



**Research and Consulting Inc.**

# Potential demand for rural vacation experiences in Alberta by residents of Alberta

## Exploratory qualitative research

Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation

June 10, 2012



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# Executive summary

This study was undertaken to explore the perceptions that each of three household lifestage groups residing in Alberta's urban areas currently have of the rural vacation experiences available in the province.

Using a qualitative approach, twelve focus groups were held with Albertans, two each in Calgary, Edmonton, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Lloydminster and Red Deer. Over 100 people participated, about a third aged 18-34 years living in Young Adult-only households, a third aged 25-44 years living in Family households with children under 18 years, and a third aged 45-69 in Older Adult-only households.

## Lifestage profiles

**Young Adults** mostly lived in groups with roommates, some with partners or spouses. They travelled with family members (parents and siblings) or friends and were the strongest users of social media. Among their most enjoyable activities, two stood out: “hanging” with friends and taking part in challenging physical pursuits. They were highly social and very involved with and influenced by their peers.

Young Adult views of rural Alberta were influenced by their experience. Those who grew up there either liked to reconnect and enjoy outdoor activities not available in the city or were no longer interested in small town life and only go to visit family. Those who grew up in a city sometimes had a romantic expectation of what there was to do in rural Alberta (e.g., every small town is historic and has interesting shopping, or they can go to quiet lakeside campsites where they can kick back in isolation).

Travel was most often with family (parents and siblings), followed by friends. They tended to go to Banff and Jasper, Calgary and Edmonton for their weekends away with friends. They viewed travel in rural Alberta as an opportunity to take a break from their working lives in the city and relax, but were less certain what there really was to do that would engage their interest once there. However, the major barrier to visiting was that rural Alberta lacks a “coolness” factor, peer acceptance and word of mouth – or other – promotion.

**Family households** were most often a nuclear family with two parents and children. This was how they usually travelled as well, sometimes with friends or extended family, less often as a couple, or on girls- or boys-only trips. They were social media users, but appeared less attached than Young Adults, possibly because of time pressures. Radio was used while driving.

Their leisure activities often revolved around their families; their children's sports activities frequently drove their own interests (e.g., attending games, coaching, going to out of town

tournaments). Besides sports, they wanted to spend time outdoors wherever possible. This drive to be active outdoors – which was increasingly limited by work and family pressures in this age group – is the key to attracting rural visits. Many were trailer/RV users and mostly parked in one place unless on their way out of the province.

While trip destinations were not necessarily chosen for the children, destinations did have to have something to engage them, with water based activities being most in demand. Their in-Alberta destinations were often to visit relatives and take advantage of attractions in Edmonton and Calgary or to participate in rural (sometimes farm) activities.

**Older Adult** households were usually made up of a married couple, often with a pet and occasionally an adult child finishing their education. Intensive socializing was as important here as with Young Adults (with friends) and Families (with children), except here their focus was spending as much time as possible with their grandchildren. While some form of hiking or walking was popular at all ages, physical abilities and activity preferences changed with aging to become less demanding.

This lifestage travelled most often as a couple, sometimes with friends or with family (i.e., their adult children and grandchildren). Travel was viewed more as an enjoyable activity than the break or vacation of younger households. They were the most familiar of all with rural Alberta destinations and had visited a wider variety of places in Alberta. They were the most likely lifestage to do circle trips and tour along highways or trails. They were the only lifestage to *travel* to browse in small towns, enjoy the historic environment and go shopping for antiques, local food delicacies or arts and crafts. Younger age groups also did these things once at a destination, but were generally not motivated to travel to do so.

Older Adults appeared to use a different media mix. While most were online and even on Facebook, they still used mass media (TV, newspapers, magazines) in traditional ways. Many had smartphones.

### **Differences by location**

Lloydminster, Red Deer, Lethbridge and Grande Prairie residents often considered themselves to be living in a rural rather than urban location. The difference was based on the quantity of amenities and number of people that constituted “urban” in their minds. The perceived culture or way of life (or “mentality”) in the community also weighed in when making this assessment.

Northern and central Alberta trips frequently focused on lakeside camping, southern Alberta trips on small towns and their attractions, including camping.

Lloydminster and Grande Prairie residents were often relative newcomers, lacking knowledge of the activities available in the surrounding region. They were drawn to the



large cities as a result and prepared to drive longer distances. Grande Prairie appeared to be particularly starved of rural options (or knowledge about them). Lloydminster residents were quite heavily focused on Saskatchewan destinations.

On the whole, these areas seemed to have more in common than they differed in their attitudes to rural Alberta. It was primarily constraints such as the amount of time they were willing to spend on a rural trip (same day, weekends or slightly longer, not a week or more), highway links and distance/driving time that influenced their destinations and activities.

## Perceptions of rural Alberta

Thoughts that came to mind about rural Alberta as a travel destination varied among urban Albertans:

- Many thought of small communities, their hockey rinks and leisure centres, community halls, local attractions and a different, more supportive, culture and way of life;
- Farms and visual images associated with farming were another very common theme;
- Water bodies, notably lakes, along with water-based activities;
- Camping, along with other land-based activities;
- A slower pace of life that offered peace and quiet and an opportunity to escape the city was the last major theme;
- Other, less frequently mentioned themes included scenery, provincial and smaller national parks, museums and historic sites, horse-related activities, outdoor activities, summertime, sightseeing, the history of small towns, food-related activities and strolling around small towns and shopping.

When asked to identify the top six benefits to themselves of a rural, urban or mountain park visit from a card pack with 42 alternatives, the key *competitive* benefits offered by rural Alberta emerged as being welcoming and friendly, and informal.

Other more frequently chosen benefits suggested that focus group participants expected to enjoy a leisurely or slow paced trip, offering the opportunity to unwind far away from the crush of people in urban areas, often with family or friends. Additional expected benefits included having an unusual or rare experience and that the experience might be educational.

However, in comparison to Alberta's urban and mountain park areas, benefits such as being exciting, fun or offering a lot of activities to do were rarely selected, and cast a less favourable light to a leisurely or slow paced trip, particularly in the Young Adult and Family lifestyles where there was a fear of boredom.

There were three types of locations that urban Albertans would still like to visit or revisit. The first was leading museums and historic sites in southern Alberta, notably the Drumheller area and Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, also the “Stettler train”, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Writing-On-Stone provincial park, Reynolds-Alberta Museum and Frank Slide. Barriers proved to be incomplete knowledge about what the attraction itself has to offer or even where it is located, inertia or lack of a pressing need to visit and the association of historic attractions with “education” or schooldays, something that many people prefer to avoid when on holiday.

The second location with pent up demand was to go “up north”. Many towns were mentioned, with the appeal being grounded in the diverse natural attractions in the vicinity – scenery, wildlife, forests, fishing and northern lights. Distance, travel time and the number of days necessary to go there were the key barriers, with out of province destinations holding greater appeal by comparison.

The final set of locations included parks and other attractions, with a desire to visit Waterton dominating this list, based on a combination of natural beauty and things to do there. The remaining attractions included festivals, large statues and sports activities in scenic locations.

## Recommendations

Numerous recommendations were made based on the detailed study findings. A complete discussion may be found in the final chapter of the report.

Consistent findings throughout the focus groups pointed to a lack of “buzz” about rural destinations. People rarely talk about them – and word of mouth is the primary form of information. Furthermore, participants felt that they rarely saw or heard advertising about them, especially in comparison to Calgary, Edmonton, the mountain parks, adjacent provinces and states and international destinations.

As a result, knowledge about what there is available to see and do and where to go to engage in these activities or to enjoy these attractions, was limited to personal experience and the little that had been heard from others. The focus group discussion itself proved to be a source of information to some participants. The need for more information – and more in depth information about what each experience offers – appeared to be the most pervasive barrier to increasing visitation.

The result was that many of the recommendations made call for improved communication and higher levels of promotion, through traditional media (e.g., radio), comprehensive, accurate and easy to navigate websites, social media and e-zines. Optimum timing for promotion appeared to be when the weather starts to warm up and throughout the

summer. The destinations being promoted should take into account distance and driving time from home suitable for day, weekend or extended weekend trips. Both a print events calendar and an interactive one online were requested. Online booking options are desirable.

One particularly comprehensive and imaginative participant suggestion built on childhood memories of the province's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary promotion, "Stamp Around Alberta", which provided a reward for visiting different tourism destination regions. The idea brought the old concept into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by having a "treasure hunt" using geocaching. Tokens could be offered as a tangible reward, and a map provided for tracking the locations visited. For the Young Adult segment and possibly others, tangible rewards may not be necessary if virtual elements (similar to Foursquare) are used. The concept appeared to be well received in all lifestages as smartphone ownership is now pervasive. It also has the potential to stimulate word of mouth promotion.

As a stand-alone element, and to complement a game such as proposed above, a single App for mobile devices from a reputable source (e.g., Travel Alberta) that provides information on what there is to see and do at a particular location would be well received. Ideally, the App would be location sensitive where the mobile device has GPS functionality. The key component would be an inclusive, date-sensitive, list of activities, attractions, and festivals/ events. Information on hospitality services at the location (accommodation, restaurants, gas, groceries) would be desirable, but they are also available on standard GPS systems, so that need is less pressing.

Better roadside signage for activities, attractions and visitor information centres represents both a promotional opportunity and a product improvement opportunity necessary to lure willing travellers off their direct path to their destination.

Other product development opportunities included various improvements to accommodation facilities (hotels/motels and campsites), more roadside rest areas with more amenities, better hours of service and quality of service, and upgraded attractions, facilities and historic sites (including small towns with cultural or historic interpretive potential and museums).

Since the term "rural Alberta" did not always have favourable connotations, another way of referencing the area would be helpful. Ideas tested had limited potential (e.g., "Hidden Gems" could be used selectively), but did identify pitfalls to be avoided. Any term developed needs to intrigue potential visitors and suggest that they will have fun and an adventure in Alberta. The term could benefit by being directive and phrased from the potential visitor's point of view (e.g., discover, experience, explore).

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# Introduction

Infact Research and Consulting Inc. are pleased to present a report on an exploratory study of the potential of urban Alberta residents to participate in rural vacation experiences in the province. The findings are intended, in part, to help guide the creation of a questionnaire that will measure market potential quantitatively and will provide insights that serve to enhance understanding of quantitative statistical results.

## Background

The rationale for conducting a broad-based study of potential domestic demand for leisure trips and vacations in Alberta's rural areas at this time was recognition that with the increasing growth of tourism and its position as a major economic generator in Alberta, there is a growing emphasis on the importance of encouraging more travellers to experience the many and varied tourism vacation experiences that are available in rural Alberta.

The 2012 Growing Rural Tourism Conference in Camrose offered another point of view for focusing on rural tourism: "...the benefits generated by the [tourism] industry have been traditionally accrued by locations on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, and by the major cities of Alberta. Few of these benefits have been realized by the rural communities that populate the rest of Alberta ... Rural communities in Alberta and across Canada have begun looking towards tourism as a viable industry to diversify their local economies."

The conference focused on the early steps of initiating tourism strategies and partnerships, and looking at how participants might bring new sources of revenue and employment to their own communities. What was missing from this picture was knowledge of the underlying consumer demand for rural experiences – both how many might be interested (under the right circumstances and with the right appeals) and what they are looking for. Without this knowledge, strategies become driven by industry needs and perceptions of what is, without knowing what could be.

This study starts to gather information that can eventually be used to inform marketing and product development strategies and plans that will resonate with the true target audiences within the province.

### Definition of rural vacation experiences

For the purposes of this study, a rural vacation experience was defined as a same-day excursion that is at least 40 km away from home (one-way) in a non-urban location, or an

overnight stay away from home in a non-urban area of Alberta (with no minimum distance requirement), but not in Banff or Jasper National Park.

## Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions that each of three predetermined household lifestage groups currently has of the rural vacation experiences available in Alberta.

The objectives were to:

1. Determine current perceptions of rural vacations and potential demand for rural vacations among three household profiles.
2. Determine type of vacation experience(s), benefit(s), and activities sought in a rural vacation by each of the three household profiles.
3. Determine the major obstacles and barriers preventing Albertans from taking rural vacations and learn how these may be eliminated or mitigated for each of the household profiles.
4. Test labels or descriptive phrases that could be used to describe rural vacation attributes of Alberta and used in marketing messages.
5. Understand the trip planning process used by each of the household profiles to plan a rural vacation and learn about the key source(s) of information that would be consulted by such travellers.

# Methodology

## DEFINITION OF TARGET MARKETS FOR THE STUDY

Three demographic market segments, based on lifestage, were defined for use in the study. They were:

- *Group A, Young Adult Households.* Households consisting of one or more 18-34 year old adults with no person less than 18 years of age present in the household.
- *Group B, Family Households.* Households consisting of one or more 25-49 year old adults with at least one person less than 18 years of age present in the household.
- *Group C, Older Adult Households.* Households consisting of one or more 45-69 year old adults with no person less than 18 years of age present in the household.

## RESEARCH APPROACH AND PARTICIPANT DISTRIBUTION

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study.

Twelve focus groups were conducted, three in each target lifestage and two in each of six major centres distributed throughout the province (Calgary, Edmonton, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Lloydminster and Red Deer). All participants had taken trip/s in Canada or the USA primarily for leisure, or to visit friends and relatives, in the previous two years.<sup>1</sup>

### Distribution of focus groups by urban centre and lifestage

	A: Young adult households	B: Family households	C: Older adult households
Calgary	✓		✓
Edmonton	✓	✓	
Grande Prairie	✓	✓	
Lethbridge		✓	✓
Lloydminster*		✓	✓
Red Deer	✓		✓

\*Alberta residents only.

Recruiting guidelines for each group were established to ensure that a representative cross-section of the population would be represented in the focus groups. Ten people were

<sup>1</sup> Previous visits to rural destinations in Alberta were neither a criterion for selection, nor monitored, as the target market was defined as widely as possible to include all urban residents in the three lifestage groups with potential to visit.



generally recruited, for a minimum of six to show. The screener used may be found in Appendix I.

A total of 104 people participated, an average of 9 per focus group. Focus groups were conducted from February 23 to March 8, 2012 and had the following profile:

<b>Location</b>		<b>Gender</b>	
Calgary	19	Female	55
Edmonton	17	Male	49
Grande Prairie	17		
Lethbridge	18	<b>Age</b>	
Lloydminster	13	18-24 years	18
Red Deer	20	25-34 years	30
		35-44 years	11
		45-54 years	20
		55-64 years	16
		65-69 years	9
<b>Household Composition</b>			
A: Young adult households	34		
B: Family households	33		
C: Older adult households	37		

A diverse range of occupations was represented in each community, covering trades/ technical and clerical workers, business owners and professionals, along with a few homemakers, students and retired people.

## **INTERVIEW PROCESS AND DISCUSSION GUIDE**

Each focus group lasted one and one-half hours. The process followed during the focus groups is detailed in the Moderator's Guide shown in Appendix II, along with a copy of the individual response materials used.

Benefits of different types of leisure travel destinations in Alberta were determined by a card sort exercise. This allowed individual participants to consider the benefits of visiting rural Alberta independently of one another, before discussing their responses as a group.

## **APPROACH TO THE REPORT**

As with all qualitative investigations, the results of these discussions cannot reflect precisely how many people feel a particular way. The strength of qualitative methods lies in providing an excellent perspective of the range of attitudes, opinions, beliefs, perceptions, needs and motivations and behaviours held by the groups that are included in the consultation. It should be borne in mind that industry perceptions of the same attributes may be quite

different. While Alberta's urban residents may not see them in the same way, their perceptions are their reality; they believe their perspectives to be true and will act on them.

Comparison of the views expressed in different locations and by lifestage provides some insight into areas where different groups expressed noticeably different opinions. The findings which follow clearly identify where opinions diverge from one group to another, based either on qualitative responses or numerical approaches which could be undertaken for the self-completion material. Where no distinction is drawn, assumptions about inter-group differences cannot be made.

# Summary of findings

## Understanding the three lifestages

It is to be expected that three very different lifestages would be different. The question is, in what ways were they different? And, in what ways were they the same? This information provides a backdrop against which attitudes and behaviours relating to rural Alberta can be understood.

### AT HOME

Focus group participants from **Young Adult households** (under 35 years) tended to live with roommates, friends or boy/girlfriends. Far fewer lived with a spouse or lived alone.

**Family household** participants (aged 25 to 49 years) predominantly lived as a family with a spouse and child/ren at home. Single parents almost always had a live-in partner.

Those in **Older Adult households** (45 to 69 years) usually lived with a spouse. In some cases adult children who were studying or travelling still lived with them. Some lived alone. Interestingly, pets were mentioned as household members most often in this lifestage.

### MEDIA USE

When invited to list the mass and social media used, differences by lifestage were evident.

Almost all Young Adults indicated that they had a **Facebook** presence, though many were infrequent users, a mantra repeated in the Family lifestage, where Facebook was also the most frequently mentioned medium. Common comments included, “I am all over Facebook”, “I actually can’t stand Facebook”, “I do have a Facebook account but don’t use it a lot”. The type of “addiction” heard in focus groups only a few years ago, where people mentioned being on Facebook daily and said they spent far too much time on it, was rarely heard in this study.

In the Older Adult focus groups, Facebook trailed in fourth position. Two threads emerged that were unique to this lifestage. One was mention of concern about the safety and security of going on Facebook, including comments voiced by a security expert and the mother of a policewoman. The second was that Facebook is used in this cohort to stay in touch with children and grandchildren who live in other cities, to see their latest news and pictures. In fact, their presence on Facebook often appeared to be because they were urged

to set up a page by their children: “I was forced to go on Facebook because my daughter is”.

Trailing far behind among Young Adults was **television and radio**. In this group, television was often associated with watching movies and radio – often satellite radio – was listened to on the way to and from work and at work, generally for music. In Family households, television was almost never referenced and radio was the third most frequently mentioned, usually used when driving. In contrast, television was important as a source of news in Older Adult households, while radio featured much less. However, this was the only lifestage to mention reading **magazines** as a media source.

The **Internet** was mentioned by almost everyone in the Older Adult focus groups, being used for e-mails (another method of staying in touch), news, work and information gathering. Among Family households, the Internet was mentioned almost as often as the leader, Facebook. However, it was less extensively viewed as a media source in Young Adult households, where downloading music or watching YouTube might be a more common application.

A similar pattern emerged for **newspaper** use, with most frequent reference coming from Older Adult households, and relatively little in the younger lifestages. The newspapers read in the smaller cities in the sample included local publications and those from the nearest big city (Calgary or Edmonton), showing that some took their news very seriously.

**Twitter** was the only other media source with a noticeable number of users, with penetration being only somewhat higher in the Young Adult households than the older lifestages.

Worth monitoring is the use of advertising free **satellite radio**, and the impact that **smartphones and smartTV** are having on traditional TV and Internet use. There were several participants in all lifestages that were using these technologies to access the Internet, TV programs without ads and movies. Both these hot trends and the patterns revealed above, suggest that mass media consumption behaviours are changing and will continue to change at a rapid rate.

## ENJOYABLE LEISURE ACTIVITIES

There appeared to be both similarities and differences across the three lifestages in the types of things people enjoyed doing with their spare time. These activities can be assumed to drive things of interest on a leisure trip too.

A widely mentioned activity was reading and this appeared to occur regardless of lifestage. Another popular activity across the board was camping. These were followed by golfing, hobbies and crafts and such activities as fishing, swimming and biking.

While Young Adults liked to spend time “hanging” with friends, in the Family lifestage this time was being spent with their children, while Older Adults mentioned excursions with their grandchildren.

What stood out as a set of pastimes predominantly mentioned by Young Adults were challenging physical activities like skiing and snowboarding, as well as many less frequently mentioned ones including cross-country skiing, skating, skidooring, running, rollerblading, surfing, wakeboarding and quadding.

Among Family households, the standout was sports in general and particular types of sports including soccer, football, softball, basketball and floor hockey. Based on later comments, their interest in a particular sport appeared to be driven by the activities of children in the household. However, hockey had similar numbers of adherents in the Young Adult and Family lifestages, fewer among the Older Adult households.

Family households were the only ones to mention enjoying home renovations, but the younger lifestages had a few other interests in common: being outdoors or outside at every opportunity (Young Adults even enjoyed taking the opportunity to walk or play outside presented by the need to exercise their dogs) and watching movies.

Travel (touring) as an enjoyable way to spend leisure time was cited predominantly by Older Adults and discussed enthusiastically long before any questions could be asked. Other activities that did not come up in the younger lifestages included gardening, motorcycling and photography. Boating (canoeing, kayaking) and associated activities (waterskiing) were most often brought up by the younger cohorts.

Interestingly, there were also activities that were mentioned more often at the ends of the spectrum – by both Young Adults and Older Adults – rather than by the Family households. They were hiking and the arts (playing guitar and singing, music and painting and attending concerts or music festivals).

This list of preferred categories of activities does not include many referenced only infrequently – from volunteering and church to horses and show dogs.

## TRAVEL COMPANIONS

Travel companions, like household composition, varied in tune with what might be expected for different lifestages.

**Young Adults** most often mentioned travelling with their families, particularly parents and siblings. Mentioned second most frequently was travel with a friend, followed by travel with a boyfriend or girlfriend. They traveled less often by themselves or with a spouse.

By far the most frequent travel group in the **Family** lifestage was the nuclear family itself. Some also went with friends and some with extended family. They included parents and siblings, and among the older families, their adult children who lived independently. A very few went on couples-only trips or on female or male-only trips.

The impact of aging and changing lifestage is seen most clearly in the **Older Adult** lifestage, where the most likely travel companion was almost always their spouse. However, many went away occasionally with their extended family – in this case adult children, grandchildren and siblings. Many also travelled with other couples (friends). In addition, Older Adult households were the only lifestage where group travel was mentioned, such as chaperoning Scouters, going to marathons with a running group or overseas with another type of affinity group. Very few travelled by themselves.

It was noteworthy that when extended family trips were described, they either took place in the mountains (e.g., an Easter or Thanksgiving reunion) or in a rural area in summer, generally a campground near a lake. These rural reunions could involve dozens of people, some coming and going over time. The reunions were often held on a regular basis in the same place year after year.

## MEMORABLE TRIPS

### Destinations

To understand the current travel patterns of the three population groups, each focus group was asked in several ways to describe the trips they had taken. Some participants talked about typical trips, others about special trips and, where few rural Alberta destinations had been mentioned, some were specifically asked to describe trips in Alberta outside the national parks and big cities. Non-rural destinations form the competition for rural Alberta locations, while current rural destinations may offer a springboard for promoting other rural locations, based on existing travel patterns.

The most popular destination in Alberta appeared to be Banff, which appealed across all lifestages. In contrast, Jasper and Waterton were rarely mentioned by Young Adults. Kananaskis Country was almost always a destination for Older Adults, yet Canmore was most often mentioned by Young Adults.

Both Calgary and Edmonton were destinations for Families at a higher rate than younger or older lifestages. Other Alberta cities were rarely mentioned at all.

In rural Alberta, Drumheller appealed across the board, being mentioned more or less as frequently as some mountain and city destinations. There were no other rural destinations that came up more than two or three times.

However, as a group, small towns were identified as the site of previous trips far more often by Older Adults than the younger lifestages. Older Adults were also more likely to describe trips that involved circle routes or touring along particular highways or historic trails. When small towns were visited by younger lifestages, they tended to be the place where a good friend lived.

## **Length of stay and distance**

There was one further trend in the Alberta destinations mentioned. Those that were within a couple of hours drive of the home city tended to be day trip destinations. When they were a little further away, they tended to be weekend destinations. Longer distances roughly equated to long weekends or extended weekends (3-4 days). Very few of the trips in Alberta were described as lasting a week or more.

Because of this driving time constraint, the destinations mentioned were usually influenced by where the focus group was held. For example, Calgary residents frequently referred to Canmore and Kananaskis and small towns in central and southern Alberta. Lethbridge residents went to Waterton and the many small communities in southern Alberta. Those living in Red Deer visited Drumheller and various central Alberta lakes, while Lloydminster residents mentioned eastern Alberta locations from Cold Lake to Drumheller and beyond – as well as nearby northern Saskatchewan locations for lakes and cabins. In Grande Prairie, few rural locations were draws; those identified tended to be nearby and to the south. Edmonton participants mentioned such rural destinations as Canmore, Drumheller and particular lakes.

# Knowledge and perceptions of Rural Alberta

## WHAT PARTS OF ALBERTA ARE CONSIDERED TO BE RURAL?

Participants each received a small map of Alberta (see Appendix II) and were asked to describe where rural Alberta is.

The exercise proved interesting as different people saw “rural” in different places.

In almost every session someone identified rural Alberta as being “everywhere that is not yellow”, yellow being the colour used to mark cities with a population of 25,000 or more on the map. Many specifically identified the cities or major centres they would exclude.

This frequently sparked discussion about the smaller cities, and especially among participants living in those cities themselves. There was no question that Edmonton and Calgary were not rural. However, some residents of Red Deer, Lethbridge, Lloydminster and Grande Prairie were of the opinion that their cities were rural, while others thought not. The same applied to Fort McMurray. The reasons were similar to those used to identify even smaller centres as urban or rural, discussed below.

While most dismissed all towns as rural, others differentiated among them and considered some urban, based on:

- *The amenities offered*, for example, how long the banks stay open, having a 24 hour grocery store, having garbage pickup, the ease of calling a taxi, or if they only have one snowplough and “if it breaks down you have to shovel for a few hours”;
- *The size of the community*, the number of people who live there, the time taken to drive across town, how long the rush hour lasts, how spread out or built up the homes (or acreages in communities next to a city), buildings and farms are;
- *The culture or way of life* – whether or not people have a “city mentality”, the whole community “comes together for an event”, one actually finds one knows people in a parade or if it has “a small town feel to it”.

The discussion frequently evolved into a **regional differentiation** that added depth to the question of how Alberta’s vast rural area is viewed:

- One popular description was linked to the Queen Elizabeth II highway, “that corridor down Highway 2 [is urban] and everything else is rural” or “everything to the east and west of #2 ... east, west, north and south [is rural]”.



- Many distinguished between southern and northern Alberta, with reasonable consensus that southern Alberta – with the possible exception of Lethbridge and Medicine Hat – was rural. The basis for this determination included the presence of:
  - Farmland, farms and farming;
  - Prairies and dry countryside, “you can see grass for miles”;
  - Sparsely distributed towns, or feeling “You’re always near a town” (the difference clearly being in the eyes of the beholder).
- There was less certainty that northern Alberta with its many trees (“the bush”, “forest and wilderness”), wildlife, sparse population, being “a hundred kilometres from nowhere”, few roads and no cellphone service, hunting and fishing for food, could be termed rural.
  - For some it was just too quiet and the lack of people made it too remote to equate with the more populated farming communities in the southern part of the province that they thought of as rural.
  - For others, forested areas were accepted as being rural, as was farmland.

However, what was not so clear was where southern Alberta ended and northern Alberta began and even whether there really was a central Alberta area. Evidently the distinction is not commonly known or accepted, although the terms are widely used.

- Southern Alberta was frequently described as starting with, just north or just south of Edmonton;
- Southern Alberta was also often thought to start with Calgary, between Calgary and Red Deer or with Red Deer;
- Edmonton was sometimes viewed as being part northern Alberta; but
- In other cases, Edmonton was defined as central Alberta, since northern Alberta started at Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray; and finally,
- Red Deer residents were quite sure they lived in central Alberta, so the confusion occurred among those located either to the north or south.

There was no spontaneous consideration of the classification of the **national parks**. When asked about that, the most popular view was that they are a class of their own, referred to as “the mountains” or “the national parks”. This view also spawned a definition of rural that said rural land could be described as “flat”.

Although the discussions showed that national parks had some of the hallmarks of a rural definition, such as scenery and town size, and one person labelled them “commercialized

rural Alberta”, the townsites were ultimately deemed too urbanized and experienced too much tourism to be regarded as rural.

## DESTINATION REGIONS IN RURAL ALBERTA

Participants were further asked what regions there are in rural Alberta to take leisure trips. The question proved difficult to answer, and the basis for determining the areas varied widely, further confirming that knowledge of rural Alberta from a travel or tourism perspective is quite limited.

