

Adventure, Culture, History – and Reconciliation

The rise of Indigenous tourism has been a long time coming. British Columbia is leading the way.

BY DIANE SELKIRK

What started as bear-watching trips in 2016 became the Indigenous-owned Klahoose Wilderness Resort in 2021.

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When Tyson Atleo (?ikaatius) was a teenager living in Ahousaht, B.C., he felt excluded as tourism in nearby Tofino began to take off. Not only did surfing culture feel foreign to the Ahousaht hereditary representative, but it was frustrating to watch his traditional territories generate wealth for foreign and out-of-town investors. “Our people have stewarded [this territory] for a very long time and not only were we marginalized from the exponential growth of Tofino’s tourism sector,” but as development increased, he says the Ahousaht people fell further behind.

While one solution was to enter the tourism market, a complication arose because, like many Indigenous governments, Ahousaht officials were stretched thin managing public services and the well-being of reserve members. “There was very little room to think about economic development and stewardship in a creative way,” says Atleo. So a group of hereditary chiefs, including Atleo, formed the Maaqutusiis Hahoulthee Stewardship Society, a non-profit society focused on sustainable economic development.

Its first step was investing in the Wildside Trail, an internationally renowned 11-kilometre hiking trail on Flores Island that starts and ends in Ahousaht communities. “This gave us insight into what visitors want,” says Atleo. Over the next few years, MHSS continued its slow build, then, when the Tofino-based tour company Ocean Outfitters shut down in October 2022, the society was ready for the next step. After buying the assets, including boats, mechanic shop, staff accommodations and the Main Street store, the business reopened in May 2023 as Ahous Adventures. While wildlife tours are still a major part of the business plan, Atleo says its vision goes beyond this: “We’re reimagining tourism as a way to steward our natural resources in a way that benefits our people and territory.”

For Paula Amos, chief marketing and development officer at Indigenous Tourism BC, the most exciting new development in Canada’s tourism landscape – one that’s been a long time coming – is the rise of Indigenous businesses like Ahous Adventures. She explains that even two decades ago, when she joined the Aboriginal

Tourism Association of BC, now ITBC, Indigenous tourism barely existed. Limited national and international experiences were rarely Indigenous-led and often exploited or Disney-fied the cultures. “So it’s taken awhile for Indigenous communities to see the benefits of tourism as an economic driver,” she says.

The shift began when visionary Indigenous leaders recognized that tourism can offer something traditional resource jobs can’t: a path to strengthening cultures and reconnecting people with their territories. Trailblazers, including the Nations running Tin Wis Resort in Tofino and St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino in Cranbrook, then set a collaborative tone by joining forces and helping form ITBC. “They believed Indigenous tourism could benefit local communities while giving the province a competitive edge as a tourism leader,” says Amos.

From there, the industry made slow gains. Amos worked to educate Nations, destinations and tourists about Indigenous tourism. But because most communities are located well outside the golden tourism triangle of Whistler, Vancouver and Victoria,

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– Tyson Atleo, Maaqutusiis Hahoulthee Stewardship Society (MHSS)

“very few would-be business owners had seen successful tourism operations in action,” says Amos.

For Alert Bay sisters Andrea and Donna Cranmer, along with their late sister Barb, this lack of exposure was both a positive and a negative. Forced to be trailblazers, Andrea says the sisters, who had no prior entrepreneurial experience, were able to create a unique business that reflected their cultural strengths. The result was Culture Shock, a gallery, coffee shop and cultural space that opened in 2004.



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"I saw the younger generation and they're just so bloody proud of their culture. I realized I wanted to be part of that."

— Mike Bellis, owner of Haida Gold Ocean

Mike Bellis wants to share his Haida heritage as well as the beauty of the Salish Sea. His boat charter company is based in Nanoose Bay.

Unconstrained by preconceived ideas of how the gallery should look, Andrea says they got creative. "Because Barb loved coffee, she wanted a coffee shop included in the space. So we had someone come to Alert Bay and show us how to make fancy coffees." She says they also wanted to educate people about their distinct culture, so decided to only feature Kwakwaka'wakw artists. As time went on, the sisters, who won a BC Achievement Indigenous Business Award in 2022, expanded Culture Shock to include cultural tours, youth training programs and even a pop-up shop.

While the Cranmer sisters did receive practical and cultural help from their extended Namgis family, Andrea says they didn't get business training. Resources including ITBC and the Nuu-chah-nulth Economic Development Corporation (NEDC) business development services provided some of the missing framework. And, Andrea says, hard work and ancestral

teachings did the rest. But for many individuals and communities, ongoing education and support is out of reach.

