restaurants is a common highlight for hosts.
- **Local flavour** – virtually all hosts want to showcase the local flavour of their city or town. While this varies for each location, the key is showing the guest what the host’s city is all about. It’s about demonstrating why their location is a great place to live.

Additionally, there are some city specific highlights:

- **Calgary:** The Calgary Zoo, Blues Can bar, Calgary Tower
- **Red Deer:** Windy Point, Kerry Wood, Three Mile Bend
- **Edmonton:** West Edmonton Mall
- **Lethbridge:** Waterton Lakes National Park
- **Canmore:** hiking trails, mountains, scenery
- **Grande Prairie:** Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum

### 3.3.6. Accompaniment

Whether or not a host chooses to accompany their guests on outings varies based on the visitor and the type of visit.

#### **Short Visits**

Hosts are more likely to accompany their guests on outings during short visits. Time is limited so they want to spend as much time as they can with their guests. In some instances, however, especially in more expensive outings, the host will not join the visitor.

### **Long Visits**

For longer visits, guests are accompanied by hosts less often. Since the visit is longer, the hosts don't feel obliged to spend every minute with their guest. The longer the trip the more this is true. Guests often venture out on their own to various activities. In some instances budget dictates what hosts and guests will do together. This does not mean that hosts don't accompany long-term guests but rather that the host is more selective in what they do.

### **Visits from Friends**

Hosts are more likely to accompany their guests on outings when the visitor is a friend. Often the purpose behind the friend's visit is for them to get out and do things together.

## **3.4. Most Recent Visit**

Hosts were asked to describe their most recent VFR visits. The following section describes these in detail.

### **3.4.1. Planning**

#### ***Planning the Visit and Resources Used***

The most recent VFR elicited a wide range of emotions for hosts. Some hosts had feelings of excitement about and anticipation of seeing their guests, while others became stressed and worried over the need to impress and provide activities for their friends or relatives. These feelings were very dependent on the individual who was doing the hosting – some people were excited to have friends stay with them but stressed when relatives came to visit, while other hosts were the exact opposite.

The length of time it took to plan the visit ranged from a few days to several months. The difference is largely dependent on length of the visit and the distance from which the guest was travelling. Typically, the longer the stay and the further the guest was travelling, the further in advance the planning took place.

To help plan for a trip, many different resources were used. The following resources were mentioned consistently:

- **General internet research** – was the most common – using Google to search for information such as what activities are happening on a certain date or at a specific location, the cost, hours of operation, parking, and reviews
- **Specific websites** – sites such as Trip Advisor, Yelp, Travel Alberta, Zomato and travel blogs were used
- **Word-of-mouth** – obtaining recommendations from friends, relatives, or even online communities (e.g., Reddit) that have knowledge of the area or have experienced certain attractions or events
- **Personal experience** – drawing on one's own personal recollection of an attraction (e.g., if the host has had a bad experience, they would not bring their guests there; alternatively, they would be more likely to bring their guests to an attraction or event that they themselves had enjoyed)

#### ***What is Easy, Difficult, and Helpful about the Planning Experience***

The planning experience was mostly considered "easy" when the host had a good idea of what their guests would enjoy. For instance, when good friends or close relatives came to visit, it was usually easier for the host to pick events or attractions that everyone would enjoy compared to when distant relatives or acquaintances came to visit. Not knowing what their guests would enjoy or what their children would be interested in doing were potential sources of stress for the host. Living close to major attractions or natural

landmarks (such as the West Edmonton Mall or Lake Louise) also made the planning process easier for the host since there wasn't a need to travel long distances or spend extra money to provide something fun and exciting for their guests.

On the other hand, there were several factors that made the planning experience more difficult and stressful for the host:

- **Price** – the most common difficulty experienced in planning was finding affordable options. Hosts were looking for experiences that were at once fun, enjoyable and affordable. This was particularly important when the guests had already spent a lot of money to travel to the host's location. When the host accompanies the guest on the trip, price is also a consideration as the host wants to ensure that they don't break their own budget.
- **Disruption of routine** – having their guest staying in their home added an element of pressure. In particular, hosts felt a need to be home to entertain the guests and this was not always possible. Furthermore, the host needed to manage their own work schedule around any joint trip planning.
- **Narrowing down the options** – sometimes there can be *too much* of a good thing. Living in a province as naturally beautiful and diverse as Alberta can actually make the planning process more difficult since there are so many attractions to choose from. For some hosts, trying to fit everything into one trip was a difficult and stressful task. In some cases it also increased their costs as well as their guests' costs.
- **The weather** – since many activities in Alberta are outdoors, the weather often plays a big role. It was considered a challenge to plan activities in advance due to the unpredictability of Alberta weather. Many winter-related activities need cold weather for optimal conditions (e.g., skating or skiing), while many summer activities are far less enjoyable when it is cold or raining. Sometimes visitors can't get out to do what they wanted to do because of poor weather which requires changing plans so some type of contingency planning would be useful.

For many, the most helpful aspect of the planning experience was having some sort of background knowledge about the events or activities in which they were partaking. This knowledge came from a variety of sources: typically from having personally experienced the activities, but also from doing research beforehand (usually Google searches or website reviews) or through word-of-mouth.

To make the planning experience better or easier, the following suggestions were made:

- **Coupons or discounts** – price was often seen as the biggest difficulty/ barrier when deciding what activities to plan for their guests. Offering some sort of discounts or coupons would make the decision process easier for many hosts, and reduce the financial burden for all.
- **Activity packages** – often there were so many activities to choose from it becomes overwhelming to choose just a few. Creating packages with similar activities or those that are in close proximity could help hosts choose multiple activities at once. Offering these packages at some sort of discount would also help from a financial perspective.
- **Contingency plan options** – when the weather is not cooperative it would be helpful to know what alternative activities are available on short notice (i.e., what is close by and has similar types of activities but indoors).



