

QUÉBEC CITY SHINES @ SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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“Geotourism sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and well-being of its residents.” Jonathan Tourtellot, National Geographic Traveler Magazine Geotourism Editor and Director of the Center for Sustainable Destinations.

Catch phrases have specific linguistic lineage. In the case of responsible tourism, the line begins with ecotourism, evolves through geotourism, and arrives at sustainable tourism. Expectations were very high at the 2009 International Symposium on Sustainable Development in Tourism, and rightly so. It is a complex field, with timely questions about definitions, goals, and strategies, yet to be answered. This Quebec City event held great promise of discourse on all these critical topics.

Our collective environmental crimes of the past are no longer a fringe issue associated with someone in some obscure place. The excesses of our consumer lifestyles ignited in the 1950s, is placing itself however inconveniently in everyone's lap. No matter where you reside, and regardless of demographics, our global needs demand solutions.

Buckminster Fuller once said, “Pollution is nothing but the resources we are not harvesting. We allow them to disperse because we've been ignorant of their value.” Inviting over 600 people in the global tourism industry, and harnessing their collective potential would therefore be the challenge of the Quebec City symposium this past March.



The selection committee was based in Montreal at the University of Québec, where Michel Archambault chairs the Tourism Department. They organized the program of events, speakers and workshops, and scoured the world for the best minds in this critical industry. Quebec's Minister of Tourism, Nicole Ménard, opened the proceedings, and Premier Jean Charest handled the closing duties.

The conference attendees were asked to share front line techniques of survival in a rapidly changing industry, and by





soliciting input from academia, corporations and government, the resulting interaction produced a glorious opportunity to explore this dynamic subject. The hopes ignited within the assemblage aimed to plant some of the seeds for profound changes required in our world. For three full days, the focus was on the value of our resources worldwide.

This was not the week for beauty sleep. There was a mountain of compelling items on a very packed agenda, and no one seemed to shy away from the task. Quite the opposite, attendees appeared to soak up the proceedings like the hungry at a banquet. Mornings began before eight and by nine groups had broken off into areas of specialized workshops. One of my favorite ateliers was with Racelle Kooy (see video), an aboriginal tourism guru from British Columbia. Welcoming us with drumming, singing and fresh ideas, she stands as the essence of the entire colloquium.

The comprehensive grid of topics covered in three short days was difficult to fathom for most of us. Issues examined were as divergent as international hotel

ecology standards, carbon trading and credit barter, tourism future shock, geotourism map creation, destination preservation, and transportation modes of travel.

As the conference unfolded, many attendees shared passions of exactly how travelers, locales and tourism operators might help our troubled planet. It is believed that one out of twelve jobs worldwide is now based in tourism. With airport arrival levels currently at 600,000,000 and believed to be headed in excess of 1.6 billion by 2020, this issue must advance to the head of the line for countries like Canada. Why Canada?

To paraphrase from the conference report written by Julianna Priskin, Ph.D., and employing the “Three Pillars of Sustainable Tourism,” i.e. Economic, Social, and Environmental; Canada shines in comparison with all other countries in these critical areas. Dollar-for-dollar, tourists are able to enjoy their visits to Canada across a dynamic choice of economic plateaus.

On the social pillar, most foreigners touring Canada find the residents friendly and helpful, and would return. More importantly, they would recommend traveling to Canada to their coterie of friends and family back home. The environmental pillar shows the largest difference compared to others in the global marketplace, as Canada’s dreamy mix of wilderness, waterways and wildlife, together with safety and political stability, overwhelm the entire field. But is this a static state of being for Canada’s tourism in the future?

The feeling from the experts sharing their years of research at the Quebec City conference is emphatically “No”. The reason is simple; Canada is not prepared for the huge increase in the tourists who will be flocking to our nation sooner than later. The key to this educated forecast is in our preparedness. If changes to our infrastructure are not implemented rapidly, our system will buckle, and it will not be a pretty picture. This is an opportunity to weave the sustainable fundamentals into a new tourism fabric across Canada.

I met with Quebec City Tourism General Manager, Pierre Labrie (see video), and asked him why his city invested such an enormous effort into creating this symposium. He responded by saying, “We decided to organize this conference because we wanted to bring together the experts in the field from around the world, to discuss sustainable tourism, and find out for ourselves what place Quebec City has in this process.”

National Geographic Society was front and center at the convention with two senior members



of their esteemed organization. Jonathan Tourtellot, Geotourism Editor of Traveler Magazine and Director of the Center for Sustainable Destinations, plus Costas Christ, Global Travel Editor for National Geographic Adventure Magazine and Chairman of the World Travel and Tourism Council's Tourism for Tomorrow Awards (see videos). Both their speeches underlined the critical issues of our world firsthand. The symposium protocol provided a Q & A after each speech, giving the attendees an opportunity to follow up with personal questions directed at these distinguished tourism leaders.



My feeling in the aftermath of this important symposium in Quebec City can be summed up quite simply. No matter what the moniker, whether it is ecotourism, geotourism or sustainable tourism, the point is each and every one of us is important to the whole. For the first time since the consumer age commenced, the manufacturer, advertiser AND consumer are equal in the effort to survive ourselves. We no longer have the luxury of unconscious choices, whatever attitudes, nor halfhearted energies directed at trying to understand the problems unanimously presented by our scientists as URGENT.

The International Symposium on Sustainable Development in Tourism was much more than I expected, and perfectly timed for all present. Hats off to Annie Delisle and her amazing organizing team at the Ministry of Tourism Québec. Their professional work over the previous eighteen months made this symposium a highly successful event on a multitude of levels. Hopefully, our readers will become curious enough to seek out their place in the work ahead, and will match the standards set by Quebec City. ▀



The Garden of the Glaciers

The award for courage in the frontlines of new sustainable tourism projects should go to The Garden of the Glaciers in Baie-Comeau, northeast of Quebec City along the Saint-Lawrence River. At a time when established destinations are challenged, a venture centered on glaciers and rock formations in an outlying region of eastern Quebec would seem to be the stuff of Harry Potter.

Employing classic sustainable tourism guidelines, The Garden of the Glaciers officially opens on June 13, for what can be said has taken 20,000 years to produce. Building a three-pronged destination environment, this daring project offers visitors a Glacier Explorations Center, Marine Adventure Park, as well as a Cyber Center. They refer to their site as being integrated for interpretation, exploration and research.

Meeting the two principles behind this project certainly fills a person with energy and optimism, so often missing from many tourism businesses. Christian Bouchard and Karine Savard radiate a level of optimism about their unique creation, which is impossible to suppress. They have created a singular attraction unlike any other in the world.

While it may seem a far cry from lying on the beach in Cuba, The Garden of the Glaciers seeks to

involve, entertain and fascinate visitors in a proactive environment for the whole family. No one will argue the need for a week on a beach, but Bouchard and Savard are creating an entirely new brand of destination in consort with natural assets akin to Cuba's beaches. After all, how many of us have had the opportunity to get up close and personal with thousands of years of crushed seashells, or take a zipline ride across a fjord, or paddle a kayak.

These are just a few of the unique activities woven together in Baie-Comeau by these voyageurs of the modern mix, attempting to do what no one has accomplished in tourism in their region. The Garden of the Glaciers aims to embrace the entire community in a world of detail about the place in which they live. Baie-Comeau will never be the same after June 13th.

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