- Sometimes the areas defined repeated the broad geographic locations discussed above, *based on the landscape*: the north being wooded or forested where “you feel like you are going to hit a moose anytime kind of thing”, and the south being flat prairie and farms (“Southern Alberta with the fields, it feels like a farm movie to me”). Eastern Alberta was also described as “flat and farmland”, while central Alberta included rolling hills, some trees and farms.
- Some areas were *geographic areas*, usually near a larger centre. Those mentioned included: The Grande Cache area, a mountainous area with lakes, rivers and creeks, good for camping, between Grande Cache and Hinton; the hills near Calgary; the area near Rocky Mountain House; a beautiful area of parkland near Didsbury and Carstairs just before the mountains; back roads near Stavely and Nanton where you take a picnic lunch and park where you can;
- *Cultural reasons* were the basis for identifying a few regions. The area around Vegreville was seen as very Ukrainian and Polish (“I just see it as a culture because I find around Vegreville and that area it is very Ukrainian and Polish based and I find up in the north in Falher and High Prairie and Grande Prairie it is very French up there”); also an area east of Edmonton encompassing Tofield, Lamont and Mundare which was “like going into Europe and the churches ... and the cemeteries ... and the priests ... and of course it is the place for sausage but it is a real cultural experience up there”. French-Canadian towns in the north country were acknowledged to be home to “a whole different people”. Indian Reserves like Hobbema and St. Paul were mentioned as “a blocker or barrier” to direct travel routes as some participants were not comfortable stopping there.
- A few *names of regions* mentioned have been in use for decades, such as “the foothills”, Peace Country or the Peace Region around Grande Prairie and Peace River, and the very hot Badlands area encompassing Drumheller, Dinosaur Provincial Park and Brooks, with the hoodoos featuring prominently.
- A few were *names of administrative regions*, like Wheatland – a county, and Kananaskis – a provincial park.

It was notable too that there was not a single reference to any current, recent or older tourism destination region (e.g., Kalyna Country, Canadian Badlands) or marketing region (for example, Alberta Central, Chinook Country or Alberta's Lakeland), many of which were in existence for years.

## **UNPROMPTED ASSOCIATIONS: WHAT RURAL MEANS AND WHAT IT HAS TO OFFER LEISURE TRAVELLERS**

Initial, unprompted thoughts describing rural Alberta as a travel destination revealed a limited number of commonly held views and a wider variety of associations held by only a few people.

Mentioned most often were **small communities**, generically and by name. For most, these were towns they had visited and were memorable for one reason or another. For some, they were places where they grew up or had relatives they visited. During various discussions, it became apparent that small towns were known for a number of things:

- Hockey, great hockey rinks and leisure centres, and being the location for many sports tournaments attended with children who were competing;
- Community halls (where functions are booked);
- A different culture and a different way of life. For example, the community is tighter knit, with everyone knowing everyone and being more supportive of one another than in a city;
- Attractions, made all the more appealing by their unexpected location.

**Farms** were commonly associated with the term "rural Alberta". Other agricultural images included grain elevators, vistas of fields of canola or fields that were newly ploughed – and cows.

Bodies of water, including **lakes**, reservoirs, rivers and streams were next. Connected with these were water based activities such as fishing, boating, swimming and visiting lakeside cottages. **Camping** was often linked to water, but also stood on its own as the most frequently mentioned rural activity.

The **pace** in rural Alberta was another commonly voiced impression, generating such terms as slow paced, serene, quiet, peaceful, relaxing, less stressful, solitude and getting away from the rush of the city.

Images that were brought to mind less often than the above included:

- Scenery, particularly landscapes (or “countryscapes” as one respondent dubbed them) and landforms. These ranged from prairies and hoodoos to mountains and trees;
- Provincial parks and smaller national parks;
- Museums and historic sites. They covered planes and trains, mines, windmills and an aqueduct;
- Rodeos, a guest ranch, trail rides and horses;
- Outdoor activities like hiking, biking, quadding and golf;
- Summer;
- Sightseeing and drives from one place to another;
- The history of small towns, that it is valued by residents, stories of homesteading conditions, landmarks and ghost towns;
- Farmers’ markets, fruit stands and a honey farm;
- Walking the streets of small communities and shopping, garage sales, antique hunting, little bakeries, ice cream and notable restaurants.

A wide variety of other descriptions were generated by only a few participants each. They covered: meeting people and friendlier people; being outside; nature; wildlife; hunting; ice fishing and sledding (skidooning) in winter; and giant statues.

Single mentions of note included: oil wells, photography, cheaper prices, dirt, being wide open, sounds, disappointing hotels, Bed & Breakfasts (B&B) on farms or in villages, resorts, fairs and events, and places to go that you have never seen.

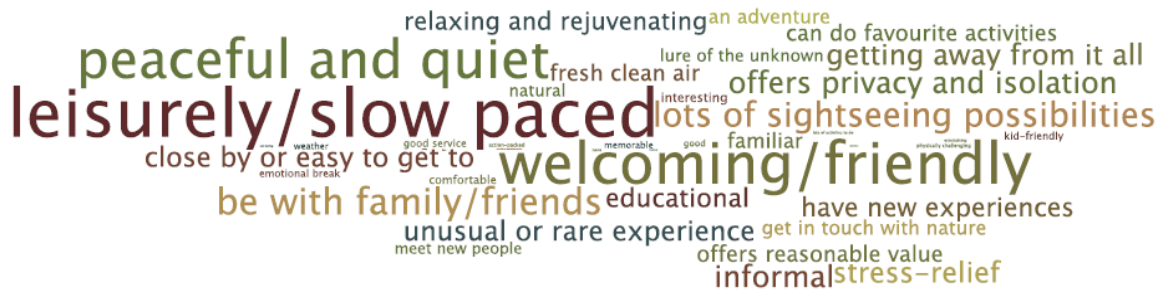
## **BENEFITS OF A RURAL ALBERTA LEISURE TRIP**

This study enhanced commonly used approaches to identifying motivations for visiting a destination by investigating the benefits that rural leisure travel would be expected to provide to the focus group participants.

Each person was asked to sort through a pack of 42 cards, each listing a different travel benefit, and choose up to six that would describe the benefits to them personally of a rural leisure trip, and up to six each for competitive urban and rocky mountain leisure trips. The benefits chosen were then briefly discussed to ensure understanding of what they meant and why they were chosen.

## Most frequently mentioned benefits

The total results are shown in the three word clouds below (larger letters mean more frequent selection among the 42 benefits considered). The table that follows lists, in order of frequency of choice, the benefits for each region.



### RURAL - TOTAL PARTICIPANTS



### URBAN – TOTAL PARTICIPANTS



### ROCKY MOUNTAINS - TOTAL PARTICIPANTS

## Top leisure trip benefits by region\*

Rural	Urban	Rocky Mountains
Leisurely/slow paced	Good choice of accommodation and food	Fresh, clean air
Welcoming/friendly	Entertaining	Get in touch with nature
Peaceful and quiet	Lots of activities to do	Physically challenging
Be with family/friends	Lively/vibrant	Getting away from it all
Lots of sightseeing possibilities	Good service	Lots of sightseeing possibilities
Informal	Close by or easy to get to	Natural
Offers privacy/isolation	Be with family/friends	Peaceful and quiet
Stress-relief	Luxurious/pampered	An adventure
Getting away from it all		Relaxing and rejuvenating
Close by or easy to get to		Stress relief
Unusual or rare experience		Memorable

\*mentioned by 20% or more participants.

### Rural Alberta

The picture of the reasons people might have to visit rural Alberta shows that such a trip would be expected to be slow paced and quiet, offering the opportunity to unwind in an informal atmosphere, often with family or friends.

What a quiet, leisurely/slow paced rural trip that provides privacy and stress-relief is, was really open to interpretation, usually based on experience. To those in the know, it was viewed as ratcheting down from their day to day life in the city: “it is so wonderful to go one hundred kilometres somewhere there isn’t a traffic jam and you can stop the car on a side road and just sit and enjoy the quiet. People wave with all their fingers when they drive past”. Enjoying leisurely experiences such as, “Going to the lake. Hanging out with a beer you know? Nice and cold”, turning one’s cellphone off and taking time to look at the stars had a similarly positive nuance. You could be in a remote campground or cabin where you can’t see your neighbours ... or it might just feel that way (“If I am driving rural [roads] you are isolated. It just feels like it is your car and whoever is in your car”). This environment was conducive to informality, particularly evidenced by not needing to be on show in how one dresses and looks.

On the other hand, for some people with little or no exposure to rural areas, the idea of experiencing a slower pace was built on a somewhat idealistic or caricature-like image of rural life that held attraction, without really being able to define how they would participate. It was an ideal that could easily veer into a fear of boredom and may be at least part of the reason for a weak impetus to actually try the experience.

Being welcoming and friendly was a benefit directly linked to “that small town feel” and the experience that people in small towns are friendly and helpful, for example: “if you have a car breakdown or some kind of issue then somebody knows somebody who will come over and fix that for you”. It was also linked to the reception one receives from family and friends. Visiting friends and relatives could be a key motivator for rural travel, “generally the main reason why you go there” or even the only one: “visit friends and family, that is really the only time I will go”.

Rural areas are thought to provide lots of sightseeing options and also to offer unusual or rare experiences. This choice of benefits further emphasizes the leisurely nature of the trip since it suggests viewing things rather than taking part in activities. Examples given of sightseeing possibilities focused on strolling the streets of very individual and charming small towns (the towns of the Crowsnest Pass being a particular example) and the beauty and diversity of the scenery. Awe-inspiring scenic views, generally enjoyed while driving, included seeing a full expanse of untouched prairie and the entrance to Drumheller when one first glimpses The Badlands. Unusual and rare experiences were related that described unexpected surprises (“I went to look at a job in Vulcan and realized it is a pretty interesting place”), historic places and experiences that are different (“how many times can you go to a place like Rosebud and attend a play or ride an old steamer train up Stettler way? These are just experiences that you don’t find everywhere”).

Being close by or easy to get to was interpreted as a benefit in different ways. Rural Alberta is not in short supply or far away (“there is lots of space. Rural areas are everywhere. Like in any direction”), while in Grande Prairie, being close to “where we live is definitely a factor” since residents feel somewhat isolated. For others, being “in the middle of nowhere” had no appeal since they wanted to be reasonably close to necessary amenities.

### **Urban destinations**

The benefits provided by visiting an urban destination were the polar opposite. Cities offer many choices ... where to stay, where to eat, where and how to be entertained and what activities to take part in. They are lively and vibrant. They are also the places where expectations of hospitality service levels are highest – where luxury and pampering is desired and easily accessible.

### **The Rocky Mountains**

Trips to the Rocky Mountains are about nature – being surrounded by it and being able to interact with it. For some people this is about the physical challenges that can be set. For others it encompasses the sights to be seen. In both cases they offer an adventure that can be enjoyed. Visits to the Rocky Mountains represent a change of pace that is often stress-relieving, peaceful, relaxing and rejuvenating, even while busy with multiple activities.

## Competitive benefits

The themes that emerged that distinguish the three types of Alberta destination areas from one another were similar to the above, but also contained notable differences that may help to position rural Alberta as having unique attributes and counteract important perceptual deficits.

### Rural Alberta

Rural Alberta “owned” the notion of being leisurely/slow paced and welcoming/friendly. These descriptions did not figure strongly as benefits of urban or mountain destinations. Mentioned half as often, but still far more frequently than in the competitive regions, were the concepts of informality, privacy and isolation, and offering an unusual or rare experience that can be educational when it involves being exposed to history or a different way of life.

On the other hand, rural Alberta was less likely to be characterized as offering the benefit of being exciting, fun or offering lots of activities to do – a view that undoubtedly needs to be addressed.

### Urban locations

Benefits that belonged almost exclusively to urban locations included a good choice of accommodation and food, the availability of entertainment (including bars and open restaurant patios, movies and concerts), having lots of activities to choose from and being lively and vibrant (more people, cultural diversity, nightlife, a faster pace). These were further explained by descriptions like action-packed, funky/trendy and not boring, offering luxury and pampering and good service.

Understandably, since all focus groups were held in larger urban centres, urban Alberta trips do not offer the lure of the unknown, an adventure, or an opportunity to get away from it all or to de-stress and relax in a quiet, peaceful or isolated environment. They also do not offer a natural environment with fresh, clean air or lots of sight-seeing possibilities.

### Rocky Mountain areas

Outstanding competitive benefits of visiting a Rocky Mountain park included fresh clean air, getting in touch with nature and taking part in physically challenging activities. Other more important differentiators were the sense of adventure that the mountains engender and reward and the memorability of past experiences. The mountains were most frequently considered to offer lots of sightseeing possibilities. They also offer the strongest sense of being away in soothing natural surroundings (mountains, trees, water and wildlife) where one can relax and rejuvenate and enjoy an emotional break.



The mountains were much less likely than the other regions to offer the benefits of familiarity, being close by or easy to get to, a place to do favourite activities or have new experiences, to meet new people, or be with family or friends. They were also not considered to provide reasonable value.

## **Perceived benefits of rural trips by lifestage**

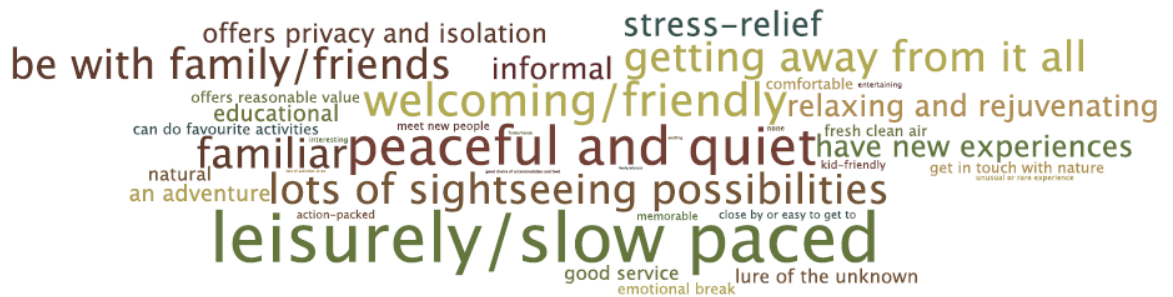
The next set of word clouds quickly show that while the three lifestage groups had much in common, there were also differences in how they perceived rural Alberta as a trip destination.

Because so many **Young Adults** actually grew up in a rural location, it is not surprising that they were more likely to say that the area is familiar and less likely to say that it offers an unusual or rare experience. For this lifestage, rural locations were more likely to be thought of as providing the opportunity to get away from their daily lives in the city. However, they were less certain what there really was to do that would engage their interest once there.

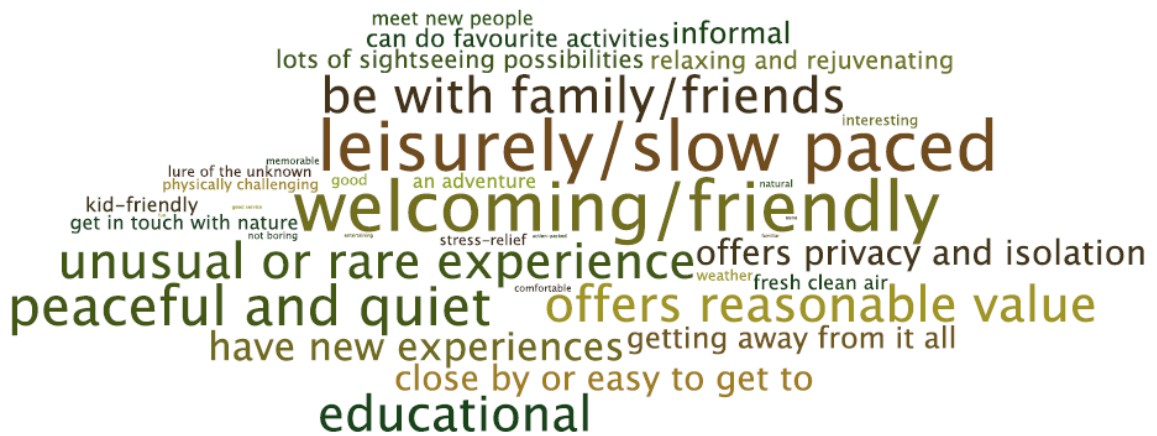
**Family households** were notable for identifying the educational value of a rural trip as a benefit, as well as seeing the region as offering reasonable value – both important values when there are children in the home. However, they were less likely to view the region as offering lots of sightseeing possibilities.

**Older Adults** were more likely to see fresh, clean air as a rural benefit. They mentioned the ability to be with family or friends and to have new experiences less often than the younger lifestages.

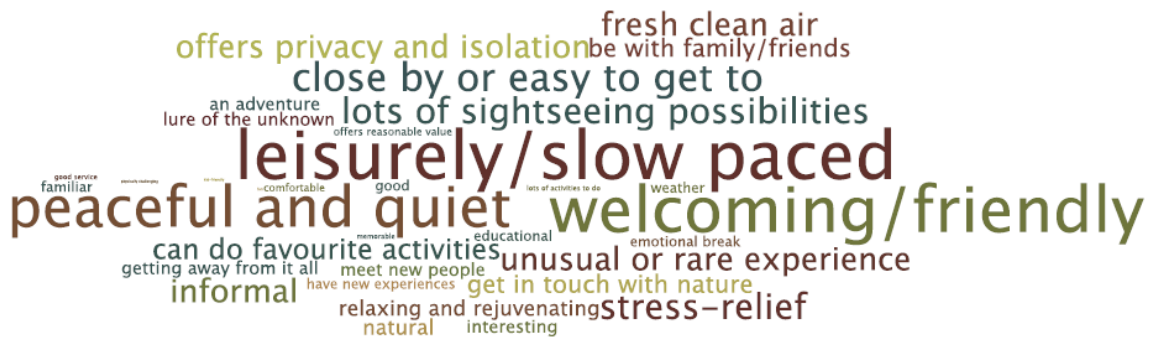
There were also some **age-related trends**. Rural areas were seen increasingly with increasing age as being welcoming and friendly, located close by and easy to get to and offering the opportunity to do favourite activities.



**RURAL - YOUNG ADULT HOUSEHOLDS**



**RURAL - FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS**



**RURAL - OLDER ADULT HOUSEHOLDS**



## Perceived benefits of rural trips by location

On the benefits predominantly associated with a rural trip, Calgary was less, and Edmonton more likely to consider being leisurely/slow paced a benefit. Both Edmonton and Calgary chose being welcoming and friendly less often than the smaller centres. What they both chose more often was being able to get in touch with nature; Calgary also felt that rural Alberta offered the opportunity to get away from it all and enjoy fresh, clean air.

The results of the card sort are shown in the word clouds below (note that bases for the word clouds are really small, so these may or may not be indicative of real differences).



**RURAL - CALGARY**



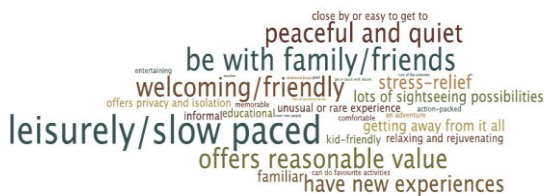
**RURAL - EDMONTON**



**RURAL - RED DEER**



**RURAL - LLOYDMINSTER**



**RURAL - LETHBRIDGE**



**RURAL - GRANDE PRAIRIE**

## PENT-UP DEMAND: WHERE PARTICIPANTS WOULD LIKE TO GO AND BARRIERS TO DOING SO

There were three themes to the locations mentioned by participants as places they would like to go. One was to visit leading museums and historic sites in southern Alberta. The second was to go “up north” and the third was national or provincial parks or other activities or attractions.

**Drumheller** was the most popular site to visit or revisit in future, but was mentioned exclusively in the Family groups. One reason for not having visited was that while they had heard of Drumheller as a place to see, they didn’t know enough about it. They didn’t view it as a destination in itself, but rather as an en route stop: “Once we get on the highway we just keep going to the States all the way, or British Columbia, or to the mountains and we just, I don’t know ... I don’t know if it is worth it. I don’t know” or from a Lloydminster participant, “Yeah if I was going somewhere else like Penticton [I would consider] Drumheller again. If I was going that way and I knew it was near. I would want to go there. But yeah, I would have to know where it is and how to go there and everything and what is going on and if it is open”.

It also appeared that one needed a reason to go back to Drumheller even when it had been enjoyed in the past. The only reason offered was to take their own children when they were old enough to enjoy it: “I would like to take my kids to Drumheller and go. I haven’t been since I was a kid, so to take them”.

**Other historic attractions** included the train in Stettler, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park, the Reynolds-Alberta Museum and Frank Slide.

There were many reasons for not having been there, but one theme for all historic attractions appeared to be a lack of pressing need to visit, as seen by this discussion:

~We want to try that train ride in Stettler with Jesse James is it? That comes on board?

*Moderator-So how come you haven’t?*

~I really don’t know. We usually go for all of those things, but just haven’t made a point to say, ‘Let’s do it’ yet, but it is on our list

~Yeah.

For Lethbridge and Lloydminster participants, the Big Valley train from Stettler was well known and an experience that they wanted to have. However, despite the distances involved for residents of these cities, some considered the train expedition to be a day trip and a casualty of inertia ... and because it was viewed as a day trip, it was bypassed when travelling through the area to get to a further destination.

Despite a desire to visit Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, it just wasn't strong enough as a destination to overcome the distance involved from Edmonton, for example. Participants didn't think the site stacked up against destinations competing for their time. They needed information on what else there was to do nearby to make a trip seem worthwhile. An additional barrier was confusion about exactly where the site is located in southern Alberta.

For several historic attractions, past plans to visit fell by the wayside, but the attraction remains "on the bucket list" and in some cases plans were being made for this summer: "That is where I would like to go camping. We were going to do it last summer, Writing-On-Stone, but we will do it this summer so that stuck out for sure".

Finally, it was interesting that the Reynolds-Alberta Museum became a "want to" destination for one participant after hearing what another participant said in the focus group. Ultimately, that appears to be the real key to releasing pent up demand, to create more than awareness that it's a good place to visit, but enough knowledge of what the attraction is about (quantity and quality) to make it a priority.

It is also evident that as most history-related sites are thought of as being worth at most, a day trip, the sites (including major museums) need to be tied into a longer trip when distance precludes a short trip. However, on a longer trip the perceived importance of visiting the site then vies with the attraction of reaching the ultimate destination ... which leads back to knowing enough about it to make it a priority. Alternatively, if the history-related site is the destination, then enough needs to be known about what else there see to see and do of interest in the vicinity (e.g., outdoor activities, other attractions) to make it a complete and satisfying trip.

Participants also complained that they found it difficult to find enough in-depth information: "You could go online and Google stuff, but it's just mainly Banff and Jasper or Edmonton and Calgary. It is actually kind of hard to find some of that stuff sometimes. It kind of all leads back to the main places".

The desire to go "**up North**" or "North of Grande Prairie" was expressed just like this on occasion, but more often as a particular place to visit. These places included Athabasca, Slave Lake, Peace River, High Level, Wood Buffalo National Park, Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan, and Cold Lake, with the lakes being mentioned slightly more often.

Each destination had its own draw. For example, Slave Lake has "some magnificent hiking and forest area" and "for birding it is like one of the premiere spots in Alberta". Cold Lake "is a hidden treasure. No one goes there". Athabasca has "woods, mountains, great fishing". For High Level "when you fly in on those bush planes the countryside up that road looks absolutely amazing" while Fort McMurray has northern lights.

In general, the appeal of desired northern Alberta destinations lay in their diverse natural riches, that led one vague “up north” participant to say: “I have never gone up north. To the lakes up north ... I would love to go and rent a cabin for the weekend and go tenting or fishing”.

So what were the barriers to visiting these beautiful places? The north was seen as “far” and “remote” and a long drive from home. These concerns were well captured by this participant: “the distance involved makes it a little more challenging a trip. If you are travelling by highway there is a lot of distance there. Some of those locations are very difficult to reach by road so you got to have a good vehicle to ensure, especially if you are travelling with a family, to be able to do that trip”. Other concerns were the cost of the trip and the availability of amenities: “those small towns, you don’t know if you show up after 5 o’clock if you can even get in”.

In addition, northern destinations fight for precedence for precious summer vacation time against other destinations. For example: “It is a decent sized drive. Probably five or six hours anyway. If I am driving that far I would probably hang out in the national parks area” or “It seems like it isn’t very accessible. Like ... you can’t sacrifice four days for travel to be there for two more days”.

Since distance cannot be removed from the equation (no one asked was interested in flying to a destination in Alberta), similar factors to those identified for historic attractions are in play here: making the appeal of the destinations more concrete through knowledge of what they offer and reassurance about the availability of amenities and supplies. Another “up north” participant had this to say: “Like way up [north] ... but that is quite a drive for a weekend so you kind of want to know what is there. If you are going to take that much time to go that far you would like to know some information”.

**Parks and miscellaneous other attractions** formed the final group of places people – almost always Young Adults – want to go to. This category was dominated by Waterton, which was mentioned in all centres and talked about almost as often as Drumheller as a place they would like to visit.

Waterton was chosen for its natural beauty, its lakes and hiking opportunities and because it is “grand” but not as busy with tourists as Banff or Jasper. Other parks mentioned were Cypress Hills and Writing-On-Stone provincial parks.

The remaining attractions selected were visiting Vulcan, the Taber Cornfest, Lethbridge and Red Deer air shows and scenic golfing in southern Alberta.

**A final note.** Many participants, when asked why they had not visited the destination they would like to go to, said they didn’t have the time or were too busy. While this could be

perfectly true, if the participant spent any time travelling away from home, the real question is why this destination was not selected. Those barriers are related above.

# What rural areas do not offer leisure travellers: Product development opportunities

There were several key dislikes and concerns that were raised on an unprompted basis during the focus group discussions, most of which act as a barrier to rural travel. They are discussed first. Each theme was probed as it came up, and later, if it hadn't been raised, it was discussed on a prompted basis. Additional themes that were potential barriers but not raised spontaneously, are identified as such below.

## FACILITIES AND AMENITIES

### Missing amenities

Facilities and amenities available in rural areas left something to be desired. Missing were those that were more likely to be **associated with cities or the mountains**, including spa weekends, fine dining, malls and a vibrant atmosphere.

However, the missing amenities went further than that, to address the **rural lifestyle**. There were comments about it being tough to find anything to do after 5 p.m., that one could not get a drink in the evening in some communities, and “entertainment that doesn't rely on the weather” was unavailable.

### Accommodation

Accommodation facilities came in for their share of concern, for one because they **can be hard to come by**. A lack of hotels, cabins and campsites was noted: “A lot of people prefer to stay in hotels and cabins and things like that and a lot of places just don't have that”, while “The campsites are sporadic even though it is rural. You would think there would be a lot of campsites where there really isn't”.

Scarcity of accommodation led to complaints about booking procedures, particularly the need for long lead times, and the deterrent this presented to spur of the moment trips – or even trips with a short planning horizon of a week or two. The issue appeared to be particularly severe in connection with campgrounds: “I think part of it for rural Alberta, there is very few places that will allow you to register online and make sure that you have a spot. And if you are going with family that is pretty important that you have a place for your trailer to be parked”. A few admitted to having camped in Walmart parking lots or a field because they had neglected to book.

However, hotels came in for similar criticism (“I would definitely plan ahead just because if you are going to a place that might only have one hotel for example, and it is full, you are



kind of stuck” or “For the special event in Cold Lake you have to make sure you have a hotel room or a campsite. You can’t just show up and assume there will be something there like in the city”, or even: “I think the thing I don’t like is ... if I want a room in the hotel you book one month before. If like oh, ... one week [before] I have some time, I could go, but ... it is hard to find the right price, because you have to pay more”).

The problem was made more challenging when online booking was unavailable or information was not up to date: “online they say they have a room or they don’t have a room and then you call the hotel and they will actually have a room available. But then again if you are in rural Alberta they might not have online booking for the smaller hotels, so you would have to call someone”.

Perhaps even more significantly, rural **hotels** were often described as being **poorly maintained** – variously thought to cover the condition, appearance and freshness of the physical property and decor, its cleanliness and/or service: “And some of them [campsites] are not that great, so then your option is going to hotels which is, yes, way cheaper [in rural areas], but at the same time it is hit and miss because a lot of those hotels are live-in hotels for rig guys” and, “I don’t like staying in cheap hotels. That is scary. I would rather pay more and stay in a nicer place. It is just the way I think ... I just walk in there and they look dirty and I don’t want to sleep on the bed”. Motels were viewed similarly.

**Participants with children had very specific needs**, most importantly that hotels have a swimming pool to give children something active to do: “it has to have a pool because it is not a vacation for the kids if there is no pool in the hotels. That is usually part of what we do look for”.