### **3.4.2. Characteristics of Last Visit**

#### ***Transportation***

For activities or attractions with fellow Albertans, separate cars were typically taken by the host and their guest. Generally, when the guest is from further away or out of province, the host acts more as a chauffeur or tour guide and is more likely to drive everyone to the attraction or activity.

#### ***Activity Length***

Short visits (2-3 days) were usually comprised of shorter day activities (local attractions or events) as opposed to overnight activities or ones spanning multiple days. Longer visits (4 days or longer) sometimes involved multiple day activities, such as camping or visiting landmarks out of town that required travel and overnight accommodation.

#### ***Day of the week***

Whether activities or attractions are visited during the week or on the weekend was dependent on when the guests came to visit and for how long. Weekend trips tended to correlate with guests that came to stay for only the weekend (or a short visit), while trips during the week were almost always made with guests that were staying with the host for a longer visit.

#### ***Accommodations***

Generally the host's home is the main accommodation, however, in the case of longer trips when visits included non-local locations or attractions, hotels were used. In some cases, friends or family who visit stayed in hotels for the duration of their trip to Alberta, however, this was the exception.

#### ***Selecting activities***

Selecting an activity was often as simple as giving the guest a list of options and asking them what they wanted to do. Among hosts that planned, they usually researched (typically Google searches) what was happening during the guest's visit. They also looked for reviews or asked other friends and relatives what activities or events would be suitable for their guests. Past personal experiences also contributed to the decision to participate in a particular activity or event. Ages of guests was often a significant determining factor in the activity chosen – needs to be entertaining and child-friendly, or accessible and manageable for older guests.

#### ***Best part of the visit***

For many, the best part of the visit experience was simply spending time with their guests, especially if they hadn't seen them for a long time. For others, participating in a specific activity or visiting new places (or places they hadn't visited in a long time) was the best part of the experience.

## **3.5. Travel Alberta and the Alberta Tourism Industry**

### **3.5.1. Travel Alberta**

Most hosts have some knowledge of Travel Alberta. At the highest level, they understand that it is a government agency that is associated with promoting travel and tourism in Alberta to Albertans and non-Albertans.

Most hosts were aware of Travel Alberta's:

- Website
- Magazine about things to do in Alberta
- Discount card
- Camping guide
- Travel centres
- Advertising through commercials, billboards, pamphlets

While many hosts can correctly identify some of Travel Alberta's activities, most do not actively seek out or use its resources. Travel Alberta is considered something mainly for tourists, not hosts. Travel Alberta is not a top of mind resource for local attractions. Many hosts consider the camping guide or magazine to be good resources, however, these resources came to them either in the mail or by them happening upon it during their travels – they did not actively seek out this product. This is also true of the website. Some hosts indicated using the Travel Alberta website however they used it with much less frequency than other websites. Most arrived at the website via Google search as opposed to them going directly to the website. Reviews of the website were lukewarm, with some suggestions that the site could be improved. The website was described as not being memorable, being outdated, "like a government site," having too much information, difficult to navigate and with insufficient filtering options. *Note: the focus group sessions were held before the new Travel Alberta website went live.*

While most of Travel Alberta's services were not actively sought out, the discount card was. Hosts indicated that they had to sign up for the discount card in the past in order to get it and that they had made the effort to do so.

### **3.5.2. Suggestions for Assistance in Hosting Friends and Relatives**

Hosts described a variety of things that could assist them in hosting their guests. The large majority focused on providing information on special events and lesser known attractions. Hosts indicated they already know what the big attractions are and would like to know more about the lesser known "hidden gems" or about upcoming events. Specific suggestions included:

- A website to help hosts plan their outings. This website should include many pictures, have reservation systems built in along with vacancy listings and must be easy to navigate.
- An aggregator website of travel and tourism in Alberta - it would a one-stop shop so to speak of planning visits.
- More local content.
- Local "What's On" calendars – both online and print format.
- Content marketing through social media and other formats – hosts are looking for an unbiased perspective on tourist attractions not advertising.
- Discounts and coupons for attractions.
- Trip itinerary ideas – these would need to include filters for cost, duration, activities and audience.
- A go to guide for hosting visitors – this guide would provide a variety of ideas for both short and long stays along with ideas for specific niches such as kids, seniors, active.
- Reviews of attractions.
- A mobile app – this would be a one stop shop to travel and tourism in Alberta. It could use geo-location technology that would list restaurants, attractions, accommodation and events

A variety of channels were suggested. Online was the primary channel however it is important to note that it is unlikely that hosts will actively seek a particular site rather, it will need to show up during a Google search. Other channels suggested included billboards, direct mail, social media and YouTube.

## 4. Areas for Further Exploration in Quant Phase

The next phase of this study is the deployment of an online survey.

In addition to topics previously identified in the proposal, consideration should be given to further exploration of the following topics in the quantitative survey:

- Extent to which hosts participate in activities with their visitors, making them “local tourists” in each type of visit. Does this occur more often for some activities than others? Differences in incidence of accompaniment across different visit types, i.e., friends vs. relatives; short vs. long.
- Extent to which hosting leads to repeat visitation by residents to local destinations that they found while hosting.
- Extent to which new Albertans use VFR to explore and discover their new home.
- Incidence of advance planners vs. plan as you go and the impact this has on overall activities selected and total spending.
- Differences in planning and hosting between Albertans and new Albertans. Differences when new Albertan is Canadian born versus new Canadian, if possible based on sample size.
- Quantitative read on the use of planning resources.
- Extent to which hosts encourage visits/repeat visits.