"It's such a young industry, there just aren't enough points of reference for someone trying to start an Indigenous tourism business," explains Deneen Allen, the founder and CEO of the Firecircle, an online tourism entrepreneur accelerator. During decades of tourism consulting in remote communities, Allen says she kept encountering individuals and Nations "that weren't succeeding because they lacked key pieces of knowledge."

Often the result of the way the federal government offers programming, Allen says courses and funding are often short term, so people start working on a business plan and then the resources and support disappear. Despite this lack of consistent support, Indigenous tourism and confidence began to surge. "It's as though Indigenous people feel like they are finally being

heard," she says. Wanting to support this new upwelling of potential entrepreneurs, Allen realized that an online program could be a solution. Partnering with the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada, Firecircle began offering a five-part program that takes participants from idea to business plan, complete with pricing, marketing and cash-flow projections.

For Mike Bellis, who became part of the new wave of Indigenous entrepreneurs in 2018 when he started Haida Gold Ocean Adventures, a boat charter company out of Nanoose Bay, a program like Firecircle would have helped. "I wouldn't have tried to run a year-round business," he says, describing how storms forced the cancellation of his entire second winter season. While he learned through trial and error, Bellis, whose family left Haida Gwaii when he was a boy, says before starting Haida Adventures he'd not really seen Indigenous-owned businesses besides his uncle's carving shed.

Bellis, who decided to focus on his passion for the sea after an injury ended his career as a golf pro, says while NEDC provided a "big blank book with lots of questions" for him to create a business plan, the process took months. By summer, he was out on the water with his guests, showing them the beauty of the Salish Sea and, to his surprise, sharing his Haida culture. "I saw the younger generation and they're just so bloody proud of their culture," he explains. "I realized I wanted to be part of that."

Canada's Fastest-Growing Tourism Sector

This surge of growing pride, a kind of reconciliation in action, is what Keith Henry, president and CEO for ITAC, says makes Indigenous tourism so valuable. As Canada's fastest growing tourism sector, it made a \$1.9-billion contribution to Canada's GDP in 2019, before being stalled by the pandemic. Henry says that beyond the numbers, Indigenous tourism is about people connecting with each other.

Unfortunately, though, numbers are important, and as someone who has spent decades advocating for struggling Indigenous businesses, Henry says it comes down to stable and sustainable funding.

To understand the problem, you need to understand how destination marketing organizations work. As tourist boards, they receive a hotel tax that is invested back into local tourism development. In Canada this comes to about \$350 million — and it's controlled by the people who use it. A fraction of this money might be passed on to Indigenous tourism — but Henry says it's not reliable or consistent.

This leaves ITAC dependent on others for funding, something Henry says has held up a number of projects, including small

business grants. "Some \$20 million was announced for Indigenous tourism in [the federal] budget of 2022. It took us two years to negotiate the first half of that money and the second half is still sitting in limbo in the federal system."

Needing to innovate, Henry says ITAC recently established the Indigenous Tourism Destination Fund as a way for Canadian businesses to support Indigenous tourism and make progress towards the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action #92 — building respectful relationships and ensuring that Indigenous communities gain long-term economic benefits from activities taking place on their lands or using their resources.

The goal — to stabilize the funding and support business and destination development in every province and territory — can be met by participating businesses that are encouraged to offer customers the opportunity to make a voluntary contribution (as little as 25 cents per transaction). "Indigenous people know what we need to succeed," says Henry. "We're worth the investment."

Over 20 businesses signed up in the fund's first month, including WestJet, Airbnb, Rocky Mountaineer and Expedia. Henry says the big surprise came when small Indigenous businesses, including Klahoose

Wilderness Resort, also joined the effort.

Chris Tait, tourism manager for the eco and culture resort, explains that while tourism is relatively new to the Klahoose First Nation — they started bear-watching tours in 2016 and opened the resort in 2021 — it's already having a positive impact. "It's not just that it's a good job that pays well. People are reclaiming their culture," he explains, "I'll see them doing a song, so proud of who they are. Guests feel it. I see them with tears in their eyes and I know those visitors are going to go tell their friends and their family about the Klahoose First Nation."

This is part of the reason the Klahoose wanted to participate in the ITDF. "We're small, our contribution is small, we only have seven rooms — but the fund gives us a way to shine a light on Indigenous tourism across the country," Tait says. "Maybe guests will want to learn more after the experience they have with us, and thanks to the fund they'll find Indigenous businesses in Newfoundland and Quebec or the Northwest Territories and Alberta."

For Henry, this is the goal: When people visit their first Indigenous tourism destination they'll discover not only world-class adventure, culture and history, but also a business that connects people and uplifts communities. *

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— Chris Tait, tourism manager, Klahoose Wilderness Resort

Klahoose Wilderness Resort tourism manager Chris Tait wants guests to experience both outdoor adventure and Indigenous history and culture.



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