Expectations about meeting children’s needs at campsites were even higher. A safe playground (no broken beer bottles), a swimming pool or water feature for play, walking or hiking trails or other amenities that would encourage exploration and educational opportunities (e.g., about history or nature) were all mentioned. For example: “We used to play ball out of a place called Enchant ... and they have got ball diamonds there obviously and camping and they have a pond that is part of the irrigation canal so there is swimming and stuff and it is just a really peaceful place”. Adults appreciated a variety of entertainment features too: “We did a trip, actually just outside of Calgary, to Mossleigh and it has got a beautiful campground there and ... it has actually a tribute to trains. It has got a museum but it has got an actual restaurant and theatre ... and it was wonderful... It was a lot of fun ... They have converted cabooses as sleeping quarters ... and they are beautifully done”. Cypress Hills with its accommodation, water-based activities, amphitheatre and nightlife also appeared to offer the diversity of experiences desired.

Families with more than two children faced particular difficulties if they did not camp or were visiting in winter. Not all hotels permitted them to book one room, increasing their

expenses. And then some hotels did not have adjoining rooms for families, with the result that “they will make you get two rooms and my husband and I will have to be in separate rooms. Then he has got three [kids] and I have two and we just sit there. That is not a family trip”.

**Campsite restrictions** at provincial parks were the subject of much ire. They were thought to be family oriented as the rules of no noise after 11 p.m. are strictly enforced. Young Adults explained their reaction like this:

- ~“I think people work and work hard [and want] to get stress relief and get a chance to get away and they want to let loose a little bit and don’t want that list of rules of things you can’t do.
- ~Yeah you don’t want the park rangers coming and bugging you.
- ~Yeah you don’t want to drive for four hours and have a 10 o’clock bedtime.
- ~Or tell you that you can’t have a drink in the campground”.

Family group participants were critical too, since it limits the ability of the adults to relax: “I am not partying but it is nice to stay up and chat with your buddies around the campfire”.

For those who want to party, private campgrounds or crown lands without these rules were preferred sites (“you get to shoot fireworks and do whatever you want”), though there were suggestions that if the public sites were not so small, it would be less noisy. Another reason for criticizing the size of campsites was the feeling of being crowded in “side by side”, without any privacy – sometimes for the protection of one’s neighbours (“my kids can be quite obnoxious at times ... and you don’t need to worry about the people next door complaining”)! Areas where one campground was located next to another were similarly seen as “congested”.

On the other hand, one participant made the case that restrictions do help to meet different needs, but they need to be accommodated in different parts of the site: “I don’t care if it is private or not, but have different sections ... that if you have a group of guys that are fishing for the weekend and they are kind of over in this area and if you have got an old couple and you know they are driving a motor home and go to bed at 7 they are over here. And you know something in between. When we went camping ... we had lots of kids with us but we still liked to sit around the fire and we were up past 11, so it needs to be kind of that happy medium in the middle too ... People go camping with different reasons and it is nice to be able to not get put next to the sleeping grandpas and you know the partying 20 year olds.”

**Washrooms in parks and at campsites** (or their complete absence) were criticized both by men and women. It was acknowledged that remote locations “in the bush” were not “toddler friendly”, with big sticks to trip over, wolves in the vicinity and “guys out there with quads”. Without a bathroom, they were not wife friendly either. And men, while

enjoying tenting, apparently wanted running water too: “I enjoy camping just to camp. I hate waking up in the [morning] when you are all hot and sweaty – Or freezing”.

Private campgrounds were preferred on occasion for the pride of ownership and degree of supervision exercised by owners (though a participant stated “I just have a feeling if it says ‘resort’ I am staying away from it because I have been burnt too many times”).<sup>2</sup>

**Bed & Breakfast (B&B)** accommodation was thought of as rural and providing “an all in all feast for breakfast” with some food fresh from the owner’s garden. Some people loved them and use them, others don’t. There were no examples of B&Bs visited in rural Alberta.

On the “pro” side, B&Bs were described as ideal for learning about the community: “If you are travelling and you are going to a place where you know nothing about [it and] you want to experience that culture and that style of life, it is the Bed & Breakfast [that] is the best place to go because they live there and you eat their food and you talk their talk”.

On the “con” side, they are not as private as a hotel and one may have to share a bathroom. Unlike a hotel, some felt compelled to clean up after themselves or make their beds.

### **Roadside rest areas**

The United States (US) was praised for the number of rest stops provided along highways, complete with washrooms, while there are few in Alberta. US facilities were described as clean and easy to access from the highway. Amenities like children’s playgrounds, dog parks and a place to sit or walk around and stretch were identified as desirable features offered there.

Many dog owners in the focus groups did take dogs along with them, particularly when camping, but also on other excursions.

### **Gas, groceries and laundry**

The only other amenities that generated discussion were gas, groceries and laundry. These were the main purchases needed in a rural area, especially gas and fresh produce.

Concern was almost always linked to their availability, and particularly their availability in the evening or early morning (after one arrived or before one left).

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<sup>2</sup> Useful additional information on campground needs consistent with what was heard in these focus groups may be found in Alberta Economic Development and Tourism. “Phase I report: Northern Alberta product needs study”, 1996.

## Food and service

There was almost no discussion about restaurants or food quality, whether available or not. Yet food quality was important to the travel experience: “I want everything. If I am driving all the way from Grande Cache and I am spending all this time I want good food, I want good things to do, I want to go home broke and happy. I am serious”. The ideal appeared to be: “sitting in a little restaurant, in a little home town restaurant. They serve real good food”, but the reality was that while they were highly sought after, few could recommend such gems.

Food service appeared to be the bellwether for tourism service attitudes in general. For example: “We have travelled other parts of the country, the world and Alberta’s service is the worst. And that is very frustrating to take our money that we work so hard for and ... come home disappointed because the waitress was lousy or the housekeeping was lousy. That is a real frustration travelling in Alberta” and “The people in Alberta are so spoiled with good jobs and money they think it grows on trees ... if you go places you almost get the feeling ‘Well, oh geeze, do I have to wait on you?’ ”. “Oil rich towns” were described as having the worst service.

## INFORMATION

Information on **what there is available to do and where to go** is considered to be limited. These comments arose after just hearing other participants talk about rural experiences they knew nothing about: “Like there is lots of stuff but Alberta doesn’t advertise well, there is a bunch of different things that you can do. A lot of these things are happening and to see but we don’t know about them”. This is particularly important as the most important medium, word-of-mouth, is frequently absent for newcomers to the province or city and those without friends or families in rural locations.

**Informative signage** was condemned for not being there, including warning signage about the distance to the next gas station (“When you are driving from here to ... you don’t know if there is going to be a gas station, you know? ... lots of people aren’t going to venture there because they are, ‘I don’t know, are we going to make it?’ ”)

**Location signage** indicating how to find an attraction and **interpretive signage** about it was another noted deficit: “The famous gentleman of Peace River that made Peace River on the map was Twelve Foot Davis and nobody knows who that is. I lived there for eight years and they have no signs whatsoever and you just have to be a local to know about this and go out to the view point, so I think signage sometimes is a huge thing”.

And even when information is available, **booking procedures** can leave much to be desired. Without the ability to pre-book campsites, some participants were not prepared to

risk a long drive that could end without a place to stay overnight: “for rural Alberta there is very few places [campgrounds] that will allow you to register online and make sure that you have a spot. And if you are going [to meet] with family that is pretty important that you have a place for your trailer to be parked ... Because we don’t know if we have a spot we don’t go”. In addition, cabins book out quickly while one hotel informed a wedding guest that if an oil company wanted rooms, their booking would not be honoured.

Issues relating to information availability noted above were all mentioned spontaneously. Further discussion of this set of barriers may be found in the next section of the report dealing with Trip Planning and Promotion.

## **ATTRACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

For some participants, attractions and activities of personal interest, such as being able to watch national level games, are not available in rural Alberta (“You don’t get big hockey games. They may have junior hockey out there but they don’t have large CFL teams, they don’t have NHL teams there. There is lots of curling though” and “I am from a small town and I have done all the lakes and fishing and all that kind of stuff. Most of my activities and things like that don’t revolve around the country. I would rather be in the city”).

The majority of visits to destinations in rural Alberta occurred in warmer weather and the activities undertaken reflect that. Camping was most popular, followed by day hikes. Also mentioned fairly often were attending festivals, fairs and other events (music of all types, rodeos, demolition derbies); day hiking; and fishing (including lake fishing, fishing derbies, fly-in fishing and fishing camps). This was followed by mostly mechanized forms of riding, such as quadding, mountain biking and motocross, motorcycling and trail riding; visiting museums, both small and large; and then simply enjoying nature, water, the changing leaves and particularly the birds and wildlife.

Several attractions and activities were of particular interest in this study and are examined further here.

### **Museums and historic attractions**

One of the common associations with rural Alberta is history, especially the history of the small towns. This is often seen as being tied to its carefully preserved values and artefacts.

However, most participants were pretty vague after saying something like this: “so rural Alberta is just go to the next town and see what is there and find a museum and if you don’t like it drive on” or “You can go for some really nice drives, find a lot of history. You can go and explore and see I don’t know, see what things were like 100 years ago if you want to”.

Some, however, gave concrete examples of historic places, attractions and museums they knew or had found in small towns. Probably the most frequently mentioned was the Lancaster Air Museum in Nanton. Others were the Torrington Gopher Museum, Historical Windmill Museum in Etzikom, an elevator museum, a model train museum in Nanton, Museum of Miniatures in Cardston, and collections of significant or typical old buildings at Historic Dunvegan, Bridge Lake, Kleskun Hills and Grande Cache. Occasionally the remnants of an entire area were described – ghost towns, the mine tipple and abandoned mines and towns near Drumheller – or even just the location of bygone landmarks, such as the drive-in and train station in Grande Prairie.

For those who had an interest in historical places, artefacts or stories, they often stemmed from an emotional connection to their family's past. For example:

“I went to Nanton to the air museum with my dad and my grandpa. My grandpa was a World War II Bomber and he wasn't doing so well, so we went on a trip down there to see and it was pretty cool. He took me down into the cockpit where he used to fly and sit there. He had a stroke so he couldn't talk so well, but yeah he pretty much showed me what he did in World War II. I was like, 'Wow you were crazy bud'. But he did it right?”

“There is a lot of people that have been here for a long time and they have homesteads and places you can go to and kids don't understand that stuff. I never grew up like that, but my grandpa talks about having the outhouse and stuff like that. That maybe explains my toilet fetish. You can go out there and see what life was like. You won't get that in the cities or even, 'Here we are sitting where all the granaries used to be' ”

Under the right circumstances, they also represent an opportunity to bond with one's own children: “I would go to do it. Not so much for myself but my oldest child is very into anything that has a story. Even a burnt wall. He will go and see it because it has a story and touch it. I would look for these things to take him, maybe more of that me and him and dad kind of thing, as opposed to packing the entire family and go and look at it”.

For new immigrants and first generation Canadians, these places offered a means of connecting to their new country and an outing when entertaining visiting friends and relatives.

In general, historic attractions were visited while on a trip as part of a group of activities or while en route to a destination. They were rarely described as the trip motivator or destination.

Alberta's many large statues were led in awareness by the Ukrainian Easter Egg in Vegreville. Their place on a trip was similar – a stopping place to stretch your legs, and a photo opportunity along the way. However, there were people who “just decided we were just

going to go to strange little places and do that”. They were out to find interesting things that would be fun to see, including some of the small museums.

Some people were history buffs, “I like to go to places that are either directed to history or legends. I really like doing that”, or “my project is to go and find ghost towns and go and look at them ... sometimes it’s just a cemetery, but it is still wonderful”, but many – if not most – were really not interested: “not very exciting”, “it’s a waste of money”, “I can get a better bang for my buck than paying you know, twenty bucks to walk through a museum, you know what I mean?”, “I would rather be outside, so we wouldn’t be in a museum” and “I guess maybe if you have kids that might make it more appealing to go”.

The impetus and urgency to actually visit among those between these extremes (i.e., interested but rarely go) appears to be lacking: “I always seem to say I will do it another day. Not enough time today, so then I will get onto it later. And later as it happens you are busy doing something else” and, “I am sure after twenty years there have been lots of changes. Say in Drumheller, or there is a new space and science centre in either Calgary or Edmonton [that] would probably be really interesting, but I have just never made the effort to go. It is just one of those things ‘Oh that would be fun to go to one day’ ”.

One of the reasons may be that museums appear to be firmly positioned in the realm of “education”. Many of the major rural provincial museums that had been visited or were mentioned during the focus groups, led by the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, and including Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Frank Slide Interpretive Centre, Reynolds-Alberta Museum and Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, were last visited with parents when the participants were children, or with their own children or other ‘kid’ relatives ... or on a field trip while in primary school: “I went often with my school. We had field trips from Grade 1 to 9 and then you think, ‘Oh well, I don’t need to see that again’ ”.

Children themselves can be resistant: “So like there is a lot of history here and [in] smaller centres you can find it because it is still there and they value it and try and keep it. Value it and try to teach your children, is another story” and “my husband was a school teacher and we never drove through a community that we didn’t stop at a museum and my children grew to dislike it because there were other things they [liked] to do”.

A suggestion in one focus group was to have a game for children where they could have passes to the attractions and then mark them off in a book as they were visited: “Okay we reached this destination and you know the egg or got the Vulcan ears from the museum and like check mark it off”.

Special discounts through online coupons (e.g., Groupon) were another suggestion.

Of all the museums and historic sites mentioned, two stood out as providing the ingredients for a trip that offered multiple activities to choose from. The most popular was the Drumheller area, which was known across the province. Repeat visitors often did not even go to the Tyrrell Museum, spending their time at other attractions instead. However, a frequent Drumheller visitor warned of its deterioration: “the one thing I don’t like about there, is it doesn’t seem like anything has changed in twenty years. The dinosaurs are dying because the paint is just falling off. It looks pretty haggard now. I mean it has got great potential there, but it could use a bit of a facelift”. And someone who originally came from the area commented about the incongruity of the commercial development that has taken place.

The other regional historic attraction was the Crowsnest Pass. Knowledge of the area, and visitation, was generally limited to southern Alberta locations (Calgary and Lethbridge) where it was described as being far more than Frank Slide. These descriptions speak for themselves:

“[there] is quite a bit of traffic and some publicity, not enough I don’t think for the number of things that you can see when you go there. Because you can spend days in the Crowsnest Pass and not see everything they have to offer”

“Great hikes ... but the only thing you hear about it is Frank Slide Interpretive Centre but there is dozens of other little things you can do. Take the mine trips there and if you just wander the streets of the towns. Things [that] are wonderful history. It is pretty old buildings too. I am a little bit into photography so that is good for that”

“Thunder in the Valley during the Rum Runner Days in July. I don’t know if anyone has been there, but the fireworks show on Saturday night is really pretty impressive what they put on there. That is always fun”

### **Farmers’ markets, fruit stands and craft sales**

Any reference to food finds in rural Alberta was generally greeted positively (“I love all of that”). Food purchases are low cost items – think of ice cream cones in Vulcan – and when sourced locally, appeared to be highly valued. In Lethbridge, for example, there was a lengthy conversation about a “little honey farm” while in Calgary similar time was spent discussing a “fabulous greenhouse”.

Authenticity appeared to be great part of the appeal: “I think about fruit stands. People selling off their land” or “The U-Pick Strawberry farm. I think that is our whole conversation, that kind of sums it up. Hidden Gems. That’s Alberta itself”.

Farmers’ markets of all sizes were termed “awesome”, from the market leader in Millarville to one in Buck Lake. However, there were several degrees of willingness to travel to a farmers’ market – from not at all, to seeing them as a stop along the way or a place to visit only if one was there anyway, to being willing to travel specifically to attend.



Craft sales were regarded similarly. “I would [go] if I was there and it was advertised, I would go and see it while I was there ... unless it was really, really amazing, I wouldn’t go out of my way to go there for trip because of the craft sale” versus the much rarer response, “I go anywhere really that has a craft sale or a church is putting on a sale of some sort. My fiancé loves home baked goods and anything sweet so we will typically look for something like that when we go. Like farmers' markets or craft sales”.

Some people saw these as forming part of trip, neither incidental add-ons nor trip motivators, for example: “When we were planning a trip we would see what is going on in the area before we got there and we would plan [what] to do. We wouldn’t go out for that reason but we look to see what is going on the weekend we are there”.

Farms and ranches were known to offer tours. Tours had appeal for some (from winemaking to cheese production to raising rabbits), but the end product was more important to others.

### **Farm or ranch visits**

One person was planning a visit to a guest ranch this summer, but beyond that the concept of a farm or ranch visit as a leisure trip experience was almost unknown to focus group participants. In fact, the idea was met with incredulity by a self-described “farm girl”: “Is there even a place in Alberta where they have a farm that will let you? ... Actual farms where you can stay?”

Young Adults responded in different ways. Some were not interested at all, while others felt a change of lifestyle and gain in new skills would be of interest. In the Family lifestage there was a sense that it would be educational for city kids, particularly being exposed to the animals.

The biggest barrier appeared to be lack of awareness, which would need to be addressed by targeting those inclined to take this type of trip.<sup>3</sup>

### **Festivals and events**

Rural rodeos were some of the commonest events attended. They sometimes offered the opportunity to reconnect with friends, especially when returning to one’s home town, and provided a feeling of immersion: “That is the best, being right there and part of it because you are so close to it”.

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<sup>3</sup> Additional insight may be gained from Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. “*Event-Based Market Potential for Agtourism*”, 2004.

The Teepee Creek Stampede caused a lot of chatter in Grande Prairie as some of the newcomers in both focus groups had found difficulty identifying what to do in the region (“the maple sugar festival here ... is the only festival I have heard of since I have been here. So if I knew, I would go to these things”).

Teepee Creek’s Mud Bog was deemed “wicked” and described like this: “It is a big mud pit that big trucks try and go through it. And lots of them get stuck and it is very funny. These guys that think they are so great with their big muscle trucks. But it is really loud so it is not something you want to take small children to unless they are used to that sort of thing”. Demolition derbies were events along the same lines that had been attended elsewhere (e.g., near Rocky Mountain House and Vegreville).

Attendance at rural music festivals was mentioned relatively frequently and covered a wide range including country, bluegrass, folk and electronic music.

There was a perception that, “most places have a parade sometime during the year” and many have summer fairs.

The Passion Play in Drumheller, the Rosebud Opera House and a dinner theatre near Lloydminster provided other avenues of entertainment.

In one group “small ball tournaments” came to mind while some Families with children who were competing said they accompanied them “just for fun”.

No complaints were heard about the quality or quantity of events available; the only complaint was that it was hard to know or keep track of what was on in the vicinity that would be of interest to them.

### **Wildlife viewing**

Some participants were conscious of opportunities to view wildlife while in rural Alberta. They mentioned birds, wild pheasants, snowy owls, sage-grouse, ducks, sheep, elk, “herds of caribou”, deer, pronghorns, coyotes and bears. However, many considered the mountain parks superior in this regard.

When asked how they spot wildlife in rural areas, the response was mostly to stop the vehicle when an animal was seen alongside the road, for example, “When you see the wildlife on the side of the road we tend to stop but we stay away and just watch them which is really nice to see” or more evocatively when talking about Slave Lake, “when I got out of the car there was just the sound of the birds was so overwhelming because you don’t hear a lot of birds here [Calgary]. Just this din of bird sounds. And the reason we stopped and pulled over to the side of the road was because there was two coyotes and three

ravens feasting on a deer that was hit at the side of the road and normally you would go, 'That is horrible', but there it is just part of the circle of life and they just turned around and looked at us like they were not threatened and went on with their dinner".

In other cases, it was suggested that one has to deliberately stop and look and listen: "I would go out and walk in the field and look for it. So I like the prairies very much for the wildlife and taking your time and just stop and get off and go out" or again, "I find the prairies are full if you stop and look in the ditches and you watch along them. The ducks in the ponds. I always find lots of wildlife in the prairies. There is a lot of activity. Animals, the pronghorns. There is so much going on. In the spring time we will watch sage-grouse by Medicine Hat and watch them do the dance ... It is just beautiful to watch".

But then there were focus groups in which the only wildlife associations were trips to see birds or animals in captivity: "I would go to a zoo", "a place like Birds of Prey" in Coaldale or "Ellis Bird Farm" near Lacombe.

Evidently people who live in a city need to learn different approaches to seeing the wildlife that is to be found in rural areas.

## CULTURAL VARIETY

Rural Alberta may be too similar to participants' daily life. Some wanted to encounter different cultures, have unfamiliar experiences and even different (better, more predictable) weather when they went away: "Sometimes for me it is the different culture. That is what I like about travelling and going overseas ... So I feel if it is rural Alberta it is usually the same language, it's the same life as you", followed by "Like Vegreville has the egg and when you come to a community like that, you kind of want to experience something different even if you are just there to relax and just the novelty of something like, 'Oh I never tried this before' as opposed to 'well its typical Alberta to go to the lake and kind of hang out and hang on the beach and go horseback riding'".

It was suggested that rural Alberta should improve promotion of areas where a different culture (such as Ukrainian or French discussed under Destination Regions), or new or novel experiences and things that are different could be found. For example: "they have a number of Ukrainian communities that put on interesting events that go on. That is between here [Lloydminster] and Edmonton. I would like to sometime do that".

On the one hand, visiting the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village was often associated with an "educational" trip taken with one's parents as a child – and not always fondly remembered for that – and on the other, some of the current generation of parents would like to do something similar: "The Ukrainian Festival in Vegreville. We used to go as a child with my family and that would probably take me and my children to Vegreville to

experience the Ukrainian culture because it is so prominent there”. Interest was also expressed by people who were of Ukrainian heritage themselves: “Because my mother’s family is Ukrainian I would love to go to Vegreville ... I have some of the handicraft that my grandmother did, but I would like to see the museum there”.

Most spontaneous mentions of Aboriginal experiences were associated with attending powwows. Interest varied. Many said they either had been to one, or would be interested in going, “If I have a chance to go to one, I would”. However, there were other people who were not in the least bit interested. Medicine Hat’s teepee was described once.

Blackfoot Crossing was referred to spontaneously by the very well travelled Older Adult group in Calgary (“Like you can camp and hear the stories from the past and we went a couple of years ago to one at the Blackfoot Nation and there was a story teller there and just the emotions that he did when he was telling the story. It was unbelievable. Just very nice”). This group also described medicine wheels in southern Alberta (“I have been to the medicine wheel that is thousands of years old, older than the pyramids and I think they should be, hardly anyone knows about them, and I think they should be promoted more. Every time I have gone, there has been no one there. Just me and my friends”). Another participant in this focus group described a trip up north: “There is a museum up in Grouard where they still teach the moose hair tufting and you know the fish scale art. They can do all these things that are just unbelievable and they don’t want to pass an animal on the road without picking up and using some of the parts to make art. But it is just incredibly beautiful and the music up there as well ... because it is French communities and Aboriginal communities that have joined their music together so it is quite gorgeous”. This focus group in particular demonstrated that an active interest in seeing other cultures overseas actually can and does carry through locally.

None of the other groups made mention of these attractions and only one (in the Calgary Young Adult group) had heard of Blackfoot Crossing. When the facility was described to them, many – though not all – indicated interest, even from as far away as Grande Prairie. For some Young Adults, and Families with kids (rather than themselves), the experience was regarded as “educational”. Some were personally engaged (“I think it would be pretty fascinating” and “I would go. Yeah I like that. I like anything that is cultural immersion to something that I am not a part of”) while for others it would be something to do rather than a draw in itself (“I think if I was down there ... I probably would check it out, but just to go for that, most likely not”).

## ACCESSIBILITY

### Roads

Roads were the subject of spontaneous comments, almost always negative, including references to logging roads, bad roads, gravel roads that all look the same and maze-like range roads.

During the discussion of visiting rural areas to take part in winter activities, it became apparent that fear of poor road conditions was a key inhibitor to participating, especially among Older Adults. This was because of Alberta's changeable weather, "The weather is a deterrent. Because the roads might get bad" and because of perceptions of the roads: "A lot of people don't travel in the winter in Alberta. I don't think people feel confident on one lane" and "I get more nervous driving on back roads during the winter".

The scenic value of driving off the main highways was brought up only very rarely.

Given these predominantly negative views and that most people do not go out of their way to explore unknown roads, it is not surprising that there was limited interest in touring backcountry roads.

More information on the topic of rural roads was elicited when the term "Off the Beaten Path" was discussed (see 'Terms for Rural Alberta' in the final chapter of this report).

### Driving time and distance

The drives to rural destinations apparently should be no more than a day trip for most: "For me it [a rural trip] would be ... close enough ... where you do everything and come home at supper time kind of thing. So it is not to me a far destination" and "We tend just to stick more in southern Alberta where we can do day trips that way. When you go past Calgary you feel like to have to stay more than one day if you go further" (Lethbridge participant). Others, however, preferred to take a weekend or long-weekend to visit the same destination, so distance was not always a factor in length of stay.

For example, in Lethbridge, Waterton – a 2 hour drive – was both a day trip and weekend destination, depending on how much of a break was needed and finances. In Lloydminster, Drumheller – 5 hours away – was considered a day trip, while the 3 hour trip to Edmonton was deemed "not that far away". In comparison, in Calgary the distance to Slave Lake at almost 7 hours prohibited a weekend trip, though places 3½ hours away were well known. And a drive of less than one hour from Red Deer was rejected by one person as too far to go on a day trip. One participant in Lethbridge, which is well served with interesting and historic small towns and provincial parks within a few hours drive, even stated that he

would not travel further north than Edmonton (6 hours). Ultimately, it appears that the competitive opportunities nearby influence how one thinks about distance to a destination.

In a different vein, some expressed the view that there is too much distance between attractions while the roads are too quiet, “Look at all the space and there is no attractions. I don’t want to drive on a road where ... I could get a breakdown and it would be a while before somebody helps me. That creeps me right out. I want to be on a road that is heavily travelled where I have got attractions” or, “I will always say this is beautiful here. The open style and all of that kind of thing. Love it. Love it. But to entertain me, no. I don’t want to get in the car and drive so far to see nothing”.

## **AFFORDABILITY**

On an unprompted basis, it became apparent that the cost of travel in rural Alberta could be a deal-breaker for Family group members, though they expected rural destinations to be affordable (“offers value is like a given”). With the distances involved, trips with children may require an overnight stay which ramps up the expense. Young Adults were also concerned about the affordability of the short same day or weekend out-of-town trips they crave, possibly because so many trips they do take are to the mountains to participate in high cost activities. It was only in the Older Adult groups that cost – while not unimportant – did not generate a whole lot of discussion.

There were two major determinants of high costs: accommodation (especially hotels) and transportation (especially fuel). This was followed by prices to visit attractions and take part in activities, and miscellaneous items like food and laundry.

### **Accommodation costs**

Hotel costs depended on the type of hotel available: “The only thing that causes me to check on costs is accommodations. Depends on where we are going. If it is day trip it is not a factor. If we are camping it is not a factor, but if we are staying in a hotel, it depends on which hotel. Sometimes it is not a factor, sometimes it is more of a restraint”.

In general, where cost was an issue to the participant, the preference was for modest chains with a known standard that are clean and offer good value (e.g., at \$120 a night). Hotel costs in rural areas were expected to be reasonable (“It is an expense but it is not of anything at all. They are quite reasonable”) ... except where there was oilpatch activity; then it was known to be expensive. When travelling with a large family (more than four), costs could escalate when the family was forced to take more than one room – or lie to avoid it since it becomes “crazy expensive”.

Camping was a far more affordable alternative than hotels (“The camping is usually cheaper too”). However, even here there were occasional complaints about fees for a site without hookups (reported as \$30), fees for pitching an extra tent (\$10), and fees for the firewood one is required to purchase on site (\$20).

### Transportation costs

Long trips that take the best part of the day gave rise to concern about fuel consumption and gas costs. In one Young Adult focus group, the issue of gas costs was illustrated by this statement when asked about the affordability of travel in rural Alberta: “You got gas money? Okay let’s go”.

Sometimes the additional expense is for the purchase of the vehicles that use the fuel (e.g., an RV, a truck to pull a trailer and/or the trailer itself), as illustrated here: “A lot of people prefer to stay in hotels and cabins and things like that and a lot of places just don’t have that. Like you have to haul an RV or a travel trailer probably for miles, [it] is expensive for fuel and the expense of having to buy a travel trailer”.

Some actually reported that they had worked out the cost, for example, “when you figure out really how much it costs when you have to fill up your van and pull the trailer to wherever ... all of that stuff costs just as much if we were just to go to a hotel. The price is the same for us because we figured it out. It is what you want to do, it is not the cost. Because when you look at pulling your trailer all the way to a baseball tournament here or how much it would cost you just to stay in a motel, it is the same amount. It is what you want to do. Because the gas is the [equalizer]”.

As a result, when fuel is considered, the idea of simply touring (“just driving aimlessly”) is no longer an option.

Finally, there were occasional discussions about flying to more distant northerly destinations. The cost was always a barrier: “You lose almost a day just driving [to Grande Prairie] and it is ridiculously expensive. Like, it is cheaper to fly to Victoria where it is at least more fun”.

### Cost of attractions and activities

One of the high interest attractions with greater potential in rural Alberta is the train from Stettler. This was used to illustrate how, with children, a one-day outing can become a prohibitively expensive overnight trip with the attendant accommodation and food costs – or baby sitter expenses.

Even a tour such as the one described under 'Edmonton's Countryside - Country Soul Stroll' was greeted with the question, "With something like that, that tour would have to be fairly affordable".

In another discussion, about the Iron Horse Trail featured in Travel Alberta's Snowmobiling print ad, there was dialogue about whether equipment and clothing would be available for rent. That led to the statement: "Those would be the things that would make my decision".

And a highly popular activity like fishing could also be viewed as costly: "Go fishing, but the limits are so low. It's pretty expensive per fish ~ Plus it is expensive to get the licence ~ Yeah and then they only let you keep one, maybe".

On the other hand, Waterton and Writing-On-Stone parks were used to give examples of activities that were quite affordable: "Like you go to Red Rock Canyon and walking and tanning there and you can find lots of fun things to do. It is not expensive if you just find stuff to entertain yourself with, rather than go to the stuff that costs money in town". Even very short trips can provide enjoyable experiences: "I want our kids to remember us doing stuff even if it wasn't very far from home. I want them to remember and say, 'I did that when I was a kid'".

It was suggested that package deals that tie a key attraction to accommodation and possibly food (which could include groceries) are a necessity, both for Family and other trips. This was seen regularly in Travel Alberta publications for Calgary, Edmonton and the mountain areas: "There is always deals where they will bundle it and with the rural one there is none. With urban, if you do a lot of research on the internet, there is always a family rate".

Beyond the cost savings, packages represent a time and energy saver too: "so going rurally with kids, [or] even if I was going on a women's weekend kind of thing, they've kind of got to set it up for you. They've got to have a nicer hotel with a spa or maybe a hiking or trailride package ... I kind of want someone to say, 'Here you can go and do this'. And I do that. Go to Stettler and here you can have the whole weekend".

When the cost of a rural leisure trip starts to rival a known attraction like Disneyland, the decision to ignore Alberta destinations becomes simple: "If you do the math on some of these trips, like if you drive to Drumheller and you stay two days with the kids and all of a sudden you are spending eight hundred bucks, well you can go to Vegas for the weekend for that. And I would much rather do that. So it is kind of, the trips on the surface they seem like 'well that would be great' ... [but] by the time you get back you have spent a thousand bucks. And you are like 'well, was it actually that fun?' "

Lethbridge participants were full of praise for Montana as a destination, not only for offering good entertainment, shopping, food and a better service experience, but for providing



“better value on your dollar”, with many free or less costly attractions that are also “far more enjoyable”.

## MULTI-SEASONAL APPEAL

One of the concerns to be investigated in this study was whether seasonality was an issue; whether participants currently engage in winter activities in rural areas or would be interested in doing so. This was a supplier-driven issue, rather than buyer driven since there were no spontaneously mentioned concerns.

Summer has the advantage that attractions are open and there are many activities one can participate in.

In contrast to the summer activities described earlier, those who did visit rural areas in winter – or who knew what was available to do – mentioned cross-country skiing, sledding (on rivers, in a snowmobile derby) and ice fishing most often. Snowshoeing was also mentioned, but more as a “to do” than as something that is done. Downhill skiing and snowboarding followed (though preference was expressed for the Rocky Mountain resorts due to longer runs and more varied terrain). Other mentions included: hiking, dog sledding, sleigh rides, tobogganing and tubing on snow.

Winter activities have apparently changed in fashion and ease of access as illustrated here: “in my experience a lot of people don’t cross-country ski or snowshoe anymore. Not my age anyway or anybody that I have seen. And if you want to do that there is lots of places to do it in the city you know? Just like there is in more rural areas. There are parks and trails” (a Young Adult).

Age plays a role in what is possible too: “We had to move to snowshoeing after I had my knee surgeries. Now we don’t cross-country [ski]” (an Older Adult).

The more sedentary talked about enjoying nature, particularly the beauty of the scenery and quiet of the snow. There was winter birding ... and “people watching” from a lodge or coffee shop.

And then there were those who don’t go out in winter, but prefer to stay home by a fire to read or watch TV: “I was going to go [to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump] last summer then I couldn’t leave the city and I am not going to go in the winter” ... or they go overseas: “In the summer we did all of these little trips here and there and to the lake or whatever, whereas in the winter we go away to a different country”.

Despite the many opportunities for winter activities, planning for trips appears to start only as the temperature gets warmer and thoughts turn to ways of enjoying the weather. We

heard this explicitly and implicitly, as in this conversation: “Because by the time we decide to go somewhere we don’t seem to ever have a lot of time. It is a good day trip [from Lloydminster to ...] ~ You have to just tell yourself I am going to go this summer and I am going to do all of these day trips and you find what day trips there are and you go for it”.

*Final note:* There was interest in learning about winter trail development needs from the supply side. None of the participants who were involved in these activities spontaneously criticised the infrastructure currently available or mentioned a need for improvement. In addition, when excerpts from the Travel Alberta Snowmobiling ad were read to some of the groups, no comments were made about the trails themselves, only about the need for rental supplies so that they could be enjoyed by city people who don’t have all the gear.

# Trip planning and promotion of rural properties

## SOURCES OF AWARENESS OF RURAL TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES

The discussion to this point has focused on what urban Albertans know and have experienced in rural Alberta. A key to broadening their exposure is to increase awareness of rural tourism opportunities.

The response to the question of how much they hear about rural Alberta for leisure trips was generally met with shaking heads and comments such as “not much”, “rarely” and “not a lot”. Further discussion revealed that three information streams were brought to mind when reacting this way.

### Word of mouth

One was word of mouth, that is, what is heard from other people – friends, colleagues and family. This was particularly important in the Young Adult groups where travelling with friends was so prevalent. It occasioned some revealing comments that demonstrated clearly that in this segment, being acceptable in the peer group was an essential component. The following repartee in Calgary says much about current attitudes:

*Moderator: Do friends talk about places in rural Alberta?*

~No

~Not in the same way [as funky/trendy places in the city]

LAUGHTER

~Oh you got to check out this barn

~in Carstairs

~in Vulcan

LAUGHTER ALL TALKING TOGETHER

Edmonton Young Adult respondents said much the same. For example: “Basically I am shocked. Well why don’t I go to all of these rural areas? Perhaps I should go more often. But a lot of it is my friends and like hype and it not being mentioned on the radio and that whole draw isn’t there ... I don’t ever hear my friends say to me ‘Let’s go to Two Hills. Let’s do this. It is going to be so much fun’. So relaxing, I guess is really important, but perhaps, it seems like we are all drawn to these areas to relax but there is something big missing. That pull. That extra nudge that would really get somebody to go to these areas”.

Participants in all lifestages referenced more traditional word of mouth too. The following illustrate the type of awareness creation that helps to move people forward in the buying cycle: “A friend who is a photographer and he goes out hunting landscapes or sunsets, and family who have found a bizarre bookstore in Fort McLeod. Or friends who do hiking in and around Pincher Creek or Medicine Hat and so it seems to be more word of mouth I think”,

and, “That is not something you hear on the radio. You know because you have friends from rural Alberta or you are from rural Alberta yourself and you just go to see these crazy things [referring to giant statues].”

## Advertising

The second major information stream is advertising. The general consensus seemed to be that there is advertising for the national parks and the cities, but little else: “Well I think what happens is the big advertisement is Jasper, the mountains, Canmore, maybe Drumheller and that is basically all you really hear about, or Calgary or Edmonton, come and visit the cities”, or “You know the things that are advertised on TV are for Banff or Jasper big time”.

As a result the mountain parks and cities are what come to mind when thinking of an Alberta trip: “And yeah when you think of going out for leisure the first thing that pops to mind is not somewhere rural in Alberta I guess”, or “as far as Alberta there is so much tourism [advertising] of Banff and Jasper and they are so tourism geared that, that is automatically what you think of when you think of a vacation in Alberta is to go to somewhere like that. That is what is marketed”.

Other Alberta destinations were top of mind, but only those with the highest level of general awareness, for example, “Unless it is something like Head Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Drumheller and stuff like Frank Slide, you don’t really hear much about small towns. Unless it is like Vegreville with the giant egg”. More detail was reserved for those that had already been visited: “In Drumheller they do a Passion Play and you don’t hear about it ... I didn’t know about it until I went to Drumheller”, or “on what they call the Cowboy Trail there is all of these little things you can stop and do, but unless you go and look for it you are not going to find it”.

Even directional sources can be missing: “And you find sometimes it isn’t even on the map. Oh it is over there? And there is not sometimes a good sign. Because, I don’t know, the neighbours will go every year to this fishing lake which is an hour past Cold Lake, but we travel that road and we don’t really know where [it is]”.

Learning took place as a result of the focus group discussions themselves, “I end up doing familiar stuff like the Grande Prairie Stampede ... but like I don’t even know about the Teepee Creek Stampede. I don’t know about it”, or this interesting take on Drumheller: “Okay I am from Nova Scotia ... And those places in Alberta that I heard of [from family], I had no idea that Drumheller had all of this stuff. I thought it was more of a place with a prison”.

In Lethbridge, one participant was quite insistent that prevalent advertising locally by the State of Montana should be noted for the study: “If you go on the website you will see Billings is the headline sponsor of the Lethbridge Herald half the time”. Both Lethbridge focus group participants were in agreement that this was true and went on to discuss other advertising media (radio and TV), promotional materials and special incentives offered by Montana, including for shopping and tours.

Similar concerns were raised elsewhere, for example, “I just would just like to see more advertising on TV here. You know various things like ‘Explore Alberta’, because in Alberta we get ads for other provinces and I don’t really see much for Alberta”.

### **Information availability**

Thirdly, there were many comments about information availability, specifically a lack of information with greater depth than merely the place name. Participants were clear that they needed to know what the claim to fame of a destination is and what (else) there is to do there: “so what is the point of going. They haven’t told you what is there” and “There is a lot of information about other towns and counties that we don’t know about and it isn’t until you actually enter those counties and towns and talk to people who live there that tell you the little treasures that are in those areas. I would love if somebody could enlighten us as a province as to what we are missing with those areas”.

In fast growing areas like Lloydminster and Grande Prairie, this lack of information was frustrating and limited travel by newcomers. For example, from a Lloydminster participant: “I have only lived up here for 5 years. You don’t know what is out there. You don’t go. Like I only went to Whitney Lakes this past summer ... but you know everyone else seems to know, but only locally. And because they have grown up in the area”.

Some people were keen to know more because they really were interested in destinations or activities outside the city: “I would go if I knew what was there. If I knew there was a special stop or an art stand or an artist or ... if I knew there were maybe fairs or things like that. If I knew about it I may go, but a lot of times I don’t know about it” and “I love to go to places that I haven’t heard anything about. You know just to see it for myself for the first time and be able to come back with my own details of what I saw and tell other people about it”.

## **INTEREST IN RECENT PROMOTIONS**

Where available and time permitting, the focus groups were shown enlarged print copies of website pages or brochures found online that promoted things to see and do in their vicinity. Additionally, most focus groups were shown one or more of Travel Alberta’s

2011/12 winter campaign print ads (see Appendix III for materials). Uniquely Alberta in particular, also Boomtown Trail and Valentines Day proved to be the most suitable for use.

The purpose of this exercise was *not* to test the materials, but to try to identify what types of activities the groups might be interested in hearing about and how far they might travel for different reasons. The discussion also acted as a bridge between the prior focus on destinations and their benefits, and potential interest in rural activities, as well as the role of promotion by medium and the need for information in trip planning. Finally, it also provided the opportunity to briefly investigate how they reacted to current Travel Alberta creative and the perceived role of Travel Alberta in providing information.

A number of people thought the Travel Alberta ad shown looked familiar even if they didn't read the newspaper. Some had seen the commercial – sometimes on the recommendation of friends – and noticed the similarity. A few found that the slogan, 'remember to breathe', really resonated with them.

In general, reaction to the Travel Alberta ads was that the main image drew their attention and curiosity, so they might scan the "large print" or read a few paragraphs to identify where it was, or if there was anything of interest. The general consensus was that there was far too much text ("I like reading, but that is a lot of reading") and too few pictures, so it would be easy to pass by the ad altogether. One exception was that if it were summer or they were starting to make travel plans, they might look at it more closely ("It all depends if you are looking to go on a trip. If I am not going on a trip I would not spend the time to read that, no"). A few would even keep the ad.

When selected descriptions of events, generally within a few hours drive, were read to them, the response to the descriptions was almost always positive, attesting both to the information value of the text and its success in stirring interest. However, participants really wanted pictures for each activity or event, since that was what would draw their attention to the paragraph in the first place ("You need a picture honestly associated with each of those paragraphs. I would be more apt to look at that").

In Calgary there were positive responses to 'Find delight with Ammolite' near Lethbridge ("I am intrigued"); a really positive response to 'Trail ride to Kakwa Falls', especially from horse and nature lovers ("I could get my Facebook picture kind of standing under a waterfall having a shower. [That] is way cooler than a picture of you standing on some rocks") – though no one wanted to pay to fly to Grande Prairie and the drive was considered too lengthy. There was little interest in 'Discover Medalta Potteries' in Medicine Hat which was not thought to be unique; however, the opportunity to be taught to make pottery had appeal for some. Although they had visited the towns mentioned, there was no recognition of the name "Boomtown Trail" or what it meant.

In Edmonton, the 2011 web page for 'Edmonton's Countryside-Country Soul Stroll' was shown and there was agreement that the key issue was where to find that information. There was mixed interest in 'When thunder takes flight' in Cold Lake, but more enthusiasm for "the stomping and the experience" of 'Sip fruit wines so fine'. No one had heard of the Boomtown Trail here either, but 'Camrose's Main Street project' drew at least one antique hunter.

Red Deer participants saw a web page for 'Country Drive-2011 Showcase Weekends'. The Young Adults were sure the activities listed and distance to travel to do them was not of interest to them, but would attract an older generation: "It makes me think of something I would take my grandma to". The Older Adults responded by talking about serendipitous finds at bakeries and corner stores in small towns, such as "enticing" cinnamon buns in Big Valley. Reach for local promotions was again an issue: "I would. I have seen that advertised but it is always like a week after it happened. Like they have these weekends. That would probably appeal to me because I know I would go" (an Older Adult).

In Lloydminster, the 'The Vermilion River Region' promotion had not been seen, but the picture in it was easily identified and many of the events were familiar to them. Response to the activities was mixed. Many had already done them or as much as was of interest, while others identified individual activities they still wanted to do (dinner theatre/concert and museum in Family group, rodeo in Older Adult group). This promotion was too close to home: "I think that those are just impulsive things we do and don't realize it [is tourism]". The '4<sup>th</sup> Annual Wild Rose trail' art event was of no interest in the Family group, while several had participated in the Older Adult group. Finally, the farmers' market in the 'Lamont County-Doors Open (2010)' event was the only identified activity of interest to Families, but only "If I heard good things about it". In the Older Adult group, only a minister had interest in the church tour.

The Boomtown Trail was again unknown in Lloydminster, but 'Classic Cinema in Camrose' "would be cool". Camrose was a familiar destination and mention was made of a national hot air balloon competition that is held there. The first response in the Older Adult group to 'Experience Bison Archaeology in Action' was "Do they help you get up afterwards? LAUGHTER That is for someone young", but some were interested in the historic and cultural aspect. They were very familiar with 'When thunder takes flight' in Cold Lake.

In the Grande Prairie Young Adult group, 'Trail ride to Kakwa Falls' was met with great enthusiasm, especially the idea of descending on a rope and the size of the falls. The Family group was the only one to identify the main image of 'Uniquely Alberta' as Kakwa Falls since most had actually been there. The idea of joining a trail ride tour to get there did not resonate well with most ("Why would I hire somebody to take me there if I can get there myself?") but not all, while for others competitive destinations became a factor: "I think of

places that take 5 days. If I ... was going to watch my children for five days I am going to Mexico”).

Taken together, the reactions to the ads support results discussed earlier in the report and suggest that:

- Places and activities that are too close to the city are not thought of as tourist activities or day trips;
- Places in Alberta that are too far (e.g., require a day’s driving) are met with resistance, especially if time could be spent outside the province at a preferred location for the same time and cost;
- The idea of particularly good food always intrigued, though it needed to be part of – or even a highlight of – a trip with other things to do;
- Shopping excursions and museums were of greater interest as one got older, while more strenuous activities were of greater interest to younger people;
- The Young Adults responded only to ideas where some aspect of the activity itself could be deemed “cool”.

The name “Travel Alberta” was very well known, though most did not understand the full range of activities of the organization. This definition was arguably the most accurate: “Tourism to promote Alberta. Not necessarily for Albertans. But I am sure it’s neighbouring provinces ~ It is probably so that people don’t just drive straight to the Rocky Mountains and get a little more tourists”.

A more limited definition emerged in this discussion: “It is a website isn’t it? ~ They campaign ~ TV commercials ~ Yeah and on the radio. And you know there is lots of places that are part of it, like museums and stuff that are part of it, and they just get people to hear [more] to have more tourism in Alberta”.

Only some actually looked for the Travel Alberta website when searching on the Internet for information: “TravelAlberta.ca or whatever it is called. I go to there all the time” versus “talking about a specific place you know I am going to think I am probably going to have better luck with answers calling this specific place rather than Travel Alberta” and this type of experience by a Family participant: “I was looking for information and it was easy to ... click in the destination ... and never found that that produced a lot of results for me. I was having to go through so much information to say, ‘Here that would be good for us’ [child friendly]; it was no, no, no, no and I had to read through so much just to find specifics ... I hate to fight to go through the categories”.



There was some recall of print materials from Travel Alberta, which many people keep for future reference: “That Travel Alberta thing that came out I kept it for quite some time”.

There were also recipients of Travel Alberta e-mails and Holiday Cards and awareness of Travel Alberta information centres.

One participant ran a Welcome Wagon service and had this to say: “When new people have entered the area and I go to welcome them I always take Travel Alberta information so they know where things are that they can do that is fun in the area because they are always interested in what is here because they want to tell all their family and friends, ‘Hey we have something to go and see’ ”.

## WHETHER PEOPLE PLAN THEIR TRIPS TO RURAL ALBERTA

There was no “typical” approach to travelling in rural Alberta. Instead there were a few alternatives that sometimes described different people, and sometimes were used by the same person in different situations.

At one end of the scale were people in virtually every group that would quite literally make a spontaneous decision to take a trip, get in the car and drive without any destination in mind: “Often times we will jump in the car and drive south and go to Claresholm and all those areas down south and down to the Pincher Creek area and tour that old coal mine down there and just generally goofing off. Sometimes we just jump in the car and it is pointing west so we are going west”. For these people, “It is not the destination, it is the adventure. It is the journey. It is just hit or miss. It wouldn’t be the first time I slept in a car because I couldn’t find accommodation”. In the same category were people who had a destination, but liked turning off the main route at some random point, just to see where they ended up.

Some appeared to do, at the very least, a minimal amount of planning for their rural trips: they decided on a destination. After that, they may have done nothing more than get in the car and head there, choosing to stop along the way if something caught their attention: “When you plan something so firmly it just takes the fun out of it. Just go and do it. I will drive down the road and I will see a farm that is selling beef jerky and I will pull in and buy it just because it is something to do”. Or, in other cases, they had an idea of what was available to do, but made no plans. On an overnight trip they preferred to check out their accommodation options once they arrived.

However, most appeared to want to know more than the destination name. They planned their route and looked for information on what there was to see and do at the destination, along the way and/or nearby: “I would plan it out for sure. Because it is not like going to a

big urban place where there is lots to do. I would want to make sure if I am going to be driving out there that there is stuff to do”.

They also generally preferred to nail down their accommodation before leaving and be ready for other eventualities: “In terms of planning, I would have an idea of accommodation and most importantly I want to know what to bring. So if I intended to go to the lake I would want to bring my bathing suit ... if you are going to go camping you would bring matches ... because you don’t want to purchase all of that stuff when you get to the middle of nowhere. You may not be able to do so”.

At the other end of the scale was a small group who planned and booked everything before they left: “Oh I would have planned everything possible”.

It was notable that discussions almost always focused on a single main destination. Very few talked about a circle tour or having multiple destinations on a trip. Rather, they mentioned stops along the way, or setting up at one place and then – possibly – venturing out from there. This was certainly the preferred option when camping, especially with trailers that take some setup.

## **WHERE IS INFORMATION FOR PLANNING FOUND?**

### **Information about rural destinations doesn’t just come to urban residents**

As noted earlier in the report, there were complaints that information about rural destinations, attractions and activities doesn’t just come to urban residents and isn’t found in places they are likely to be, such as on a mall brochure rack. This issue was not universal, as some people had seen articles in magazines, knew that they could go to their AMA office or their home town visitor information centre, recalled Travel Alberta advertising, had seen brochures at a Travel Alberta table at a home show or received information from Travel Alberta directly. On the whole, the impression was that, “It is not hard to find it, but it is not in your face”.

The discussion of having information come to you was almost always about print material and that was preferred by at least some participants in all lifestages. The information can be put away for future reference by those who are so inclined. In one Young Adult group similar information storage was linked to electronic material.

There was also discussion about e-mail newsletters as a passive option in a Young Adult group. Not everyone was quite as enthusiastic as this participant: “XX mentioned having those automatic emails things. I love those. I am going, it will be this summer ... I get like three a week. I love it. It makes me go and look at different areas and if I got something reminding me every month about Alberta I would go, ‘Hey lets go for a weekend. Let’s do

this', but it is just out of sight out of mind. We are busy working and we think to go elsewhere". For the others, the key would be to not inundate them with too frequent messages (e.g., not more often than monthly) as they become "desensitised to it".

### Time to actively seek information

The most popular time to actively seek information occurred once a decision was taken to visit a destination. Next most frequently mentioned was to look for information as part of the process to decide on a destination.

### Information sources

Information could be found in various places. Two information sources, that are not mutually exclusive, were most popular.

- The first was to *ask people who might know*. These were relatives, friends or acquaintances, especially those who lived in a rural area themselves or who had been to the destination. Once en route, many actually preferred to talk to local residents who they would seek out at gas stations, restaurants, hotels, or – when they could find one – a community information centre. Locals were viewed as authentic and able to provide information that was not available elsewhere, such as where an undiscovered gem might be found: "If I am going somewhere brand new that I didn't really know I would ... just make a random pit stop and hear word of mouth. That is why I would not plan details because then you are technically going to miss out on something really neat".
- The second was to do a *search on the Internet*. In general, if a specific website address was not known, participants would enter the name of the destination, facility or attraction they were interested in and wait to see what came up on Google. A few people mentioned that their top choice of site for travel research purposes was TripAdvisor. On occasion the Travel Alberta site was one of the top sources chosen, but this was far from the rule and more often the result of a Google listing.

When asked whether they would be interested in a *Live Chat option* on the Travel Alberta website, the reaction was mixed – enthusiasm in one Young Adult group and both support and disinterest in other focus groups. Someone even viewed Live Chat as a potential source of credit card fraud.

A variety of criticisms were voiced about Internet searches that may be helpful in understanding what not to do:

- Some participants had very little patience and were not prepared to look at more than a few of the sources listed by Google, and once on them, were not prepared to drill down more than a couple of pages ("It depends on what comes up when I

Google it. If it is not the [first] three to five, I wouldn't check. If I have to go to page two it is not happening").

- In contrast, others described how they moved from one source to another as they followed leads. A general source, such as Travel Alberta, that petered out without getting them to the desired information, tended to be avoided on later searches.
- In many groups the comment was made that tourism sites are out of date and so the information cannot be trusted. For example: "You definitely cannot rely on the websites. They are usually never updated. It says 2010 on a lot of them".
- Accommodation websites were particularly likely to be criticised for not showing accurate current availability or price. As a result a lot of people said they did their research into facilities and prices on the web, and then telephoned the property. One person advised her group that it was important to call the property itself for a better price than is available from the general booking number of larger chains. Reservations were made by some by telephone for security purposes, but many had no compunction about booking online and preferred to do so, using telephone only when the facility did not offer any online booking.
- One person complained about misrepresentation: "And having truthful pictures and truthful things there. Because I have seen things that look absolutely fabulous you know on the internet [but] the pictures and description differ from what I see".

A variety of other information sources were mentioned:

- *Maps, GPS and mobile devices* were the only sources used or needed by some. Paper maps were used to select a destination ("Look at a map and point ... Just go somewhere on the map where you have never been. Just for the adventure. That makes it so interesting") or to track the route, especially if signage was poor. Google Maps was mentioned for this too.

A GPS functioned as a wayfinder, but had the additional advantage of providing information on gas station, restaurant and accommodation locations. The drawback to a GPS was that it doesn't always provide correct information and if it is on a mobile device like a smartphone, you may have roaming charges or hit "dead spots" and be unable to access any of these things, or even to communicate if in trouble (on the other hand, that makes a perfect excuse to turn off your cellphone!)

- *VICs* were another source. Some liked to browse for local information (including on displays about the history of the area) and pick out their own brochures, others headed straight for a staff member, some did both or only spoke to someone when they had a question. Staff were assumed to be locals and were expected to have helpful information "on the little things" not in brochures. However, for a few (always men), the VIC was just a convenient washroom stop.

In the smaller centres, several people explained that they go to their home town VIC to collect print information: “Whenever we are going to travel in Alberta I go down to the VIC and get every book that I can find and we usually have them with us in the car and I will be looking through them and that is how we find our Bed & Breakfast and that kind of thing”.

For various reasons VICs were not of interest to some participants: they don’t know where they are, by the time they see them they’ve driven past (both signage issues) and when they do find them they are closed.

- *Signage* may be used to decide on when and where to make a side trip: “I like point A to point B. This is where I am starting out and this is where I want to end up. And along the way if I saw a billboard for something that I didn’t know was there, I would try to make time to say, ‘You know we can go that extra five clicks this way and check it out’ and then get back and keep going” and “It is like an opportunity. Why wouldn’t you? Unless you like the mundane and boring”.

## **ADDITIONAL COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES**

### **Facebook**

Facebook did not feature at all as a way in which any participants actually receive travel information. However, when asked how the travel industry could best promote to them, suggestions for using Facebook and its associated features were received, particularly from Young Adults in Edmonton (“Social media, because I go on Facebook so often so that is the easiest way to get something to someone”).

One suggestion was to add a link from Travel Alberta to one’s Facebook page that could alert the page owner and page visitors about events, with prizes like a trip on a horse drawn carriage for clicking on the link. It could also introduce contests, prize draws and surveys to generate curiosity and interest. Facebook Ads were regarded with scepticism, but with an enticing picture and a reputable organization (which is how Travel Alberta appears to be regarded), they might be looked at.

Other features mentioned that could get friends talking and sharing, were Live Activity Feeds showing that you “liked” a website, and Statuses. There should be potential to influence SplashScores among those who are interested in this feature.

### **Applications (Apps) for mobile devices**

Interest in the introduction of one or more Apps for mobile devices for travel in rural Alberta was investigated where participants reported using such devices when travelling. There was always immediate and enthusiastic interest, regardless of the lifestage: “I think it

is a good idea for sure. And it gives you more information because we don't really hear anything about other than Banff and Jasper so it would be really neat to actually realize, 'Oh, I didn't know that was there'. That would be really cool to go and see if you had an App".

In keeping with the propensity to use large, well known and reputable websites (such as TripAdvisor's App), the preference expressed was for a centralized information repository that was sufficiently flexible to be accessed in different ways (e.g., for a region or destination, or for an activity). It should automatically identify where one was located to make this even easier. For example: "Yeah ... when I am staying somewhere and I can just ping on it and there is five things of stuff I can look at".

Given the number of Apps that are already available, users have learned to discriminate by looking for endorsements and recommendations, and for well known, credible and respected providers (Travel Alberta would qualify): "It would have to have good ratings for me to go on it. I just search through newer Apps ... There are so many Apps for like an iPhone that you would really have to sort of be great to get on the top when you flip through them. But even if you heard it on the radio or something, I think that might be enough to make me download it". Even with this level of diligence, they reported uninstalling many Apps that do not meet their needs or standards.

### **Create an App for a geocaching treasure hunt**

The Young Adult group in Edmonton also generated an idea that was tested in other lifestages and centres. This was to create a modern version of the tourism promotion used during Alberta's 75th anniversary, called Stamp Around Alberta. This was almost undoubtedly the most memorable campaign ever created to promote resident Alberta travel. While none of the participants spontaneously remembered the campaign slogan more than 30 years later, it was striking in how many groups someone related fond – if not quite accurate – memories of participating as a child: "About 1500 years ago they had a little tourism promotion thing here for travelling Alberta and we did that. We went to all of these different areas and collected different medallions from different areas of the whole province. We did the whole thing. I have got them somewhere yet. That was kind of a little incentive to go outside your boundaries and see a different place and get a little medallion thing for your effort. But it did take you to different areas that you may not have heard of before" and "When I was a kid they used to have ... passports ... and you could go and get it stamped in the different regions. And it was like a real challenge for some of us or a thrill to get it filled up when you were twelve or thirteen to say, 'I have got a stamp in every single region in Alberta' ".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Participants had to obtain stamps in a special passport from at least six and up to all fourteen tourism regions in existence at the time in order to receive a bronze, silver or gold medallion.

The modern twist suggested was to use GPS-based geocaching to send people hunting for small tokens/rewards all over the province. These could be real or linked to an App: “and every single time you found something, a trinket or whatever, then you could load it on your App. Kind of like Foursquare kind of thing. I have been here and done that and I found the geocache and move on ... I think, I mean that is not really stress relief, but it is fun and something that maybe a couple of friends can get together and do. It doesn’t have to be too competitive, but it can be”.

Another suggestion was to have a map that would show exactly where you had been, something that would appeal to children.

The suggestion was greeted enthusiastically by at least some participants in every group where it was tested. The downside was that not everyone knows what geocaching is, but there was always someone to explain it. The terms “treasure” or “scavenger” hunts were used repeatedly in these explanations. For example: “They give you the latitude and longitude and it is like a treasure hunt. You find the item and it could be a box under a tree in the middle of a farmer’s field and you take a picture of yourself or whatever the case is and you put something in it too ... It is like a treasure hunt but it is a travel treasure hunt. There are lots of fun things to do. And you use GPS and that to find it. There is a lot of planned sites that have the information on it on the internet. A lot of people do family activities that way”.

Furthermore, it was clear that it was something everyone would have fun doing – and “fun”, as may have been noted when the lure of competitive destinations was described, is a key term used to describe successful trips. Parents thought that it would be a way of engaging children in a game on long trips (“I think that would be a gem. I think anything that involves ... a game of some sort or an App on a phone, yeah, I know mine would be all over that”) and that they themselves would enjoy it too. Young Adults thought it might provide the incentive to get out of their travel comfort zone – the mountains and cities – and Older Adults saw it as a fun activity.

### **An event calendar**

During the discussion of the Travel Alberta ads, comments were made that people prefer to see their information clustered by what there is to do in and around a region/community, rather than information for many different places. This led to the suggestion of a calendar – quite literally a calendar with squares that listed the event on a particular day in a community. The calendar could be on a computer so it could be organized in other ways too, such as by theme.

However, some preferred a calendar in booklet form so they could browse it at their leisure or because they had no intention of doing a computer search, and some preferred a list.

## TERMS FOR “RURAL ALBERTA”

Focus group participants were shown four potential names to be used as a term to capture rural Alberta from a tourism perspective. The order of presentation was randomized to minimize systematic order effects. Participants were encouraged to come up with their own names as well. Aside from potentially identifying a unifying theme for the region, the responses were expected to provide further insight into keywords to motivate travel to rural Alberta.

At this point in the discussion, we heard many say that “rural Alberta” was not a good term to use, variously because it is boring and is only about farming and gravel roads. For example: “rural Alberta is like flat farmland. And I try to drive through this as quick as I can ... I am driving down a straight highway and there really isn’t any rise in it and it just fields around me and I just want to get to where I am going before I fall asleep”. It may even have a stigma attached to it (associated with rural residents being sheltered, opinionated, negative and set in their ways).

None of the four names presented was an out and out success. Each had its supporters and each generated opposition.

“**Hidden Gems**” was the most positively received overall:

- Initial emotional reactions were often positive and aroused curiosity, such as “That is cool”, “I really like it. It intrigued me when I saw it”, “sounds mysterious”.
- On the positive side the message was interpreted as saying that rural Alberta offers the unexpected, the unique, that “you don’t know what you are going to find”, “it is new and exciting and adventure” and “I would want to find out what they are talking about”. Some thought it to be truthful: “Alberta does have a lot of hidden gems. It really does”. It also implied that the gems are places that “nobody knows about” or that “these are things we will drive by and miss [otherwise]”.
- However, for others the term did not ring true and was considered misleading: “I guess they are trying to appeal to those people who want the unique experience. I mean they won’t be mistaken for long I guess, but if you are one of the first ones there ...” and again, “Yeah it might be something glamorous or wonderful and then you will get there and ‘Oh this is what you’re talking about’ ”.



- At a less sceptical level, there were concerns that the term should not overstate what is there: “I think it better be good when you got there. Because a gem infers ‘Wow it will take your breath away’ ”, while others were afraid these gems might be too hidden to find easily.
- Many took the term literally rather than idiomatically and were confused: “It is just sounding too much, kind of with down in the mines”, “it sounds like you are going on a treasure hunt”, or did not see a fit: “I am not sure if the sparkly image really fits with the kinds of things I enjoy” and “I am thinking of diamond bracelets and that is so far off”.

“**Inside Alberta**” had more supporters than detractors, but far fewer supporters than Hidden Gems.

- It is “to the point” and communicates that Alberta has a lot of activities to offer: “I like Inside Alberta. It just tells you, you are talking about Alberta and what is going on in Alberta. I think that it just says it like it is”.
- In the same vein, one participant thought it cosy and comfortable, not pretentious or exclusive.
- It says where it is (“It describes Alberta. Describes exactly what you are advertising. Inside Alberta”), but even that was open to interpretation. When viewed literally, it actually includes everything in the province: “It doesn’t have any flavour that would make it non-urban”.
- It sounded like the name of a publication or magazine, a TV news show and politics or a political talk show.
- It didn’t communicate travel, didn’t sound appealing (“Nothing about that would make me want to read it”), lacked excitement (“that is boring”) and just “doesn’t sound right”.

“**Off the Beaten Path**” as a term to describe rural Alberta was viewed predominantly negatively.

- On the positive side, it definitely suggested adventure (“oh wow where is going to take me? To me it is more intriguing. Like I want to read about it” and “you don’t know what you are going to find”) and the novelty of something different (“Will it take me somewhere where I haven’t seen?”).

It was most attractive to people who deliberately leave main access roads and marked paths. For example: “I purposely get lost in the woods. I go off the beaten path, as in the track that you are supposed to be on with the arrows and then I do my photography ... that is when you see all the little waterfalls and things like that that probably very few people have seen”.

- Off the Beaten Path suggested a place that was “quiet and secluded” with “no malls and no crowds” and there is “not going to be a traffic jam”. However, it could also be taken to mean “away from human beings” which would not appeal to very social people or those concerned about safety.
- A repeated theme included the expectation that it would be “not modern”, “go way back in time” and be “old and run down”.

There was resistance because it suggested or reinforced existing associations that there are no amenities – such as running water – or that the necessary amenities would be missing. It raised questions about availability of accommodations and road conditions (“It could imply back roads. Like really bumpy roads and things like that ~ I picture gravel and dirt and things like that” or “somewhere you wouldn’t want to take the motorhome on”).

Family participants in particular mentioned such concerns. For example: “[it’s] not family driven ... It means bush camping. That is what it means. Blazing your own trail” and “to a family with kids from eight through teen years ... I think it would completely flop because the kids want their video games. They want their cell phone stuff ... to get them to be interested in something like that, because once you get them there often times it is like ‘Wow this is really great’, but to get them there, you have to show them something that makes them want to be there. I don’t think Off the Beaten Path [would do that]”.

- Another less than desirable association was that it meant that one was lost, “It sounds to me like you just took a wrong turn and you ended up in the middle of nowhere” or worse: “It means you are going to be lost”.
- The phrase was considered overused and many did not connect with it at all: “it doesn’t speak to me ... or entice lots of people”.
- It’s wrong. Why it’s wrong varied based on the person’s interpretation of what was meant. For example, when rural Alberta is viewed as including everything outside of Highway 2, then smaller cities and the national parks are all off the beaten path: “it just seems to be all of Alberta is off the beaten path”.

On the other hand, when the phrase Off the Beaten Path is interpreted as somewhere remote, then “I would think that would more describe NWT where it is something like that. Not Alberta. We are pretty modernized. All of it.” With that interpretation, it also “sounds like it is miles away”.

**Canadian Badlands** had the dubious distinction of being almost universally disliked as a term to describe rural Alberta and received a firm collective “no” in several groups.

- Its main claim for support was that it created vivid mind pictures, for example, “the entrance to the prairies, the Badlands. I can picture tumble weeds going across the

- prairie and I think it is kind of unique. I think it has a bit of cowboy [to it]” or “Wherever it is they still carry open Winchesters in the back of the pickup” and “it conjures up your hoodoos and your dinosaurs and ancient stuff right there”.
- This advantage was also the basis for rejection of the term, since it only describes restricted portions of Alberta. For most, this was confined to “The Badlands” around Drumheller; for some, it also described areas in southern Alberta, such as Writing-On-Stone provincial park. Because “it’s kind of desolate”, it did not include the forests of northern Alberta or the types of trips taken regularly in rural Alberta: “That is not somewhere you want to go ... in Alberta when you think about it. Like a nice forested area or a lake or whatever”.
  - The word “bad” was almost always separated from “lands” in participants’ minds when they first heard the term. It had a negative connotation and suggested nothing to attract them: “I don’t know that that sounds all that enticing. Like what kind of land is this? Is it just going to be really boring, like terrible sights?” Even the mind pictures generated such ideas as treacherous roads, weird inhabitants and getting mugged.
  - The term “Canadian Badlands” confused them. It was completely unfamiliar. All they knew was “The Badlands” around Drumheller and wondered where the “Canadian” came from. For example: “I don’t like Canadian in there. Why it is Canadian Badlands. ... What is the intent of having the word Canadian because you are focussing on Alberta right? And so Canadian Badlands to me would mean not just Alberta. It would be other places too”.

Participants were invited to come up with their own suggestions at any point, so many of the suggestions were a play on words for one or more of the terms discussed. This generated the following list.

Alberta’s Hidden Gems  
 Hidden Gems In/side Alberta  
 Inside Alberta Discover Hidden Gems  
 Alberta. Come and Discover Our Hidden Gems  
 Experience Alberta’s Hidden Gems  
 Discover Hidden Gems  
 The Insane Gems (something contemporary to appeal to Young Adults)  
 Alberta. It’s Yours to Discover  
 The Path Not Taken  
 Off the Beaten Trail (liked because it covers both a southern cowboy/ranching term and trails for activities like skiing, hiking, quadding and sledding in the north)  
 The Road Less Travelled (suggested in several focus groups and preferred for being quiet, but not remote or deserted; will provide adventure but is friendly and comfortable)  
 The Other Journey  
 Badlands Alberta

Several observations may be made about the above list:

- There was a consistent push to have “Alberta” included in the phrase so that it was clear what was being promoted;
- The majority of suggestions reworked the Hidden Gems term, supporting its relative popularity;
- The terms “discover” and “experience” were added in order to create intrigue;
- Off the Beaten Path was the second most frequent term to be reworked.

Additional terms not directly based on the stimulus names included:

Real Alberta  
This is Alberta  
Look at Alberta  
Alberta Appeal (based on Maui Revealed)  
Exploring Alberta  
Rustic  
Wild Rose Country  
Cowboy Country  
Going to the Country (term reported to be in common use)  
What Adventures Can Find You  
Adventurous Alberta  
Rural Adventures  
Rural Roots  
Think Outside the Box (beyond the daily routine, something new)  
Beyond City Limits  
Natural Alberta

It is notable that:

- “Alberta” was again included in many suggested terms;
- The term “Country” was suggested relatively often; it was thought to communicate quiet and seclusion, but was rejected by some participants for sounding old and for its negative rural associations;
- While the word “Adventure” was not often included in these phrases, it is a keyword that should be considered for use. When participants reacted positively to the idea of travelling in rural Alberta, and when they reacted positively to the sample phrases, the idea of having an adventure was often the reason.

- The term “Beyond City Limits” was most preferred in the Lethbridge group where it was developed, so it was related to most of the focus groups that were subsequently held. The responses were mixed:
  - Support was based on the perception that it really targeted “city people”, like people in Calgary, who “have no idea what goes on outside”. It demonstrates something that is beyond what you imagine, an adventure.
  - Lack of support was due in part to participants (in Lloydminster and Grande Prairie) not seeing themselves as living in a big city or who grew up in a rural area, so it doesn’t seem to apply to them.

# Conclusions and recommendations

## Quantification of the findings

The findings shown in this report are based on twelve focus groups that engaged just over 100 people in three lifestages in six markets. While some findings may be actionable based on repetition through many of the groups, or because they are consistent with previous experience, any major initiative to market rural destinations or align product with market demand, requires better information than “some said A, while some said B” descriptions. Now that the variety of opinions held is known, the question that needs to be answered before setting direction is “how many say A and how many say B”.

A study such as Menlo Consulting’s “*Americans as International Travellers. TravelStyles 2009-2010: Focus on Alberta*”, that instead focuses on Albertans travelling in Alberta, would provide the foundational information for developing meaningful and targeted action for marketing and for product development. In addition to profiling the most receptive market segments, it would also identify or confirm the key product weaknesses that should and could feasibly be addressed.

The reason for starting the concluding discussion with this recommendation lies in the interest shown in developing a strategy for marketing rural Alberta that is aligned with the product that is available and in demand *and* that product development focuses on delivering the product or quality of product that is in demand. The presentation made by the Canadian Tourism Commission “*The Signature Experiences Collection: Improving Product Development and Marketing Alignment*”, Vancouver, February 28, 2012, was brought to our attention. Because it only targets international travellers and discusses Canada as a whole, it was not possible to compare the qualitative results from this study with the data shown. However, it was notable that all the data reported were quantitative (i.e., based on numbers) and hence reliable. One of the most useful pieces of information shown, the gap between product needs that are important to the international traveller and the perception of how well Canada satisfies each need, could easily be adapted for an in-Alberta scenario. Similarly, identifying how Alberta fares when ranked against a list of competitive destinations for different lengths of stay might be illuminating.

# Perceptions of rural Alberta and opportunities for promotion and product development

## BY LIFESTAGE

The three lifestages had very different lifestyles as evidenced by their home environment, their travel companions, their preferred activities and their media consumption. These all influenced the destinations they chose when travelling. Understanding the market segments will help to target and align marketing and product development efforts more effectively.

### Young Adult households

Young Adult households tended to be made up of groups of roommates who travelled with family members (parents and siblings) or friends. They were the strongest users of social media and were particularly likely to enjoy “hanging” with friends and taking part in challenging physical pursuits. Their view of rural Alberta was either based on knowledge as a result of having grown up there, or among the city-bred, there could be a somewhat romantic expectation of what there was to do in the area. This included visiting small historic towns with lots of interesting shopping opportunities or going to quiet lakeside campsites (with facilities) where they could kick back in relative isolation and enjoy themselves for a day or weekend. Quirky offerings like the Torrington Gopher Museum, Vulcan’s Trek Station and large statues caught the imagination of some in this lifestage and could form the basis for a “different” circle trip.

In this group in particular, rural destinations did not have the “cool” factor attached to Jasper, Banff, Canmore, Calgary and Edmonton and lacked peer group acceptance or word of mouth promotion. A geocaching game with elements derived from the Foursquare game was invented by this lifestage and appears to offer a great opportunity to introduce Young Adults to rural areas while using their beloved smartphone technology. This may well add the missing “cool” factor.

To round out trips to find caches, information needs to be available on where to stay, eat and most importantly, what else there is to do at the destination. Current GPS applications may help with the first two needs, but the third, what else to do, would be well served in this group by an App that is easy to use, well promoted and from a reputable source.

Because this lifestage is able to be concerned only with their own wishes, and since they are very likely to take part in winter activities, they are more likely to be willing to take on rural roads in winter to have, preferably inexpensive, fun. Some of rural Alberta’s winter facilities – such as, but not limited to, ski resorts – face stiff competition from the mountain resorts in this segment, so their markets may only be in nearby cities. However, other activities like

sledding, ice climbing and tubing – the more unusual the better – appear to have appeal. If rental equipment is available along with instruction for novices, rural areas could carve a niche for themselves. Similarly, young women (including moms in the next lifestage) might be attracted by the right package of accommodation, food and activities that offer pure pampering and an aura of luxury.

### **Family households**

Family households were most often made up of a nuclear family with two parents and children and this was how they tended to travel too. Other forms included trips with friends or with extended family, followed by couples, girls or boys only trips. They were social media users, but appeared to be less attached than Young Adults, possibly because they had greater time pressures. Radio appeared to be a medium used while driving. Leisure activities often revolved around their families, with children's sports activities frequently driving their own interests (e.g., attending games, coaching, going to out of town tournaments). While destinations on trips with children were not necessarily geared to children's needs (for example, Disneyland or to an educational museum like the Royal Tyrrell or Ukrainian Heritage Village), wherever they did go, there had to be something available to engage their children. Their in-Alberta destinations were often Edmonton and Calgary, to visit friends or relatives and/or to take advantage of facilities like West Edmonton Mall or Calgary Zoo.

Most of Alberta's provincial museums – and Alberta Prairie Railway Excursions – are located in rural Alberta. They are major attractions and a source of pent-up demand. They represent a real opportunity to promote Family trips. To ensure that the trips last more than a few hours and draw people from further than the nearest urban centre, outdoor activities in the surrounding area, as well as other attractions, need to be developed where necessary and promoted right alongside the educational feature to fill out and balance the experience, making the trip attractive and worthwhile. The reason is that being outdoors is vitally important in this lifestage, with swimming in particular (even indoors at a hotel), hiking, camping and other fun outdoor water or mechanized sports (e.g., quadding, mountain biking) having appeal. Packaging and/or coupons that offer family prices and value should be used to sweeten the offer as this segment appears to be under the greatest financial pressure. Hotel product and policies relating to larger families emerged as an issue that could benefit from improvement.

Awareness of places to go in rural Alberta appeared to be higher than among Young Adults, but trips were often tied to visiting relatives and enjoying their hospitality and the experiences available in their homes (often farms), or to locations fairly close to home. This was also the lifestage that appeared to use trailers or RVs for camping. Once parked, they seemed to prefer to stay in an area rather than touring from place to place.



Parents liked the idea of a geocaching game based on visiting different places in Alberta and thought it would appeal to their tech-savvy children too. A map to mark places one had visited as a tangible memento for children was suggested in this lifestage. This game may have the potential to draw families further afield as the persuasive powers of children should not be underestimated.

### **Older Adult households**

Older adult households usually were made up of two people – a husband and wife, sometimes with a pet or adult child finishing off their education. They tended to travel as a couple, less often with friends or family (at this stage their adult children and grandchildren). Older adults spent time with their grandchildren wherever possible and viewed travel as an activity rather than a break or vacation. Other preferred activities were less strenuous than at younger lifestages, as the limitations of aging became more apparent. However, since the lifestage covers a 25 year span, this varied. For example, hiking in Kananaskis was arguably the most popular activity among Older Adult households in Calgary.

This lifestage had greatest familiarity and comfort with rural Alberta and had visited more destinations for pleasure purposes. They were more likely to take circle trips and tour along highways or trails. They were also the only lifestage that appeared to actually travel to browse in small towns, enjoy the historic environment and go shopping for antiques, local food delicacies or arts and crafts.

Older Adult media use tended to be traditional mass media (TV, newspapers, magazines) in addition to the Internet which was used by all lifestages. Social media use was usually as a result of needing to link with adult children and their families living elsewhere. It would appear that the ability to promote to this lifestage will focus on different media than in the younger groups, though the Internet was the equalizer, being used by all, but not necessarily in the same way. However, this did not mean that Older Adults did not have smartphones, as many did – and many who did, thought the idea of geocaching would be fun.

## **BY LOCATION**

Results by location were much less well defined than by lifestage. People across the province appeared to have much in common with one another in terms of the benefits they look for at a destination. However, there were some geographic differences of note:

- Not everyone living in Red Deer, Lethbridge and Grande Prairie thought they were living in a truly urban area – some felt that the lifestyle was far more rural than urban. Lloydminster residents were generally in agreement that their home town was essentially rural;

- Some Southern Albertans had difficulty conceiving of northern Alberta as rural, since their understanding of the term was so heavily rooted in the familiar farms, farmlands and relatively frequently found small towns in the area. This was less true as one went further north where forests and less populated areas were accepted as being rural too.
- In northern Alberta, rural trips were very often focused on lakeside camping and outdoor activities. In southern Alberta there was greater interest in visiting small towns and their attractions, with outdoor activities such as camping occurring more often in small town facilities and the nearby national and provincial parks.
- Residents of Lloydminster and Grande Prairie who attended the focus groups were frequently newcomers and lacked information about what there was to see and do in the surrounding area. As a result, not only were they unhappy about the limited opportunities in the area, but they tended to view pleasure visits to Edmonton and Calgary as more routine than, for example, Lethbridge residents' visits to Calgary.
- Grande Prairie, being further away from Edmonton, appeared particularly starved of rural options within a couple of hours drive and participants reacted very positively to hearing about new places to go – summer or winter – from others in the group;
- In Lloydminster, the destination of many, if not most, outdoor rural trips was in Saskatchewan and word of mouth recommendations were reported to be the same. Their Alberta destinations were relatively far from home (e.g., Drumheller or Camrose), yet apparently these destinations were often treated as day trips.
- The mountain parks were a draw everywhere, for very different reasons than trips to rural Alberta. Distance, highway links and attitudes played a role in their choice of park.
  - Grande Prairie participants were regular Jasper visitors both in summer and winter; some were aware of the opportunities offered in closer-by Grande Cache.
  - Lloydminster residents were more familiar with Jasper, but as it is close to a day's drive each way, their frequency of visiting appeared to be limited;
  - Edmonton residents visited both Jasper and Banff, with Jasper enjoying an edge, particularly in winter.
  - Red Deer and Calgary residents focussed almost exclusively on Banff, with Young Adults preferring the more urban feel and amenities of the Banff townsite compared to Jasper. Kananaskis was popular among Older Adult Calgarians.
  - Lethbridge residents' primary mountain destination was Waterton, though some visited Banff and Kananaskis. Lethbridge residents were also very familiar with Cypress Hills and Writing-On-Stone provincial parks.

These differences suggest the need for much more local promotion of what is available close to Grande Prairie and Lloydminster and possibly enhancement of products in all regions to ensure that they have the quality required to encourage repeat visits. Opportunities to increase awareness of individual sites exist in all other urban areas as well.

## BY BENEFITS

The benefits of visiting rural Alberta and its competitive benefits compared to urban and mountain destinations provide an opportunity to identify what makes rural Alberta different and attractive and in what ways improvement is needed.

Rural Alberta pre-eminently represents the opportunity for a leisurely/slow paced break from the pressures of daily life in a welcoming/friendly environment. It is believed to be informal, to offer privacy and isolation and to provide unusual and rare experiences that can be educational.

With the exception of being welcoming and friendly and informal, the major competitive benefits represent a two-edged sword.

- The impression of a leisurely/slow pace, while a highly attractive and even a necessary benefit in urban markets, can go too far and represent a fear of boredom. The benefits that rural Alberta was relatively weak on (being considered exciting, fun, or to offer a lot of activities to do) highlight the danger that a rural trip might be considered boring.

It will be necessary to ensure that product that provides entertainment value is available to address these deficits and that promotions make sure that the diversity of experiences offered in any one location are covered, along with communication of the opportunity to take it easy.

- The same is true of the benefit of providing privacy/isolation. It may be thought to go too far (such as the long distances between attractions), or, it could be completely untrue (for example the reality that in summer many campsites are crowded and there is little private space). The objective should be to develop a happy medium that will satisfy the perceived and desired benefit.
- Offering unusual or rare experiences was definitely true in some ways, such as seeing wildlife along the road or in one's campsite or having the opportunity to go horseback riding or quadding. On the other hand, the choice of this benefit was sometimes associated with the mystery of not knowing what will be found because of lack of experience in rural areas, and this could set expectations at a too high level.
- Finally, with some exceptions, educational experiences are not sought after. They are reminiscent of school days and not of holidays. The exceptions are of parents looking for something for their children to enjoy learning while in a different environment and among people – generally older, but not necessarily so – who are interested in history, old artefacts and stories, historical sites and museums. What these attractions have to offer in terms of the content, quantity and quality of exhibits needs to be explained well in order to overcome inertia. They need to be positioned not as learning, but as having

fun seeing or marvelling at what life was like at another time. And that could mean providing increased interactive experiences for today's children.

- The adjective “fun” proved to be pivotal in descriptions of trips that were enjoyed in the past and when comparing the cost and risk associated with a rural trip and a destination with a known reputation. It needs to be deliberately associated with rural experiences that actually are fun.
- Finally, there are ways to get in touch with nature in rural areas, including seeing wildlife (rare and otherwise), noticing changing landscapes and understanding the wonder of dark skies. Too many people did not know of or value these opportunities as they are used to driving through rural areas at high speed. They should be better described (where – when – how to access).

## BY PRODUCT

The report details many product development opportunities based on reported deficiencies and visitor needs. They are summarized below.

### Facilities and amenities

- Provide evening and indoor entertainment opportunities;
- Offer more accommodation (hotels and campsites) in more places, that can be booked ahead of time and offer an online booking option;
- Provide “well maintained” hotels – a term that covers everything from freshness of décor to cleanliness;
- Provide family-friendly hotel accommodation to meet the needs of children (e.g., a pool) and larger families (e.g., larger rooms or interleading rooms at a lower “family price”);
- Offer designated areas for different lifestage groups at campsites and larger, more private spaces for each party;
- Improve washrooms in parks and at campsites (e.g., toilet facilities, warm showers);
- Provide more roadside rest areas with washrooms and areas to stretch one's legs, for children to play and to walk a dog;
- Encourage the provision of basic services in more communities, such as gas, groceries and laundry and that these facilities open early in the morning and stay open in the evening; and
- Improve the quality of service by staff, particularly in resource communities.

## Attractions and activities

- Numerous outdoor activities and sites for those activities were known to be available in rural Alberta. However, this knowledge was not universal and some groups in particular were unaware of their existence or of how or where to access the activity (i.e., Young Adults, newcomers to a city without a social support network, people who were not born in a rural area or had no rural contacts). Greater awareness is also needed to reassure potential visitors that they will not be left with time on their hands;
- Small towns are presumed to be the repository of local history, but there was limited awareness of which towns actually have such history readily available to visitors. Notable exceptions were towns in the Crowsnest Pass (best known in southern Alberta) and areas with a strong cultural identity, especially of Ukrainian and French heritage. Some small town museums and historic attractions were better known, but again most often in the closest urban centres. Greater awareness of these attractions is needed, especially to round out an experience anchored by another activity, attraction or en route to a further destination;
- Rodeos, other festivals and events all had their adherents. The biggest barrier to attendance appeared to be not knowing what was on where at the particular time they were looking for something to do;
- Attractions and facilities require regular refreshment (e.g., new features or exhibits) and updating in order to draw repeat business; they also require maintenance similar to that discussed under hotels, so that their appearance remains fresh and attractive. Alberta's premier rural attraction, Drumheller, was described as not meeting this common standard and similar comments about "educational" facilities and attractions were heard.

## Accessibility

Distance – and more particularly driving time – were the most important factors determining where people go or would choose to go in rural Alberta. The most popular trip lengths were day trips and weekends or slightly longer, not full vacations of a week or more. Fuel costs were part of the reason for choosing places to visit that are close to home. Distance/driving time should be taken into consideration when selecting rural destinations to promote in different urban areas.

Another access factor that figured strongly for some was the scarcity of attractions along the way to a destination. There is a real need for better signage (i.e., more signage in earlier locations that is more informative than merely a name) and promotion of off-road attractions.

And finally, there were many comments about the perceived condition of rural roads. Whether true or not, this could be an inhibitor to travel, especially in winter when Alberta's unpredictable changes in weather weigh in as a factor.

## Opportunities to improve communication about rural Alberta

Most people are open to learning more about what there is to see and do at destinations in rural Alberta. A number of opportunities to improve promotion of the destinations became apparent through the discussions. They include:

- Increased promotion to equal or exceed what is seen and heard from competitive destinations outside the province (Montana, California and warm weather locations in particular, also other provinces) and inside (Calgary, Edmonton, Banff and Jasper);
- Harnessing a way to generate word of mouth promotion, the most effective method of all. The concept of a geocaching game that will stimulate interest in different generations (because of the tailored features incorporated into the game) appears to have the potential to do this. Complementary product at the geocache sites would be necessary to successfully round out the experience, particularly for more isolated sites that cannot be combined into a single day trip;
- Effective and imaginative use of social media and e-zines in addition to traditional mass media to gain attention (using more pictures and text descriptions similar to those in the Travel Alberta winter print campaign) and promote links to online information. Optimal timing for promotion occurs as the weather starts to warm up and then through the summer;
- Online information at both the regional and product level that is easy to find – emphasizing the need for search engine optimization. Websites also need to be easy to navigate and have sufficient depth of information to plan a trip. At the regional level it is vital that they enable users to select appropriate destinations and activities targeted to their location, lifestage and personal needs and interests;
- Up to date and truthful information on the websites of individual properties and an online booking option wherever possible;
- Development of a single rural Alberta App that will be location sensitive and provide information on things to see and do in the vicinity, possibly including accommodation and food service options;
- Better signage to visitor information centres en route to and at the rural destination, local staff to ensure detailed knowledge of the location and access during normal travel hours. Staff of urban visitor information centres – and AMA offices – should be

- knowledgeable about rural destinations and able to provide local residents (generally, but not always older) with brochures about these areas;
- Better roadside signage for off-highway attractions as described previously;
  - An interactive calendar of events that will allow the user to identify events on a particular day that are happening in a region of their choice.

A term to capture the essence of rural Alberta that might be used for promotional purposes was explored without notable success, but did provide some guidelines.

Of four terms tested, “Hidden Gems” was most successful because it captured what people are looking for. However, since the term does not describe everything available in rural Alberta, it runs the risk of disappointing. The term could be used *selectively* in a similar manner to the federal “Locals Know” promotion, or even as some sort of seal of approval, but it would be far from inclusive of all that rural Alberta has to offer.

Another theme that describes what participants wanted from a rural trip was an adventure. While the term “Off the Beaten Path” conveyed that message, it carried far too many negative connotations.

It was also important that the term intrigue the reader – something that both the above did succeed at – so that they would read further. To that end, some of the participant suggestions included words like “discover” or “experience” or “explore”.

Finally, participants’ own suggestions emphasised that it is important that the name clearly show that Alberta is the subject.

We trust that these suggestions will be helpful and wish you success in promoting rural Alberta and aligning your marketing and product development efforts.

Yours truly,  
INFACIT RESEARCH AND CONSULTING INC.



Enid Markus  
President  
Direct line: (780) 487-3682

# Appendix I: Screeners



## Travel and Tourism Screener

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Location:

- EDMONTON  
 GRANDE PRAIRIE

Group:

- A  B  
 A  B

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Home# \_\_\_\_\_

Work# \_\_\_\_\_

Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am calling on behalf of Infact Research and Consulting. We are currently working on a project relating to travel and tourism for the Government of Alberta (the Ministry of Tourism, Parks and Recreation) to find out more about how people choose destinations to visit. If you qualify, we would invite you to a 1½ hour discussion with nine other randomly selected individuals and you would receive a \$75 honorarium to help cover expenses.

This is a market research study. We are not selling anything and are only interested in hearing your views. May I ask you a few questions to see if you qualify to attend?

**DO NOT READ: Client Contact for verification:**

Sid Nieuwenhuis, Manager, Tourism Research  
 Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation  
 Phone: 780.422.1058

1. Do you or any members of your immediate family work for any of the following types of organizations:

- |   |   |                              |
|---|---|------------------------------|
| A market research firm.....                       | 1 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| A consulting company.....                         | 2 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| A newspaper, radio or TV station.....             | 3 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| An advertising agency.....                        | 4 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| The travel, tourism and hospitality industry..... | 5 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| None of these.....                                | 9 | <b>Continue</b>              |

2. Have you ever attended a focus group before? **IF YES:** When did you last attend?

- |                            |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Never.....                 | 1 | <b>Continue [Recruit 5 or more per group]</b> |
| In past 2 years.....       | 2 | <b>TERMINATE</b>                              |
| More than 2 years ago..... | 3 | <b>Continue [Recruit no more than 5]</b>      |

3. In the past two (2) years, that is since February 2010, have you taken any trips in Canada or the USA primarily for leisure or to visit friends and relatives?

**INTERVIEWER NOTE:**

**LEISURE** includes longer vacation trips, weekends or day pleasure trips, trips to see attraction/s or event/s or for personal reasons like participating in a sports tournament

**VISITS TO FRIENDS AND RELATIVES** includes reunions, weddings, birthdays, etc.

**Exclude if ONLY:**

- corporate business trips, conferences/conventions or combined business and pleasure trips;
- personal business like seeing a lawyer, doctor, attending a funeral or taking a child to college, etc.;
- commuting to work;
- moving to a new home.

- |                     |   |                            |
|---------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Yes.....            | 1 | <b>Continue</b>            |
| No.....             | 2 | <b>THANK AND TERMINATE</b> |
| Don't remember..... | 9 | <b>THANK AND TERMINATE</b> |



**EDMONTON**  
**GRANDE PRAIRIE**

February 23, 2012 (schedule Group B at 5:30, Group A at 7:30)  
March 8, 2012 (schedule Group A at 5:30, Group B at 7:30)

### Quota Summary

	<b>Group A: Young adult h/h</b>	<b>Group B: Young family h/h</b>
<b>FG experience</b>	5+ No Max. 5 Yes	5+ No Max. 5 Yes
<b>Travel history</b>	ALL Took a leisure or VFR trip in the past 2 years in Canada or USA	ALL Took a leisure or VFR trip in the past 2 years in Canada or USA
<b>Gender</b>	5 male 5 female	5 male 5 female
<b>Age</b>	5 aged 18 – 24 5 aged 25 – 34	4 aged 25 – 34 4 aged 35 – 44 2 aged 45 – 49
<b>Children under 18 in h/h</b>	None	Yes for ALL
<b>Adult 35+ in h/h</b>	None	Not applicable
<b>Occupation</b>	Mix – may include up to 4 students, stay at home moms/dads or unemployed	Mix – may include up to 4 students, stay at home moms/dads or unemployed

## Travel and Tourism Screener

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Location:

Group:

LETHBRIDGE  
 LLOYDMINSTER

B  C  
 B  C

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Home# \_\_\_\_\_

Work# \_\_\_\_\_

Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am calling on behalf of Infact Research and Consulting. We are currently working on a project relating to travel and tourism for the Government of Alberta (the Ministry of Tourism, Parks and Recreation) to find out more about how people choose destinations to visit. If you qualify, we would invite you to a 1½ hour discussion with nine other randomly selected individuals and you would receive a \$75 honorarium to help cover expenses.

This is a market research study. We are not selling anything and are only interested in hearing your views. May I ask you a few questions to see if you qualify to attend?

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 Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation  
 Phone: 780.422.1058

1. Do you or any members of your immediate family work for any of the following types of organizations:

A market research firm.....	1	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
A consulting company.....	2	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
A newspaper, radio or TV station.....	3	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
An advertising agency.....	4	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
The travel, tourism and hospitality industry.....	5	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
None of these.....	9	<b>Continue</b>

2. Have you ever attended a focus group before? **IF YES:** When did you last attend?

Never.....	1	<b>Continue [Recruit 5 or more per group]</b>
In past 2 years.....	2	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
More than 2 years ago.....	3	<b>Continue [Recruit no more than 5]</b>

3. In the past two (2) years, that is since February 2010, have you taken any trips in Canada or the USA primarily for leisure or to visit friends and relatives?

### INTERVIEWER NOTE:

**LEISURE** includes longer vacation trips, weekends or day pleasure trips, trips to see attraction/s or event/s or for personal reasons like participating in a sports tournament

**VISITS TO FRIENDS AND RELATIVES** includes reunions, weddings, birthdays, etc.

#### **Exclude if ONLY:**

- corporate business trips, conferences/conventions or combined business and pleasure trips;
- personal business like seeing a lawyer, doctor, attending a funeral or taking a child to college, etc.;
- commuting to work;
- moving to a new home.

Yes.....	1	<b>Continue</b>
No.....	2	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>
Don't remember.....	9	<b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>

4. RECORD GENDER BY OBSERVATION

Male 1 **Recruit 5 per group**  
 Female 2 **Recruit 5 per group**

5. Which of the following age groups can I place you in? READ ALL

Up to 24..... 1 **THANK & TERMINATE**  
 25 – 34 .....2 **[Recruit 4 for B]**  
 35 – 44 .....3 **[Recruit 4 for B]**  
 45 – 49 .....4 **[Recruit 2 for B .... 2 for C]**  
 50 – 59 .....5 **[Recruit ..... 4 for C]**  
 60 – 69 .....6 **[Recruit ..... 4 for C]**  
 70 and over .....7 **THANK & TERMINATE**

**CIRCLE ANSWERS AND FOLLOW DOWN**

AGE IN Q5:	25-44		45-49		50-69	
6. Is there anyone in your household that is <i>less than</i> 18 years old?	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	=B	TERM.	=B	=C	TERM.	=C

7. What is [was] your Occupation or Job Title and what type of company do [did] you work for?

\_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_  
 Job Title Type of Company

**INT. NOTE:** Please obtain a good mixture of occupations or former occupations for those who are not working; Group B: maximum of 4 stay at home moms/dads, students or currently unemployed (together); Group C: most may be homemakers, retired or currently unemployed

8. Would you feel comfortable reading some paragraphs to yourself, writing down your views and expressing your opinions in a group setting with 10 or so people?

Yes 1  
 No 2 **THANK & TERMINATE**

Thank you. I would definitely like you to attend this important research project which will be held at ... **(hotel/address)** at ... **(time) p.m.** on ... **(day & date)**.

We will phone you the evening before to remind you, but if for any reason you find that you are unable to attend please give me a call at \_\_\_\_\_ and let me know as soon as possible so that I can book someone in your place. We are only inviting 10 people to each session, so we are counting on everyone to show up to make this very important research project a success.

**LETHBRIDGE**  
**LLOYDMINSTER**

March 1, 2012 (schedule Group C at 5:30, Group B at 7:30)  
March 5, 2012 (schedule Group C at 5:30, Group B at 7:30)

### Quota Summary

	<b>Group B: Young family h/h</b>	<b>Group C: Older adult h/h</b>
<b>FG experience</b>	5+ No Max. 5 Yes	5+ No Max. 5 Yes
<b>Travel history</b>	ALL Took a leisure or VFR trip in the past 2 years in Canada or USA	ALL Took a leisure or VFR trip in the past 2 years in Canada or USA
<b>Gender</b>	5 male 5 female	5 male 5 female
<b>Age</b>	4 aged 25 – 34 4 aged 35 – 44 2 aged 45 – 49	2 aged 45 – 49 4 aged 50 – 59 4 aged 60 – 69
<b>Children under 18 in h/h</b>	Yes for ALL	None
<b>Occupation</b>	Mix – may include up to 4 students, stay at home moms/dads, unemployed	Mix – may include mostly retired, homemakers, unemployed

## Travel and Tourism Screener

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Location:

RED DEER

CALGARY

Group:

A  C

A  C

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Home# \_\_\_\_\_

Work# \_\_\_\_\_

Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am calling on behalf of Infact Research and Consulting. We are currently working on a project relating to travel and tourism for the Government of Alberta (the Ministry of Tourism, Parks and Recreation) to find out more about how people choose destinations to visit. If you qualify, we would invite you to a 1½ hour discussion with nine other randomly selected individuals and you would receive a \$75 honorarium to help cover expenses.

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 Phone: 780.422.1058

1. Do you or any members of your immediate family work for any of the following types of organizations:

- |   |   |                              |
|---|---|------------------------------|
| A market research firm.....                       | 1 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| A consulting company.....                         | 2 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| A newspaper, radio or TV station.....             | 3 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| An advertising agency.....                        | 4 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| The travel, tourism and hospitality industry..... | 5 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| None of these.....                                | 9 | <b>Continue</b>              |

2. Have you ever attended a focus group before? **IF YES:** When did you last attend?

- |                            |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Never.....                 | 1 | <b>Continue [Recruit 5 or more per group]</b> |
| In past 2 years.....       | 2 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b>                  |
| More than 2 years ago..... | 3 | <b>Continue [(Recruit no more than 5)]</b>    |

3. In the past two (2) years, that is since February 2010, have you taken any trips in Canada or the USA primarily for leisure or to visit friends and relatives?

**INTERVIEWER NOTE:**

**LEISURE** includes longer vacation trips, weekends or day pleasure trips, trips to see attraction/s or event/s or for personal reasons like participating in a sports tournament

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- commuting to work;
- moving to a new home.

- |                     |   |                              |
|---------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Yes.....            | 1 | <b>Continue</b>              |
| No.....             | 2 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |
| Don't remember..... | 9 | <b>THANK &amp; TERMINATE</b> |





**RED DEER** February 28, 2012 (schedule Group C at 5:30, Group A at 7:30)  
**CALGARY** February 29, 2012 (schedule Group C at 5:30, Group A at 7:30)

### Quota Summary

	<b>Group A: Young adult h/h</b>	<b>Group C: Older adult h/h</b>
<b>FG experience</b>	5+ No Max. 5 Yes	5+ No Max. 5 Yes
<b>Travel history</b>	ALL Took a leisure or VFR trip in the past 2 years in Canada or USA	ALL Took a leisure or VFR trip in the past 2 years in Canada or USA
<b>Gender</b>	5 male 5 female	5 male 5 female
<b>Age</b>	5 aged 18 – 24 5 aged 25 – 34	2 aged 45 – 49 4 aged 50 – 59 4 aged 60 – 69
<b>Children under 18 in h/h</b>	None	None
<b>Adult 35+ in h/h</b>	None	Not applicable
<b>Occupation</b>	Mix – may include up to 4 students, stay at home moms/dads, unemployed	Mix – may include mostly retired, homemakers, unemployed

## **Appendix II:**

### **Moderator's guide and participant materials**

# Moderator's guide (final)

## I. Introductions

- MODERATOR:
- Welcome

*Housekeeping (focus group room and viewers, time, refreshments, breaks, washroom location, cell phones/beepers, recording and speaking) SWITCH ON RECORDERS*

### *POST LIST*

1. Round table introductions: name – occupation – your household – travel companions – things you enjoy spending time doing – mass and social media use

### *MODERATOR:*

*Describe process for evening (Q&A/discussion, not round the table – frank opinions needed – personal reactions, not agreement – no right or wrong answers – you can't offend me)*

## II. Leisure travel in Alberta

### *MODERATOR:*

*POST DEFINITION Brief review*

### *POST PROMPT LIST*

2. Describe a typical leisure trip to a destination in Alberta
3. Describe a trip to a destination in Alberta that stands out as special – what made it special
4. Describe some other trips in Alberta outside the National Parks and big cities

### *Q2-4 PROBE IF APPROPRIATE:*

- what destination
- benefits to you from this trip
- who went
- trip purpose
- activities
- time of year
- length of stay
- transportation
- accommodation
- how you planned for it

### III. Perceptions of Rural Alberta, facilitators and barriers

POST NAME "RURAL ALBERTA"

5. As a leisure destination, what is your first thought when I say "Rural Alberta" – other positive associations – any negative associations

PROBE:

- *HAND OUT SMALL MAPS*: where is rural Alberta  
*MODERATOR: REVEAL LARGE MARKED MAP Define rural Alberta*
- what does rural Alberta have to offer *you* for a leisure trip
- what does rural Alberta *not* offer *you* that you want on a leisure trip
- how much do you hear about rural Alberta for leisure trips
- are there regions for taking leisure trips within rural Alberta

HAND OUT RESPONSE FORM AND CARD PACK; COMPLETE TOP

MODERATOR INTRO RE SAME PERSON DIFFERENT BENEFITS FROM DIFFERENT TRIPS

6. Please sort through these cards and put up to 6 of the words or phrases on each box to describe the *top 6 benefits you would enjoy* on a leisure trip taken to an urban area, a rural area and a rocky mountain national park in Alberta.

Then write the number of each chosen card in the box and keep the cards you chose visible in the box.

- which items did you pick as your top rural leisure trip benefits
- how were they different to urban and national parks trips – why

7. Where would you like to go in rural Alberta for a leisure trip or vacation in future – why – why have not been there

PROBE BARRIERS:

- impetus – what might move it higher on your list – make it immediate (next 2 years)
- knowledge of what there is to do – how could hear/see/learn more
- time – time available for trip – what amount of time is “worth” spending on a trip to rural Alberta (day, weekend, week or longer) – why – what would make it worth spending more time
- accessibility – which areas are not accessible to you/less accessible/appear to be remote – why – does lack of apparent accessibility depend on: time to travel, distance, distance between stops/things to do, what there is to do along the way, type of transportation (RV vs. auto), number of people you hear have been there, other – preference for travel around a region vs. from a central location – how can access issues be addressed
- facilities/amenities – which are not available – how important are they to making a decision/ enjoyment of trip (e.g., comfortable accommodations, high-end dining, paved roads, WiFi, cell phone reception, other)
- seasonality – at what time of year would and would not consider going – why – how can that be changed
- affordability – any particular or all rural destinations, by experience/activity

#### IV. Interest in rural experiences and activities

8. What activities or things to see or do, do you associate with rural Alberta – which are and are not of interest to you on a day or longer leisure trip – why/not

PROBE:

- winter activities like ice fishing, cross country or downhill skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing
- visiting a museum, historic or cultural attraction
- attending a festival or event
- attending a rodeo – other western-themed events
- attending a sporting event – as a participant or spectator
- visiting farmer’s markets, craft sales, fruit stands
- participating in an agricultural tour
- touring backcountry roads – in the countryside
- scenery – changing landscapes/vegetation – unusual landforms/water bodies
- seeing birds or wildlife
- aboriginal experiences
- spending time on a farm or ranch
- staying at a B&B
- camping at a provincial park – a municipal park
- staying in a cottage or campground near a lake – in a recreation area

9. PROBE 2, TIME PERMITTING *SHOW ADS*

(Selected relevant experiences described in Travel Alberta’s ‘remember to breathe’ print advertising)

PROBE:

- interest – ability/willingness to do
- accessibility of ad – additional/alternative options to reach segment

## V. Planning and organizing a trip to rural Alberta

10. How do or would you go about planning a one day leisure trip to rural Alberta – a multi-day trip

PROBE:

- need for information
- what is 'information' for planning – for use on trip (form – hard copy vs. online; content – lure vs. factual)
- knowledge of where to find information
- perception of amount of information available for rural areas
- which sources would be consulted/preferred to make a decision – to plan ahead – while en route – how differ (use of VICs, AMA, Travel Alberta, destination websites, facility websites, WOM advice, Facebook/Twitter advice, guidebooks)
- how would web information be accessed (computer, mobile device, search engine like Google vs. apps, live chat online)
- how would bookings be made

## VI. Terms to describe rural destinations

POST TERMS ONE AT A TIME; ROTATE ORDER

11. What is your reaction to these terms to refer to and promote Alberta's rural vacation destinations – what do you associate with each term

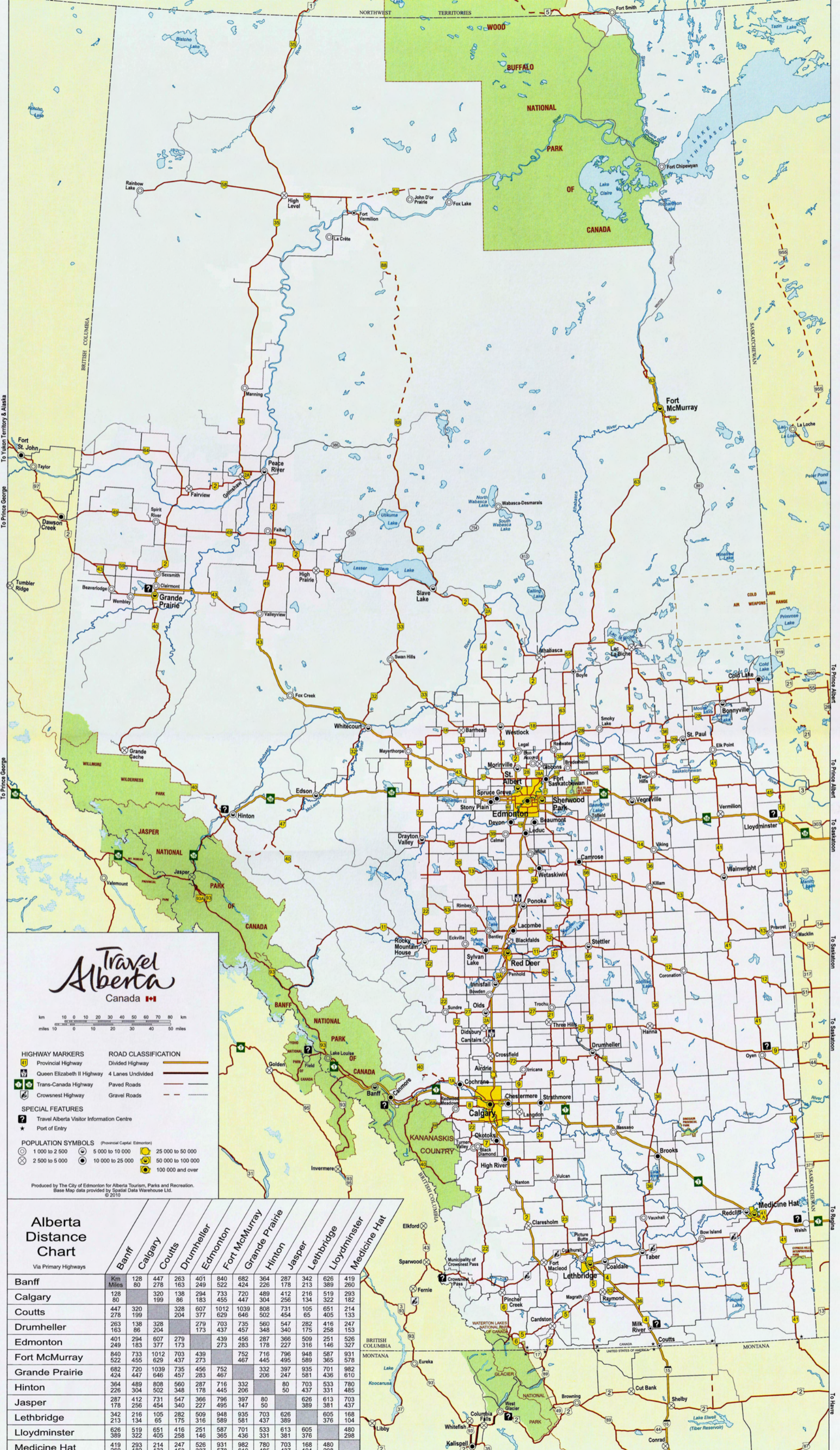
- Hidden Gems
- Off the Beaten Path
- Canadian Badlands
- Inside Alberta

PROBE:

- which would pique your interest, make you want to find out more
- what terms or phrases can we add to the list to consider

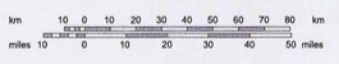
THANK YOU – DISTRIBUTE INCENTIVES





# Travel Alberta

Canada



- HIGHWAY MARKERS**
- Provincial Highway
  - Queen Elizabeth II Highway
  - Trans-Canada Highway
  - Crowsnest Highway
- ROAD CLASSIFICATION**
- Divided Highway
  - 4 Lanes Undivided
  - Paved Roads
  - Gravel Roads
- SPECIAL FEATURES**
- Travel Alberta Visitor Information Centre
  - Port of Entry
- POPULATION SYMBOLS** (Provincial Capital: Edmonton)
- 1 000 to 2 500
  - 2 500 to 5 000
  - 5 000 to 10 000
  - 10 000 to 25 000
  - 25 000 to 50 000
  - 50 000 to 100 000
  - 100 000 and over

Produced by the City of Edmonton for Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation. Base Map data provided by Spatial Data Warehouse Ltd. © 2010

### Alberta Distance Chart

Via Primary Highways

	Banff	Calgary	Coutts	Drumheller	Edmonton	Fort McMurray	Grande Prairie	Hinton	Jasper	Lethbridge	Lloydminster	Medicine Hat	
Banff	Km Miles	128 80	447 278	263 163	401 249	682 424	364 226	287 178	342 213	626 389	419 260		
Calgary			320 199	138 86	294 183	720 447	489 304	412 256	216 134	519 322	293 182		
Coutts				328 204	607 377	1039 646	808 502	731 454	105 65	651 405	214 133		
Drumheller					279 173	703 437	735 457	560 348	547 340	282 175	416 258	247 153	
Edmonton						439 273	456 283	287 178	366 227	509 316	251 146	526 327	
Fort McMurray							752 467	716 445	796 495	948 589	587 365	931 578	
Grande Prairie								332 206	397 247	935 581	701 436	982 610	
Hinton									80 50	703 437	533 331	780 485	
Jasper										626 389	613 381	703 437	
Lethbridge											605 376	168 104	
Lloydminster												480 298	
Medicine Hat													419 260



LOCATION: \_\_\_\_\_

GROUP    A    B    C

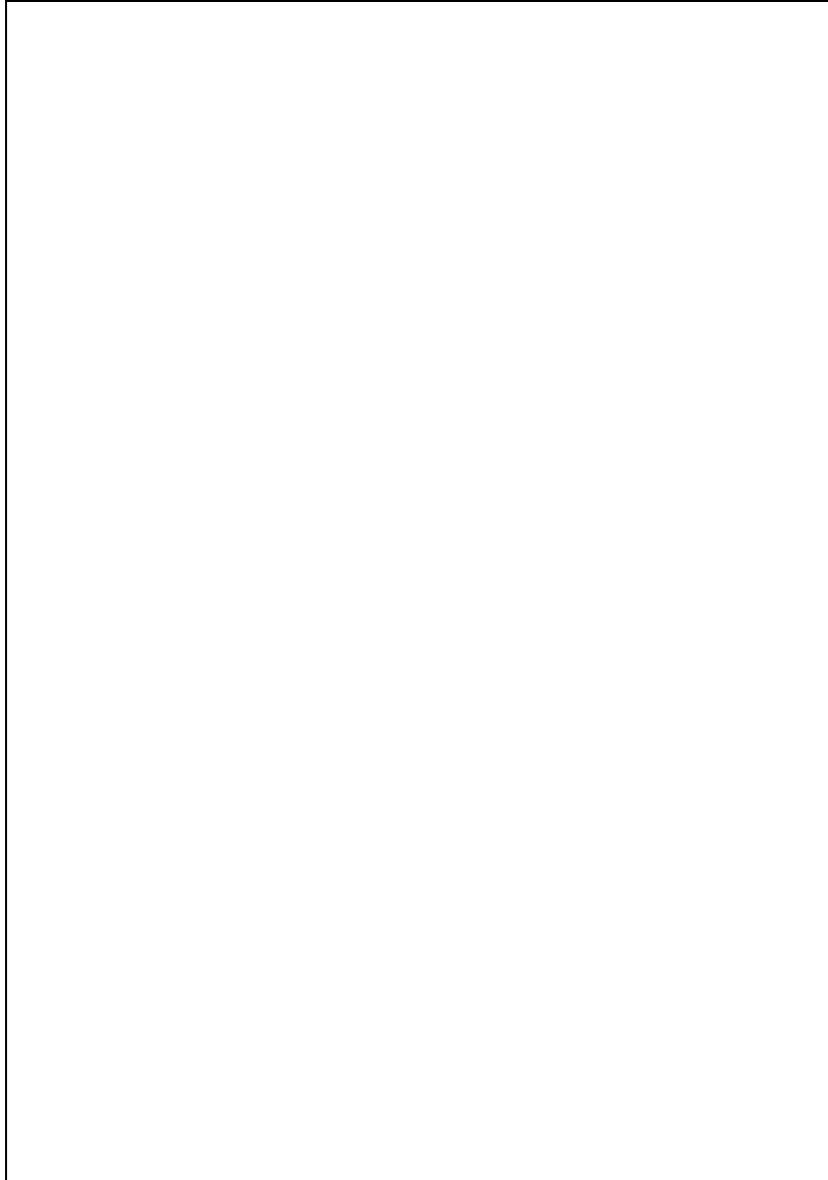
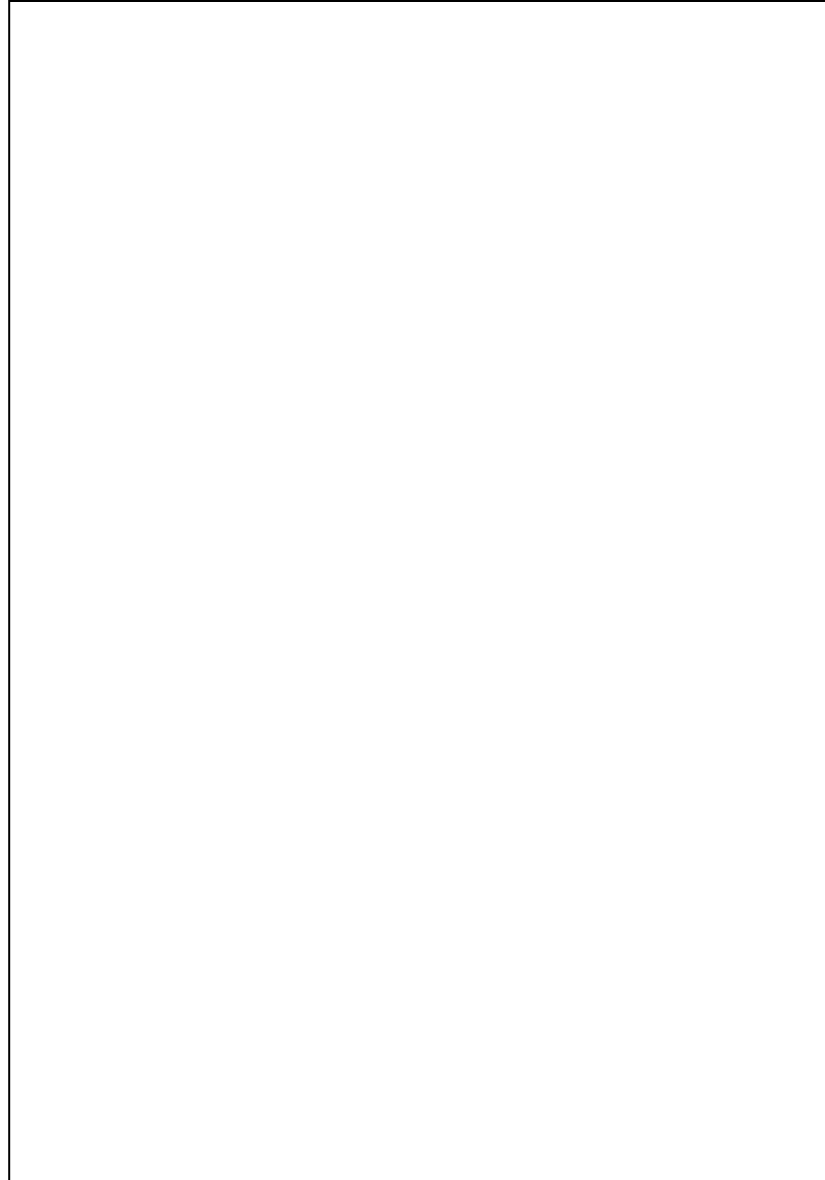
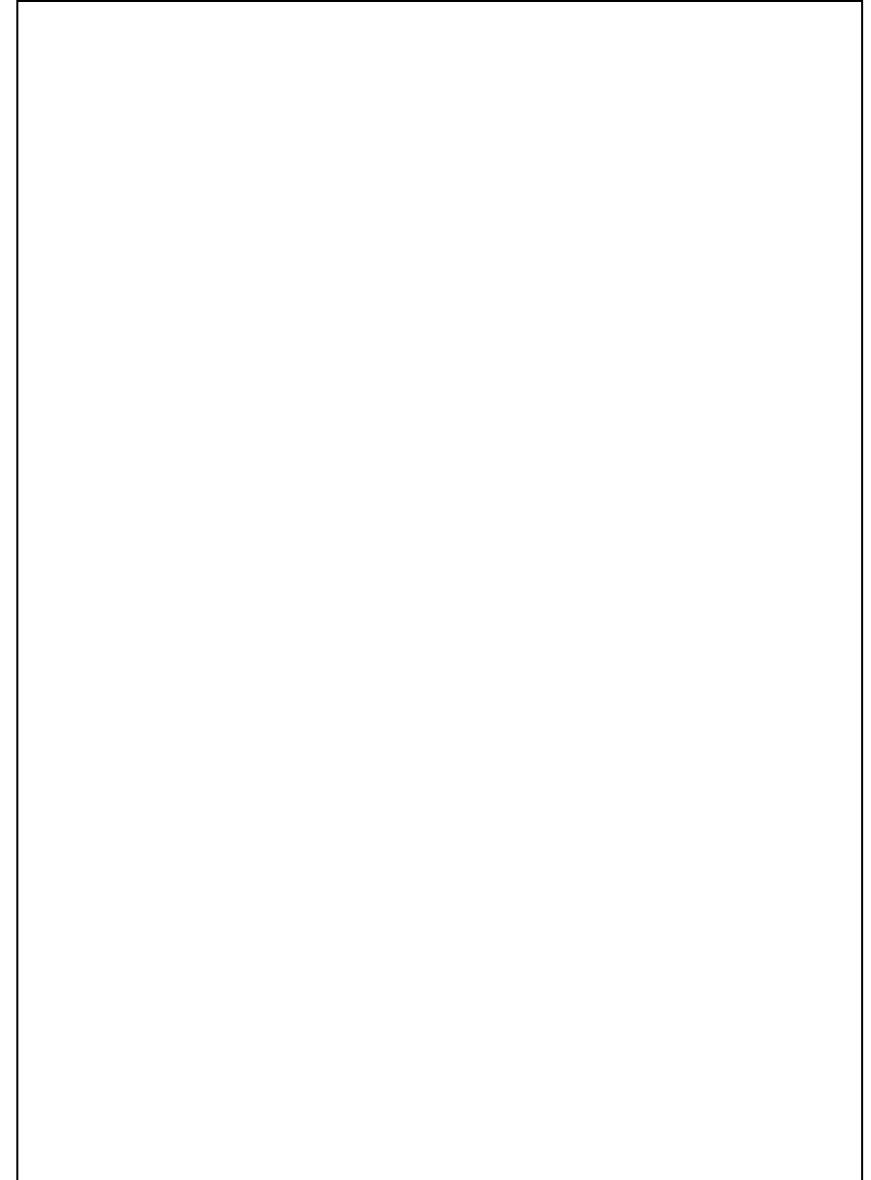
GENDER   M    F

Pick the top 6 benefits YOU would enjoy on a leisure trip taken to each type of area.

RURAL benefits

URBAN benefits

MOUNTAIN PARK benefits

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for listing the top 6 benefits of a rural area.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for listing the top 6 benefits of an urban area.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for listing the top 6 benefits of a mountain park area.

1. action-packed	2. comfortable	3. familiar	4. getting away from it all
5. an adventure	6. educational	7. fresh, clean air	8. good choice of accommodation and food
9. be with family/ friends	10. emotional break	11. fun	12. good service
13. can do favourite activities	14. entertaining	15. funky/trendy	16. good weather
17. close by or easy to get to	18. exciting	19. get in touch with nature	20. have new experiences
21. informal	22. lots of activities to do	23. memorable	24. peaceful and quiet

25. interesting	26. lots of sightseeing possibilities	27. natural	28. physically challenging
29. kid-friendly	30. lure of the unknown	31. not boring	32. relaxing and rejuvenating
33. leisurely/ slow paced	34. luxurious/ pampered	35. offers privacy and isolation	36. stress-relief
37. lively/ vibrant	38. meet new people	39. offers reasonable value	40. unusual or rare experience
41. welcoming/ friendly	42. none		

## **Appendix III:**

### **Promotional materials shown**

# Rollin' down the Rivers



North Saskatchewan River



## Vermilion River Region

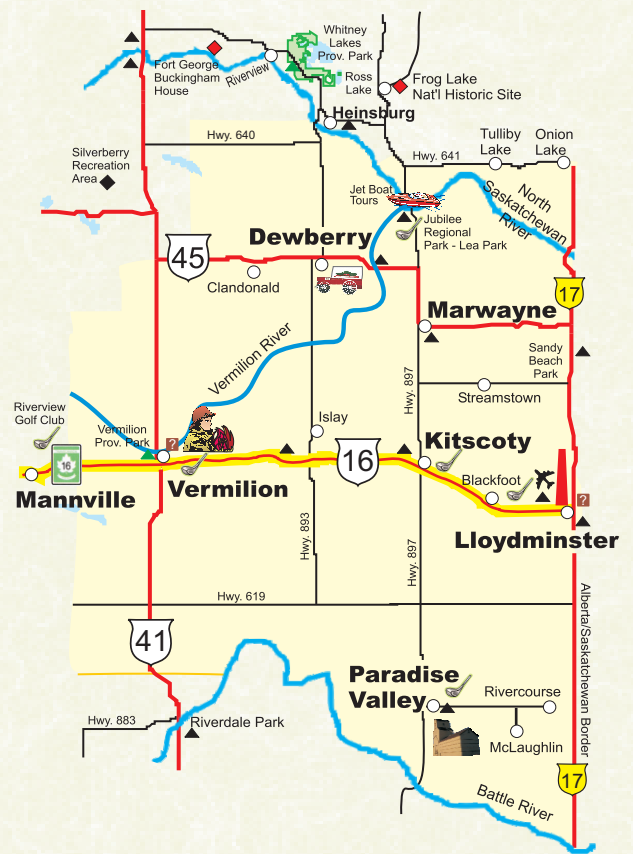
*Discover the beauty* of the **Vermilion River Region**, an area with diverse landscapes, abundant opportunities and endless activities. Located two hours east of Edmonton, the Vermilion River Region consists of nine communities encompassed by the **Vermilion, North Saskatchewan and Battle rivers**. With only a one hour drive from one end of the region to the other, every community has something to offer for everyone.

*Looking for something to do?* Visit **Mannville** and enjoy the beautiful rolling hills of the **Mannville Golf Course**. Spend the day in **Vermilion** and experience the breathtaking view from the **Vermilion Provincial Campground**. Roll through time and tour the historical **"Climb Through Time" museum** in **Paradise Valley**. Roll in laughter at the annual **Kitscoty Dinner Theatre**.

*Wanting to spend some time outdoors?* Roll up your sleeves and enjoy one of the most famous outdoor rodeos north of **Marwayne** at **Lea Park**. Enjoy an afternoon on a **Jet Boat Safari** where the North Saskatchewan and Vermilion rivers meet. Head over to **Dewberry** and see the **"World's Largest Chuckwagon"** and take in the excitement of the races. Roll down the Alberta and Saskatchewan borders in **"The Border City"** of **Lloydminster** and take in all the beauty the city has to offer.

No matter what your age, whether you want to make your vacation fun filled or peaceful and quiet, the choice is yours!

*Just come down and see the  
fun and beauty there is  
Rollin' down the Rivers!*



Vermilion River



[www.vermilionriverregion.ca](http://www.vermilionriverregion.ca)











You are here: Day Trips & More > Country Soul Stroll

Select Language



### Edmonton's Countryside • Country Soul Stroll

- Country Soul Stroll
- Venues
- Get in and Go
- Mini Map

#### Country Soul Stroll - Featured Itinerary

July 17 - September 6, 2011

What better way to start out your day than a trip to the **Devonian Botanic Garden**. Wander through the indoor greenhouses and the expansive feature gardens outdoors. Don't miss spending some time in the butterfly house for an up close encounter with these beautiful creatures.

Just 10 minutes west of Stony Plain is **The Carvel General Store**, a must-see in Parkland County. This beautifully-restored 91-year-old landmark and specialty store is in about as peaceful a setting as there is anywhere. Featuring the work of local artists, authors, fine crafters, potpourris, soaps and lotions, fence board



furniture, teas, as well as classic clothing and linen, they offer a wide selection of country finery for all tastes.

#### Country Soul Stroll

While here why not stop at one of the many beautiful communities in this area including the historic **Town of Stony Plain**, **Village of Wabamun** (The Village on the Lake), or find everything you need in the **City of Spruce Grove!**

Next it is off to the **City of St Albert** to take a trip back into St. Albert's past by visiting the **Musée Héritage Museum** and **St. Albert Heritage Sites**. Located in downtown St. Albert, The Musée Héritage Museum tells the story of St. Albert from its beginnings as a missionary settlement to the thriving City it has become today. Then it is a short drive or follow the trail over the footbridge and along the Sturgeon River to discover the **St. Albert Grain Elevator Park**. Newly restored and opening on July 1, 2011, this park features two of Alberta's designated wooden grain elevators; Here you can discover everything you wanted to know about these historic prairie structures.



Just 3 kilometers from St. Albert on Highway 2 you will find **Horse Sense Training & Petting Zoo**. Interact with horses, parrots, mini cattle, llamas, donkeys, rabbits, pot bellied pigs, emus, goats, sheep and more! This is a great place for a picnic while watching the horses at play then go for a pony ride, or try calf roping, go for a hay ride or even take a riding lesson. Book ahead and you can even go on a trail ride.

Keep heading Northeast and you will find the **Alberta Railway Museum**. Climb aboard and experience Alberta's railway past in a big way. With over 75 cars and locomotives on site, this is a large scale museum that will make a huge impression. Take a ride on a track inspector motor car, steam engine or vintage diesel locomotive then tour restored train cars and check out the station and water tower. The Alberta Railway Museum is open on weekends all summer long.

Now it is on to the **Town of Gibbons** where you must make a stop and see Toulia Prins of **Toulia's House of Clay**. Imagine holding the house you grew up in or the church where you were married in the



2 of 4

22/02/2012 3:46 PM



palms of your hands. The art of replicating architecture is Toulia Prins' pride and passion. She carefully crafts each structure by hand, sometimes using as many as 20 pieces to complete a work. These reproductions make truly unique gifts for anniversaries, corporate presentation, retirement or a treasured keepsake. Toulia also displays and sells a collection of original watercolour paintings by Rosa Pinzauti whose work can be found in collections around the world.

After leaving Gibbons, it is just a short drive to **Longriders RV Park** located on Highway 28A. Here is where you will find great trails for all skill levels of horse riders. All trail rides are accompanied with a guide on and around the scenic Sturgeon River Valley and the historic Athabasca Landing Trail. Bring along your RV and plan to spend the night in Longriders full service RV park for who knows what countryside adventures await you tomorrow.

For more information on any of these sites, click on **Places to Go** and don't forget you can use our new mobile AP so you can just map it, get in and go!

#### Membership Info

Edmonton Regional Tourism Group is pleased to offer new initiatives to operators along with membership opportunities to grow and invest in your business with value added programs.

Click here for more info

#### Get in and Go!

Check out our Day Trip Itineraries and experience the many wonders close at hand.

- Spring Drives
- Country Cuisine
- Country Soul Stroll
- Strathcona Garden Tour
- Country Christmas
- Family Stuff
- French Venues
- Aboriginal Experiences

#### Get the Countryside!

Get our newsletter and enjoy the latest news and events from Edmonton's Countryside. Click here for more options, such as mobile formatted.

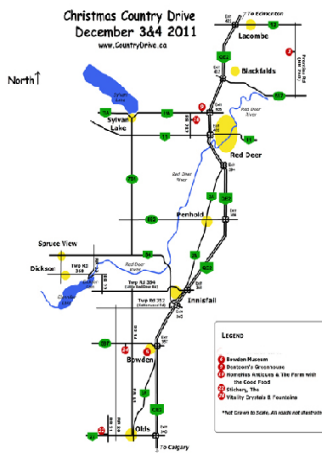
#### Email Address

Subscribe Me





2011 Showcase Weekends  
 Summer Time Country Drive  
 August 6th & 7th  
 Harvest Time Country Drive  
 October 1st & 2nd  
 Christmas Time Country Drive  
 December 3rd & 4th



[Click for Printable Version](#)

**6. BOWDEN MUSEUM M W G**  
 The museum will be open without charge. The Garage Sale at the Anglican Church will be our Christmas half price sale. **Open: May 27 – Aug 27, 11:00AM –**

4:00PM, Wed, Fri & Sat. 403-224-2122. **Email:**  
[bhs@shawbiz.ca](mailto:bhs@shawbiz.ca) 2201 – 19<sup>th</sup> Ave, Bowden.  
<http://museum.anwc.net>.

**9. DENTOOMS GREENHOUSES S P W**  
 Dec 3 and 4 – Dentoom's Christmas Open House. Come sample our mulled cider, wine and cheese. Our Christmas Store will be 10% off all weekend. Drop in and explore our poinsettias, fresh Christmas greens, wreaths, garland, door swags, Christmas décor and ornaments. **Christmas Hours: Mon – Sat, 9am – 6pm, Sun Noon – 5pm, 403-309-7700 Email: sales@dentooms.com**  
 Corner of Highway 11A and RR 275, 1/4 km West of Highway 2, Red Deer. **Phone: 403-309-7700**  
[www.dentooms.com](http://www.dentooms.com)

**16. HOLMEHUS ANTIQUES & THE FARM WITH THE GOOD FOOD S W RP G**  
 Antiques and collectibles, free-range eggs, freezer beef, fruits and vegetables. 2,500 sq ft shop specializes in Scandinavian, British Isles, German and Canadian collectibles. Unusual jewelry, textiles, metal, wood, china, glass, furniture. Farm tours and picnic tables for individuals or groups. **Directions:** Located on RR 282, 3.2km W of QE2, between Hwy 11 and 11A Red Deer **Phone: 403- 347-0516**

**22. STITCHERY, THE S W**  
 Bring your family and friends on a fabulous road trip for the Christmas Country Drive Event at The Stitchery. Celebrate the Season with a wide range of

hand crated quireware by local artisans for your gift giving needs. Check out our Rug Hooking/Quilting Kits for your creative friends, and other in store specials and demo's. Merry Everything Happy Always!  
**Directions:** 0.8km W of Olds on Hwy 27, turn N at RR 21 **Rural address: 33002 Phone: 403-556-6221**

**24. VITALITY CRYSTALS & FOUNTAINS INC. S W G**  
 Just 4 minutes west of Bowden you will see crystals from around the world! There are powerful healing stones, unique gemstone jewelry pieces and tranquil crystal fountains, all displayed in a beautiful cabin store. Christmas at Vitality Crystals & Fountains Inc! Huge sales on great gifts for Christmas! Special gift certificate draw! **Directions:** 5.7km W of Bowden on Hwy 587 **Rural Address: 1431 Hwy 587 Phone: 403-224-2042**



**Glenn's Restaurant** is located on busy Highway #2 (between Edmonton and Calgary) 3 km. south of Red Deer, Alberta on Leva Avenue in Red Deer County.

Glenn's provides one of the best loose leaf tea collections

You can enjoy breakfast all day or home style meals with a focus on healthy choices.

(403) 346-5448  
 (403) 340-2199  
[glennrest@telus.net](mailto:glennrest@telus.net)  
[www.glenns-restaurant.com](http://www.glenns-restaurant.com)  
<http://www.countrydrive.ca/Showcase/Weekends/tabid/54/Default.aspx>



# REMINDER: UNIQUE EXPERIENCES RESULT IN UNIQUE MOMENTS (remember to breathe)

With an amazing variety of landscapes, cultures and activities you can choose many experiences that are unique to Alberta.

Shimmy down a rope and play beneath Alberta's tallest waterfall. Sink your teeth into award-winning Gouda cheese, and then sip an orchard-grown fruit wine. Steady yourself on a shifting northern sand dune. Draw the tip of your finger across an interactive display that causes water to rise.

Did you know these experiences, and many more are available right in your own backyard? You can meet like-minded people, jump into the moment and bring back stories you can tell at a restaurant, a campfire or post it online. Here are some unique ways for you to explore the province and create unforgettable memories.

When it causes you to catch your breath – and you must remember to breathe, if only for a moment – it's uniquely Alberta.

#### FLOCK NORTH FOR PELICANS

Stand on the shore and watch some of the world's largest birds thriving in northern Alberta's natural environment. The Slave River is home to the oldest known American white pelican colony in the province and the most northerly in the world. Spot them on an eco-tour of Elk Island National Park. They arrive in April and head south again in mid-September. Try other bird habitats such as Moose Lake near Bonnyville, Wood Buffalo National Park and Cold Lake.



#### QUAD TO SAND DUNES

Thump over ruts in the road and navigate paths in thick boreal forest as you steer your ATV toward what's known as 'Alberta's Sahara' in the north. The Athabasca Sand Dune Ecological Reserve, east of the Richardson River Dunes, protects the largest active sand field in Alberta. It shifts more than a metre per year, with dunes rising as high as 12 metres. The Richardson River Dunes Wildlife Park north of Fort McMurray is part of the largest sand dune complex in Canada. Ready to play? The park's access trail provides hours of adventure riding. (fortmcmurraytourism.com)

#### FIND DELIGHT WITH AMMOLITE

Ammolite is a gemstone made from fossilized shells, and most of it comes from southern Alberta. The Korite ammolite mine offers the only tour of its kind in the world, so here's your chance for a unique Alberta learning adventure. Come explore Alberta's geology and history, just 30 minutes from Lethbridge. Korite supplies most of the world's ammolite. Three-hour tours are expected to run in July and August, 2012. (403-327-3119)

#### DISCOVER AWARD-WINNING SYLVAN STAR CHEESE

In the heart of Alberta near Red Deer and Sylvan Lake is Sylvan Star Cheese, home of mouth-watering, award-winning Gouda. Don't miss these champions – Gouda Spice Herbs & Garlic, Medium Gouda Smoked and Old Grizzly, among others. You can book ahead to tour the cheese-manufacturing farm. Pick up some goodies to take home or buy product at the store. You can also purchase the cheese at farmers' markets in Calgary and Edmonton. (sylvanstarcheesefarm.ca; 403-340-1560)



#### ALBERTA YAKS GET ROYAL TREATMENT

Live like the Royals when you sample meat from Alberta's yak ranches. Will and Kate dined on Alberta yak during their visit this past summer. Springridge Ranch near Pincher Creek is one of several yak ranches in the province. You can buy their low-cholesterol yak at Horizon Meats Butcher Shop in Calgary. (springridgeranchyakcrossbeef.blogspot.com)

#### THAT'S SO SWEET, HONEY

Alberta has the largest group of honey producers in Canada, which means you can buy beeswax candles or even make your own lip balm. Get out to rural farmers' markets to find bee products. Or take a tour, explore the secret lives of bees and buy retail at Chinook Honey Company in Okotoks. The Chinook Arch Meadery is Alberta's first honey winery and you can buy product at select Alberta farmers' markets, including Millarville. (albertabeekeepers.org)

#### SIP FRUIT WINES SO FINE

It lingers on your tongue before warming your belly. You can drink it during winter and help to make it when summer comes. At Birds & Bees Organic Wine Farm and Meadery, try strolling through the blossoming organic orchard in the spring, then squish Saskatoons with your feet during the July 2012 Stomp. "You can even paint your toenails the colour of Saskatoons," says owner and wine maker Xina Chrapko. You have additional choices with the Barr Estate Winery in Sherwood Park and Field Stone Fruit Wines in Strathmore. (birdsandbeeswinery.com; 780-657-2275; barr.ca; 780-819-9463; fieldstonefruitwines.com)

#### TRAIL RIDE TO KAKWA FALLS

Journey by horseback to Alberta's tallest waterfall, Kakwa Falls, near Grande Prairie. Start the five-day horsepack trip in the foothills surrounded by aspen and spruce, and travel through grassy meadows with the sun on your face. Once you arrive at Kakwa Falls, explore the 30-metre waterfall, and if you're game, climb down a rope and walk right beneath the falls. That will surely take your breath away! (Horse Trekking Adventures; 780-835-4629)

#### STROLL INTO FUR TRADING HISTORY

Let costumed interpreters guide you through the historic town of Dunvegan, the site of one of Alberta's earliest fur trading posts and missionary centres in the Peace River Valley. The entryway to the area is over the longest suspension bridge in Alberta. Explore nineteenth century log buildings that have been meticulously restored and refurbished. Nearby gardens are farmed as they were a century ago. (history.alberta.ca/dunvegan)

#### DISCOVER MEDALTA POTTERIES

Get your hands on history while working with clay. Don't know how to be a potter? An instructor will show you how, just book at least a day in advance. The Medalta Potteries National Historic Site celebrates a time when local workers produced 75 per cent of Canada's pottery. There's a working pottery studio, where retro Medalta pottery is made for sale in the gift shop. Visit year-round and peruse thousands of artifacts from exquisite vases to dinnerware at the museum. (medalta.org; 403-529-1070)

#### EXPERIENCE BISON ARCHEOLOGY IN ACTION

Paw the ground for treasures at an Adult Dig-It Camp at the Bodo Archaeological Site near Provost, where a professional archaeologist teaches you the basics of excavation and how to identify artifacts. You can help excavate a 300 - 500 year-old bison bone bed at the Bodo Bison Skulls Site. Learn about the history of Alberta and the First Nations, as well as the science of archaeology. You can even rent a tipi. Available from May through August. (buffaloadventures.ca; 780-842-9247)

#### WHEN THUNDER TAKES FLIGHT

The Maple Flag annual air combat exercise in May and June at Cold Lake attracts top gun pilots from around the world. It provides intense training for Royal Canadian Air Force pilots. You can watch, and for that up-close-and-personal touch, even talk to pilots during the open house. This massive undertaking typically involves up to 5,000 pilots and support crew. (md.bonnyville.ab.ca/visitors)

#### GET INTERACTIVE AT BOW HABITAT STATION

Explore the natural environment at Bow Habitat Station in Calgary, one of North America's largest indoor hatcheries. Trace the touch screen and watch water levels rise as the interactive display reveals an underwater world at your fingertips. Thousands of trout are raised as a fish management tool and stocked in public lakes across Alberta. The best time to visit is during winter, when they have the most fish. Enjoy five interactive displays and 12 aquariums. (visitcalgary.com; 403-297-6561)



A lantern swung by a guide cloaked in a black cape leads you on ghost tours of downtown Calgary...



#### FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GHOST HUNTERS

A lantern swung by a guide cloaked in a black cape leads you on ghost tours of downtown Calgary as well as Inglewood, Kensington and 17th Ave. The tours go in all kinds of weather but, hey, sometimes rain makes it that much spookier. (calgaryghosttours.com; 403-472-1989)

#### DEMONSTRATE GOOD TASTE WITH CHOCOLATE

Savor chocolate tasting, try chocolate making and meet other chocolate lovers with classes at Kerstin's Chocolates in Edmonton. Discover how they make chocolates by hand – no machines in this shop! Taste six varieties of chocolate from around the world. In three hours you will learn how to temper chocolate, make truffles and confections, and then, yum, you get to take your goodies home. (kirstenschocolates.com; 780-990-0011)

#### BEAN THERE, HAVEN'T DONE THAT

Meet award-winning baristas at Transcend Coffee in Edmonton, who deal directly with coffee growers. Check out other great 'Festival City' coffee stops including Credo Coffee, Da Capo Lifestyle Caffé and Three Bananas Café. (transcendcoffee.com; credocoffee.ca; dacapocaffe.com; threebananas.ca)

#### SEE STARS WHERE THE DARK SKY RULES

Lay back, open your eyes and remember to breathe. The stars are alive. Jasper National Park is home to the world's largest dark sky preserve. And it's the only one in Canada with a town smack in the middle of it. This exceptional darkness, perfect for stargazing, is accessible year-round. Try Pyramid Island, 15 minutes from town, as a starting point. Come for the annual festival in October. (jasperdarksky.org)

#### GO RETRO IN THE ROCKIES

Sip a warm drink and enjoy the mountain views at the newly re-opened historic and retro Tea House at the top of Mount Norquay. It was originally built in 1952 and all the materials had to be brought up by hand on the chairlift. Marilyn Monroe once had tea here. Take a scenic tour before you hit the slopes. (banffnorquay.com)



For more information on a unique experience in Alberta, visit [remembertobreathe.com](http://remembertobreathe.com).



# REMINDER: SMALL TOWNS CAN HOLD BIG SURPRISES (remember to breathe)



A road trip to visit the quaint towns and villages along the Boomtown Trail offers authentic, unique and memorable holiday shopping.

We know how it is – there are always a couple of stumbers on your holiday gift list. But this year, we're here to help you find the perfect gift for those hard-to-buy-for toughies. Inside the shops, galleries and markets along Alberta's historic Boomtown Trail, you will definitely find that one-of-a-kind something for that one-of-a-kind someone.



While strolling the trail's towns and their charming main streets lined with turn-of-the-20th-century boomtown buildings, you'll meet many talented artists and crafters who create handmade treasures for local shops and galleries. You'll also find them selling homemade goodies, art and crafts at the Christmas markets that sprinkle the trail.

The Boomtown Trail encompasses the region running along highways 21, 56 and 9 from Bassano in the south to New Sarepta in the north. The towns along the trail are the perfect distance from Calgary or Edmonton for a merry day trip. The Boomtown Trail team has made trip planning easier with two downloadable apps. One is an electronic version of their detailed travel guide, while the other is a trip planner that provides history and highlights as you drive and allows you to upload your photos and videos to Facebook as you go. Visit boomtowntrail.com to learn more, or call them at 780.672.2710.

“the towns along the trail are the perfect distance from Calgary or Edmonton for a merry day trip.”

#### TAKE A SHOPPING DAY TRIP

To help make easy work of your list, here's our list of where to find great gift ideas and fun along the Boomtown Trail.

##### Apple jelly from Acme for Aunt Jenny

Nov. 19, Christmas Market at the Acme Community Centre, 10 am – 2 pm. Come hungry – the Acme Royal Purple will be serving up a hot chili lunch. (Colleen 403.546.3783)

##### Art cards from Alix

Nov. 26, Christmas Farmers Market & Firemen's Christmas Toy Run at the Alix Community Hall, 10 am – 2 pm. Bring or buy a toy for the toy run. (villageofalix.ca; Curt 403.357.9933)

Dec. 2 & 3, Christmas on the Farm at Morris Meadows, 6 pm. Have a hearty old fashioned dinner, enjoy a concert and win prizes at this tranquil country retreat. (morrismeadows.ca; Sid 403.396.0153)

##### Booties from Bashaw for baby

Dec. 4, Christmas in the Country Market at the Bashaw Community Centre, 10 am – 4 pm. You'll discover a wide array of handmade crafts, delicious baking and unique treasures, plus sleigh rides for the kiddies (and the kids at heart). (townofbashaw.com; Bev 780.877.2489)

##### Barnwood birdhouse from Bassano

Nov. 26, Willing Workers Craft Sale at the Bassano Community Hall, 10 am – 3 pm. You are sure to find some perfect ornaments for the tree – oh yes, and perfect gifts for other people too. (bassano.ca; 403.641.3788)

##### Big Valley's fresh-baked buns

Be sure to stop by Hulley's Hideaway on Big Valley's frontier town era Jimmy Jock Boardwalk. Peruse the Hulley's prairie-inspired art work, while you indulge in Vivian's famous cinnamon sticky buns made from scratch. (hulleyshideaway.com; 403.876.2726) Try, if you can, to save room for the Fudge Factory down the boardwalk. (403.876.2233)

##### Classic cinema in Camrose

The Bailey is buzzing! Since its reopening in April, Camrose's Bailey Theatre has been consistently packed. The recent \$7.5 million renovations have restored the rich interior of this Vaudeville era theatre and brought the 1930s art deco façade back to its shining black and white glory. Take a tour of the building during the week or take in a classic film on Monday evenings for only \$5. (baileytheatre.com; 780.672.5510)

Nov. 25 – 27, Camrose Festival of Trees at the Camrose Regional Exhibition (Fri. 12 – 9 pm, Sat. 10 am – 6 pm, Sun. 12 – 5 pm). The festival will feature a children's area, a petting zoo, Santa, and of course, glittering, wonderfully decorated trees and competition gingerbread houses. (cre.ab.ca; 780.672.3640)

Camrose's Main Street Project has overseen the restoration of more than a dozen buildings, including the first and oldest building in town. So you can admire historical buildings (some dating back 100 years) while you shop the unique stores downtown. You'll find antique dealers, specialty bookstores, fun clothing and jewelry stores, and galleries. Phew – after you've been through all those stores, take a breather at a charming tea room or café. (tourismcamrose.com; 780.672.5191)



##### Fudge from Carbon for Cheryl

Dec. 10, Christmas Fair at the Carbon Community Hall, 10 am – 3 pm. Over 30 tables of pet clothes, candles, knitting, baking and the Tricked-out Cowgirls, who will glam up your tack with flashy gemstones. After Santa arrives at 12, kids can get a picture with the big man himself. (villageofcarbon.com; 403.572.3244)

##### Desserts and designs in Delburne

Dec. 10, Delburne Snowflake Saturday Festival. A little snow never stopped fun-makers on the prairies – join them in Delburne for hockey, hayrides, crafts and baking, hot chocolate and carolling. (delburne.ca; 403.749.3606)

Rinehart's Soda Shop in Delburne will conjure up nostalgic visions of poodle skirted teenage girls sharing coke floats with boys in varsity jackets and slicked back hair. The shop has a charming retro feeling with an old fashioned menu including old time sodas, ice cream and 100% Alberta beef burgers. (403.749.3333)

Whether you are a dedicated quilter or an admirer of the craft, you will discover a unique treasure at Country Quilting & More in Delburne. Heaps of fabric, distinctive gifts and loads of inspiration can be found here – they also run quilting classes and retreats. Find them on Facebook for the latest news, specials and events. (countryquiltingandmore.webs.com; 403.749.3330)

##### Doilies from Donalda for Grandma

Dec. 11, a Village Christmas in Donalda features a Christmas market, an old fashioned wiener roast, sleigh rides, Santa's Shop (where children can purchase \$1 gifts and have them wrapped by Santa's elves) and the Parade of Lights in the evening. (village.donalda.ab.ca; Bruce 403.883.2943)

##### Embroidery from Elnora

Dec. 3, Christmas Market at the Elnora Community Hall, 11 am – 4 pm. This market presents more than 50 vendors offering everything you can imagine – including baking, Christmas crafts and woodworking. A homemade lunch of chili, soup and pie will be available all day, and enter the draw to win a cozy quilt. (villageofelnora.com; 403.773.3922)

##### Food and fiddling in Ferintosh

Dec. 8, Christmas with "Country Blend" at the Ferintosh Recreation Centre, 6.30 pm. Featuring a traditional Country Christmas performance by Country Blend. (ferintosh.info; Colleen 780.877.2513)

##### Inspired artwork from Irricana

Dec. 3, Family Christmas Craft Day at the Irricana Lions Community Hall, 10 am – 12 pm. (irricana.com; 403.935.4672) Choose from 12 different craft stations and then congratulate yourself on a job well done with cookies and hot chocolate.

This little art-loving community (just 35 minutes from Calgary) has lots of public art, music, theatre and the Grasshopper Gallery, a thriving art co-operative. Here local artists of all kinds gather, create and sell their work – so you'll find sculpture, pottery, drawings, paintings and textiles to take home. (grasshoppergallery.ca; 403.935.4234)

##### Luscious cuisine in Linden

Make a special trip for the Mennonite fare at Country Cousins Restaurant in Linden. Generous portions of home-cooked farmers sausage, cabbage rolls and cottage cheese perogies with cream sauce are definitely worth the drive. And don't forget a slice of their scrumptious peanut butter pie – even if you have to take it with you for later. (403.546.4444)

##### A romantic rendezvous in Rosebud

Nov. 4 – Dec. 23, The Gifts of the Magi – A Christmas Musical at the Rosebud Theatre. A classic heart-warming story about love, generosity and sacrifice set in New York to a jazzy beat. Enjoy a delicious country buffet and live music in Main Street's historic Mercantile building (built in 1911) before heading over to the Opera House for the show. Bring the whole family or book a stay for you and your honey at a cozy B&B just a stroll away (check the theatre website for stay and play packages). (rosebudtheatre.com; 1.800.267.7553)

##### A real Boomtown saloon in Rowley

Sam's Saloon in the little ghost town of Rowley is packed on the last Saturday of every month when the surrounding community gathers for their monthly pizza night. For the best seats, arrive around 5 pm – or come earlier to have a look around at the dozen or so boomtown buildings preserved by the town's community association, including a church, trading post and railway station. The old bank building, constructed for a movie set in the 80s, now sells local handicrafts. (403.368.3816)

##### Silver from Stettler

Nov. 26, Dec. 3 & 10, Christmas Special to Big Valley on the Alberta Prairie Railway Excursions, 6 pm departure from Stettler. Trip includes a traditional ham and turkey buffet dinner, dancing to a live band, carolling, hayrides and a train ride through the sparkling prairie night. (absteamtrain.ca; 1.800.282.3994)

Stop by the Coffee Tree on Stettler's Main Street for a breather, a snack and to pick up some Boomtown Trail coffee. Depending on how early you get up in the morning, you can choose from Farmer, Coalminer or Hair-Bender Cowboy blends. (403.742.0999)

##### Twinkling ornaments from Three Hills

Nov. 25 & 26, Three Hills Christmas Farmers Market at the Community Centre. (threehills.ca; 403.443.5822)

##### Twilight among the trees in Trochu

Dec. 1, Christmas Market at the Trochu Community Hall. Be there for a special appearance by Santa Claus his very self! (Arlene 403.442.4225)

Enjoy a cozy dinner at the Sweetgrass Café in the Trochu Arboretum & Gardens and admire the arboretum dressed up all sparkly and twinkly during the Festival of Lights (Dec 16 – Jan 2). In the winter, the café is open Wednesday, Thursday and Friday for lunch and dinner is by reservation only. (town.trochu.ab.ca; 403.442.2111)

##### More shopping to do?

Discover even more events at boomtowntrail.com or by calling 780.672.2710.

Happy shopping and happy holidays from the Travel Alberta team.



VALENTINE'S DAY

# REMINDER: GREAT LOVE STORIES NEED GREAT SETTINGS (remember to breathe)

Writer Jodie McKague offers alluring advice on how to win your loved one's heart this Valentine's Day.

It comes as no surprise that Valentine's Day, a holiday honouring the love and affection shared between intimate companions, was first celebrated thousands of years ago in Italy, a place that inspires lovers all over the world to sing "Amore."

Fortunately for today's lovebirds, when February 14 rolls around, there's no need to make a trans-Atlantic voyage in search of romance. February in Alberta is the perfect time to explore the winter magic of the great outdoors. And it's an even better excuse to cuddle up indoors and enjoy Cupid's charm, while taking advantage of Valentine's specials offered at a wide selection of attractions, boutique hotels and fine-dining establishments around the province.



#### CUDDLING IN CALGARY

If you have a hankering to hit the town with your sweetheart, book a room at Calgary's **Hotel Arts** ([hotelarts.ca](http://hotelarts.ca)). The posh, 175-room boutique hotel is located in the heart of downtown, close to shopping, spas, restaurants and the city's arts and entertainment district. Take advantage of the special **Romance Package** which includes valet service and a bottle of Italian Prosecco sparkling wine to start. Then stop by **Raw Bar** to sample the infamous Thai Lobster Bisque or choose from the diverse cocktail menu before swinging on over to the **Beatniq Jazz and Social Club** ([beatniq.com](http://beatniq.com)) where you'll find live music every Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

The Calgary Zoo is hosting **In the Heat of the Night** ([calgaryzoo.com](http://calgaryzoo.com)), February 13 & 14 from 6 to 10 p.m. This adult-only event includes a romantic dinner buffet in the ENMAX Conservatory followed by a naughty talk about mating rituals in the animal kingdom. Tickets start at \$80 per person. Surprise your love bug with an animal themed stuffie for an additional \$15. To reserve your table, call (403) 232-9300.

For a luxurious quiet night in, book a room at the **Kensington Riverside Inn** overlooking the Bow River. Down duvets, soaker tubs and turndown service are included in every luxury suite. Foodies won't want to miss the special Valentine's menu in the hotel's award-winning **Chef's Table Restaurant**, managed by Chef de Cuisine Craig Boje.

February 14 will be a busy night for Chef Jan Hansen at the Selkirk Grille who will prepare a special *table d'hôte* for guests attending the **Vintage Valentine's Dinner**. The restaurant is on the grounds of the **Heritage Park Historical Village** ([heritagepark.ca](http://heritagepark.ca)) and was recognized in 2009 as one of the top three regional restaurants in Calgary by *Where Magazine*.

Step out for a Valentine's lunch date at **Manuel Latruwe Belgian Patisserie & Bread Shop** ([manuellatruwe.com](http://manuellatruwe.com)). Get there early for traditional Belgian waffles or sample the hand crafted brioche and *pain au chocolat*. Even the Parisians would approve!

If you prefer to get it on in the kitchen, sign up for a Valentine's Day Couples Class at the **Cookbook Co. Cooks** store and school. This hands-on group lesson is taught by Chef Chris Halpin of Manna Catering Services in a fun and informal environment. Tickets are \$90. Call (403) 265-6066.

#### ROMANCE IN THE ROCKIES

If alpine settings get you in the mood, why not book a horse drawn sleigh ride with **Brewster's Adventures** in uber-romantic Lake Louise? Snuggle up close in a private two-seat cutter while you breathe in the crisp mountain air and enjoy the unforgettable views of Chateau Lake Louise as you glide along the lake. Advance reservations are required, call (403) 762-5454.

For further relaxation, head to Banff where the staff at **Red Earth Spa** ([bestofbanff.com](http://bestofbanff.com)) will help you and your loved one melt away stress when you book their exclusive **Deep Earth Romance Package**. Enjoy a 30-minute private plunge in a bath filled with blends of essential oils, seaweed and sea salt, followed by a 60-minute massage, manicure and pedicure with your sweetie by your side. The package is \$495 and includes lunch.

If extreme indulgence is what you have in mind, Jasper is the place to be. Experience world-class hospitality when you book the **Veuve Clicquot in the Snow Weekend Package** available February 10 to 12 at the **Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge** ([fairmont.com/jasper](http://fairmont.com/jasper)). The two-night event starts with a Veuve Clicquot welcome reception featuring tastings of the finest bubbly. This is followed by a special gala dinner that will leave you feeling like a movie star by the time you hit the hay in your specially prepared Fairmont room. Rates start from \$698, which includes accommodation and activities, valet parking and gratuities.

“ Enjoy a 30-minute private plunge in a bath filled with blends of essential oils, seaweed and sea salt... ”

#### AMORE AROUND ALBERTA

Next it's over to Stettler for a five-hour rail adventure operated by **Alberta Prairie Railway Excursions**. You and your sweetie will roll in style under the cover of moonlight across the Canadian prairies while enjoying a five-course meal served aboard the company's old-fashioned diesel locomotive-powered train. Stettler is about two and a half hours from Calgary and two hours from Edmonton. The train departs Saturday, February 11 at 4:30 p.m. For reservations, call 1-800-282-3994.

Take date night to a whole new level when you book one of three romantic packages available at **Heritage Ranch** ([heritageranch.ca](http://heritageranch.ca)) in Red Deer. Choose a one-hour horse drawn carriage ride followed by a steak or salmon dinner and bottle of wine. The **Ultimate Date Package** also includes reservations in a Jacuzzi suite with shuttle service to and from your hotel. Call (403) 347-4977 to book your date package.

Folks in the Westlock area will have an excuse to get all dolled up and bring out the snazzy attire for a night of live jazz performed by the **Jesse Peters Trio**. The event takes place at the Cultural Arts Theatre in R.F. Staples High School on February 14. Doors open at 7 p.m. Pre-concert festivities include a silent auction and wine & cheese reception. (780) 307-3703.

Lovers of all ages are sure to enjoy the Valentine's Fundraiser organized by the **Kalyna Country Performing Arts Association** in St. Michael, located 42 km northeast of Fort Saskatchewan. Traditional Ukrainian fare such as homemade perogies and kubassa will be served, followed by a chocolate dessert extravaganza and dance performances by local Kalyna kids. The event takes place Saturday, February 11 at 5:30 p.m. To purchase tickets in advance, call (780) 895-7471.

Also on February 11 is the **Pioneer Valentine's Tea**, hosted by the **Stony Plain Multicultural Centre**, located about 45 minutes west of Edmonton. The annual event was started 17 years ago to honour local couples that have been together for 50 or more years. Make it a date with your special someone; and don't forget to bring a notebook – they may be dishing out some valuable advice! Call (780) 963-2777 to reserve your spot.

#### ESPECIALLY ROMANTIC IN EDMONTON

Let the soothing sounds of the **Edmonton Symphony Orchestra** ([edmontonsymphony.com](http://edmontonsymphony.com)) serenade you and your Valentine during an evening performance of *Let's Fall in Love*; a collection of romantic standards sung by John Pagano. Sit back and enjoy the exquisite acoustics of Edmonton's **Winspear Centre** while Pagano croons out favourites such as *Let's Fall in Love*, *Time After Time*, *Night and Day*, *Call Me Irresponsible*, and *Wives & Lovers 24-84*. The performance starts at 8 p.m. on February 11.

Just down the street you'll find actor Rebecca Northan performing her hilarious one-woman show *Blind Date* at the **Citadel Theatre**, January 28 – February 19. The critically acclaimed show explores the strange and bizarre rituals of dating and the emotions that arise in the pursuit of love. **Dine & Play** packages are available for \$89.50 per person, and include a ticket to the play and dinner from a set menu at one of the Citadel's nine partner restaurants. For reservations, call (780) 425-1820.

Romance is never far away when you spend a night at the **Union Bank Inn** ([unionbankinn.com](http://unionbankinn.com)). The thoughtfully appointed boutique hotel is tucked away in a heritage building in the heart of downtown Edmonton, not far from the river valley. Book a table for two at **Madison's Grill** on the main floor, or walk to nearby **Tzin Wine & Tapas** ([tzin.ca](http://tzin.ca)) or **Lit Italian Wine Bar** ([litwinebar.com](http://litwinebar.com)) where you and your Valentine can share a bottle (or two) of your favourite vino before calling it a night. Now that's *amore!*



#### TRAVEL ALBERTA'S FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS' TOP TEN ROMANTIC THINGS TO DO IN ALBERTA

1. **OVERLANDER MOUNTAIN LODGE** IN HINTON – ROMANTIC GETAWAY ([OVERLANDERMOUNTAINLODGE.COM](http://OVERLANDERMOUNTAINLODGE.COM))
2. **A SLEIGH RIDE**, WHEREVER ONE CAN BE FOUND
3. **ICEFIELD HELICOPTERS** – PRIVATE HELICOPTER TOUR AND ROMANCE PACKAGE ([ICEFIELDHELI.COM](http://ICEFIELDHELI.COM))
4. **ICE WALK AT JOHNSTON CANYON** ([BANFFADVENTURES.COM](http://BANFFADVENTURES.COM))
5. **ROCKING R GUEST RANCH** – ROMANTIC GETAWAY PACKAGE ([ROCKINGRGUESTRANCH.COM](http://ROCKINGRGUESTRANCH.COM))
6. **MUTTART CONSERVATORY** – TAKE A ROMANTIC STROLL AND GRAB A BITE TO EAT ([EDMONTON.CA](http://EDMONTON.CA))
7. **THE MELTING POT** – FONDUE FOR TWO IN EDMONTON ([MELTINGPOT.COM](http://MELTINGPOT.COM))
8. **BOSTON PIZZA** – HEART SHAPED PIZZA AT BOSTON PIZZA ([BOSTONPIZZA.COM](http://BOSTONPIZZA.COM))
9. **NORTHERN LIGHTS VIEWING**
10. **ICE SKATING UNDER THE STARS**

For more romantic Alberta activities, visit [remembertobreathe.com](http://remembertobreathe.com).

[remembertobreathe.com](http://remembertobreathe.com)

Travel  
Alberta  
Canada



## REMINDER: THERE'S NO PLACE YOU'D RATHER BE (remember to breathe)



With thousands of kilometres of trails and amazing terrain in Alberta, writer Mike Fisher discovers a new way to hit the winter trails.

Here's how to get your heart thumping in north, central and southern Alberta with rides that promise breathless winter escapes. You'll get the lowdown on top scenic trails, great social events, and find like-minded people who love exploring the wilderness as they enjoy the good life.

If you want to try snowmobiling as a new adventure, what should you expect? You bounce over rolling hills of white snow with the blue sky above as bare winter trees to your left help guide you along the winding snowmobile trail. The grips thrum in your hands and just before you hit the straight flats, you ease up on the throttle.

A doe raises her head with a fawn at her flank, just over there, by the spruce trees to the right. You raise your hand to alert friends and family following behind you on their snowmobiles. The doe watches. You all stop.

*Remember to breathe.*

Discovering the prairies, foothills, mountains and river valleys together in the crisp winter air makes for memorable moments that stay with you forever.

### GET SNOWMOBILE ESSENTIALS

The best way to learn about and enjoy snowmobiling in the province is to connect with one of the 34 sledding clubs, according to Chris Brookes, Executive Director of the Alberta Snowmobile Association. You can find the clubs at the ASA website, under the ASA Clubs and Trails category ([altasnowmobile.ab.ca](http://altasnowmobile.ab.ca)).

"Whatever your skill level or experience snowmobiling, Alberta's snowmobile clubs are your best bet, because it's a very inclusive culture," says Brookes. "The people in these clubs really want others to enjoy this recreational activity like they do."

A sampling of clubs and events includes the Pembina Drift Busters in central (hosting the ASA Annual Jamboree on Feb. 3-4 at the Westlock and District Community Hall; [peminadriftbusters.ca](http://peminadriftbusters.ca)); the Crow Snow Riders in the south (holding a Westcastle club ride on Jan. 7; [crowsnow.org](http://crowsnow.org)); and the Fort McMurray Sno-Drifters in the north (hosting its annual Safe Ride on Jan. 8; [sno-drifters.com](http://sno-drifters.com)).

Another invaluable resource is the Canadian Avalanche Centre ([avalanche.ca](http://avalanche.ca)). They offer a section dedicated to snowmobiling on their website with current conditions and links to training courses that can help prepare you for the backcountry.

If you have a need for speed, among the top events for those seeking something a bit different is the Winter Festival of Speed at Lac la Biche (March 3-4, 2012) in the north. The festival features motorsports on an icy race circuit, snowmobile drag races and a carnival for kids, among other attractions.

### WHERE TO GET IN GEAR

You'll find links to snowmobile rentals, dealers, trail information and snow reports at the ASA website. The cost for an ASA trail pass is just \$70 after January 1, which goes towards helping the clubs maintain some 5,500 km of managed trails in the province. Some of the clubs, such as the McMurray Sno-Drifters ([sno-drifters.com](http://sno-drifters.com)), have websites where you can purchase the passes online.

The clubs also organize weekend events throughout the snowmobile season, which typically runs from January through March.



Routes can change every winter, so to find the best trails and loops, check out the maps the clubs make available. Routes often include staging areas where you can start and then choose from loops taking you into the wilds for anywhere from an hour to a few days, depending on how adventurous you want to be.

### DISCOVER THE SNOWMOBILING CULTURE

There's a strong vein of volunteerism in the clubs and it's characteristic of the welcoming culture of snowmobiling in Alberta, says Brookes. "We have a huge variety of riding conditions as well as the best snow in Canada," he says. "But we also have great people that know the best areas around their communities and want to share their knowledge."

You might chow down on a hot dog during an outdoor picnic while meeting other snowmobilers during a stop at one of the many warming shelters and huts along the trails, or participate in weekend rallies that draw hundreds of people to small and vibrant Alberta communities that you can explore.

### EXPLORE TOP TRAILS BY REGION

Edmonton and Calgary (there is a Calgary Snowmobile Club) are home to many snowmobilers who use trails in the province's north, central and south regions, says Brookes. "There is a huge variety of sleds in people's garages in the cities and they head out to the country every weekend." Here are some of the top routes for getaways that can last just a few hours or a weekend.

“ We have mountains, foothills, river valleys and wide open prairies. And we have the best snow in Canada... ”

#### Central Alberta

"Central Alberta is considered Alberta's snow belt," says Brookes. "You can find great rides and all variety of terrain, from simple pleasant trails to steeper hills and deeper powder."

The 300-km **Iron Horse Trail** ([ironhorsetrail.ca](http://ironhorsetrail.ca)) in central and northern Alberta is one of the most popular snowmobiling routes in Western Canada. It has a lot to offer beginner riders. Iron Horse traverses this historic region of the province and it is also a leg of the TransCanadian Snowmobile Trail.

The Alberta section starts northeast at Cold Lake near the Saskatchewan border. It comes across Smoky Lake to the southwest (Smoky Lake is the official gateway to Alberta's Iron Horse Trail), then up to Athabasca and over to Fox Creek, before leading just south of Grande Prairie, which is the Big Mountain Snowmobile Area.

"Iron Horse can be a simpler, straighter ride for new riders to try," says Brookes. "As you start getting into the David Thompson area west of Red Deer, there is steeper and more challenging terrain."

Snowmobile clubs including Caroline, Olds and David Thompson are very active in the region. Find maps for the Iron Horse Trail at [ironhorsetrail.ca/maps.html](http://ironhorsetrail.ca/maps.html).

The **Golden Triangle** is a 354-km riding area that has some of the deepest and thickest powder outside of the mountains. It covers both central and northern Alberta. You can start at the main centre of Whitecourt (the "Official Snowmobile Capital of Alberta," 177 km northwest of Edmonton) and head to Fox Creek, and then over to Swan Hills.

Within the triangle there are hundreds of kilometres of groomed, signed and managed trails. The trail gives you access to loops including the Athabasca River, the Carson loop by Carson Lake and the Eagle Loop close to the Eagle River. A pretty lookout over the Athabasca River is one of



many features. Along the way you can see moose, deer and lynx, as well as canyons and frozen lakes.

#### Northern Alberta

"Every loop and trail is different because the conditions are always changing, and you get a beautiful variety of it all in the north, including boreal forests and river valleys," says Brookes.

The **Anzac Trail**, about a 15-minute drive south of Fort McMurray to the staging area, works for all skill levels. You can wind through hills and valleys but also hit wide-open straights that offer stunning views. The route runs a bit less than 70 km, though the way the loops are constructed allows you to choose how much time you want to spend on it. You can find a map of it on the McMurray Sno-Drifters ([sno-drifters.com](http://sno-drifters.com)) website under 'Trail Maps' and all of the maps are GPS coordinated.

Begin from a staging building on Hwy 69 and follow signage leading east past the airport. This trail is family-friendly as there aren't any challenges such as big hills or water crossings. As a bonus, two fire pits along the trail make it easy to find shelter in quiet areas, cook hot dogs and if you wish, meet people along the route. There's wildlife, too. Be prepared to see deer, moose and caribou.

The **Big Mountain Snowmobile Area C Loop** about 20 minutes south of Grande Prairie has river valleys and meandering trails that typically boast excellent snow conditions. Big Mountain Snowmobile Area is located about six km east of Hwy 40 and features a group campground with a snowmobile staging area.

The C Loop is usually a two to three hour ride. It follows along the Smoky River to the east and doubles back along portions of Big Mountain Creek to the west. Find a map of the area at [swancitysnowmobileclub.org](http://swancitysnowmobileclub.org).

#### Southern Alberta

"The southern part of the province offers hundreds of kilometres of trail riding in foothills and mountains," says Brookes. "There is beautiful scenery and terrain, as well as great accommodation and rentals. You'll find fun and a great sense of community."

Sledders from Calgary can drive a few hours into the **Crowsnest Pass** region and make it back to the city for dinner within a day. The Pass includes some 1,200 km of trails with 200 km groomed and boasts an average winter snowfall of 7.6 metres. The drive from Calgary south to the town of Bellevue (225 km) takes about two and a half hours if you take Hwy 22 (the scenic Cowboy Trail) to Hwy 3. Find maps of routes at the Crow Snow Riders website ([crowsnow.org](http://crowsnow.org)).

Try the trail to the Lost Creek snowmobile shelter near York Creek, which takes about six hours if you do the full loop. York Creek staging area is number 48 on the Crow Snow Riders map. The main trail is good for beginner and intermediate riders but experts can branch off toward mountain terrain featuring rolling hills with twists and turns.

"Snowmobilers love Alberta because of our variety of terrain," says Brookes. "We have mountains, foothills, river valleys and wide open prairies. And we have the best snow in Canada. It comes over the Rockies and provides very heavy pack, which is great for creating groomed trails."

When your snowmobile bobs over a rolling trail to reveal a thrilling view of a river valley, you'll understand why this unique outdoor experience is popular with so many Albertans.

For more information on snowmobiling in Alberta this winter visit [remembertobreathe.com](http://remembertobreathe.com)

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