



Spotlight on B.C. & Alberta

Comparing B.C. and Alberta Tourism Indicators Produces Surprising Results

The idea for this Spotlight arose following a surprising conversation with friends who live in Victoria and had just returned from a road trip to Alberta. *“So, how was your trip?”* *“It was great – we were so impressed with how easy it was to get tourist information. The people in the Visitor Centres were so helpful...we really felt welcome. And there’s so much to do in Alberta...they have some great museums and heritage sites...”* *“What about B.C.? Did you enjoy the touring you did on your way home from Alberta?”* *“Well, we had planned to visit some sites in southern B.C. but quite a few were closed even though the guidebooks indicated they would be open. Even some of the Visitor Centres were closed. To be honest, there was more to do in Alberta and we found it much easier to get tourism information than in B.C...”*

A few weeks later these friends mentioned that they had written to the B.C. Provincial Government to express their concerns about the closed heritage sites and visitor centres and had subsequently received a form response letter expressing pleasure that they had enjoyed their trip in B.C. and thanking them for vacationing in the province – no mention was made of the specific issues they had raised.

Like many British Columbians, the notion that Alberta surpasses B.C. on any level to do with tourism is a foreign one. How could anyone think there is more for tourists to do in Alberta than in B.C.? What about our beautiful scenery, our parks, the ocean? As a sample size of two is inadequate to allow for an answer to this question, the decision to research how B.C. and Alberta compare relative to various tourism product, market and resource indicators, was made.

The results of this comparison were also eye-opening. Of the 20 indicators reviewed (see list in the table below), B.C. fares better than Alberta on 7½ (the ½ referring to the Visitor Info Centre indicator) as we have more national parks, provincial parks, community Information Centres, museums and provincial-level tourism staff. Additionally, B.C. reported higher 2010 accommodation occupancy and Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) rates than Alberta, and hosted more U.S. and International visitors (although this visitation is trending down).

By comparison, Alberta fares better than B.C. on 12½ indicators (again, with the ½ referring to the Visitor Centre indicator) as they have more World Heritage Sites, National Historic Sites, Provincially-owned Historic Sites, and Provincial Information Centres. Additionally, Alberta’s provincial campground fees and hotel taxes are lower while the province’s tourism budget is higher. As a result, it is perhaps not so surprising that U.S. and international visitation has been trending up in Alberta and that Alberta visitor satisfaction levels, at least as they relate to provincial campgrounds and visitor information centres, are also higher than they are in B.C. (While it would have been useful to compare overall visitor satisfaction levels, this information does not appear to be collected in either province. This is an omission that should be addressed as both B.C.’s and Alberta’s provincial governments will be hard-pressed to make well-informed tourism policy, product and marketing decisions if overall visitor satisfaction isn’t measured.)

Comparison of B.C. and Alberta Relative to Selected Tourism Product, Market and Resource Indicators (Sources: Various public sources were used to compile the data in this table and are available upon request)			
Comparison Item	BC	Alberta	Is BC Better or Worse Off Than Alberta?
World Heritage Sites	3	5	Worse
National Historic Sites (administered by Parks Canada)	13	14	Worse
Provincially Owned Historic Sites	10	19	Worse
National Parks	7	5	Better
Provincial Parks	746	500+	Better
Provincial Camping Fees (for summer, frontcountry, non-marine sites)	\$16-\$30	\$5-\$23	Worse
Visitor Info Centres	6 provincial & 132 community	10 provincial & 100+ community	Worse for Provincial but better for Community
Museums	347	237	Better
Visitor Satisfaction 2010/11 (Prov. Campgrounds)	80%	93%	Worse
Visitor Satisfaction 2009/10 (Info Centres)	3.9 out of 5.0 (78%)	97%	Worse
Taxes on Rooms (Hotel Room Tax + PST/GST/HST) (Does not include DMFs charged in gateway cities)	Up to 2% HRT + 12% HST = 14%	5% HRT Calg/Edmon and 4% elsewhere + 5% GST = 9% to 10%	Worse
2010 Occupancy (tourism accommodation)	61.0%	58.4%	Better
2010 Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR)	\$88.04	\$78.69	Better
Foodservice/Restaurant Sales Growth (2009 to 2010)	1.3% (1.9% 2010/11 Forecast)	3.3% (3.0% 2010/11 Forecast)	Worse
Foodservice/Restaurant Average Unit Sales (2010)	\$658,683.00	\$762,344.00	Worse
Provincial Tourism Budget (2011/2012)	\$48.9 million \$7.4 m. external recoveries	\$12.0 million (Ministry) \$53.4 million (Travel Alberta)	Worse
TOTAL	\$56.3 million	\$65.4 million	
Provincial Level Tourism Staff (2011)			
- Ministry	119 (10 vacancies)	32 (2 vacancies)	
- DMO	n/a	77	Better
TOTAL	119	109	
U.S. + International Visitation (numbers in 2010)	4,271,422 (-14.7% since 2001)	867,400 (+6.2% since 2001)	Better
U.S. Visitation (% Change 2001 to 2010)	-20.5%	0.6%	Worse
International Visitation (% change 2001 to 2010)	0.3%	18.3%	Worse

The intent of the above list isn't to present a comprehensive comparison of Alberta and B.C. tourism indicators as there are many other indicators that could be considered. Rather, the intent of the list is to illustrate that B.C. shouldn't assume that we are "doing tourism" better than our closest Canadian competitor. For example, why, when so much focus is being paid on attracting non-resident visitors to B.C., are growth trends for these markets weak when compared to Alberta? Also, the fact remains that the great majority of tourists in B.C. are British Columbians and we shouldn't lose sight of the importance of this market to B.C.'s tourism industry. To this end, is it possible that B.C. has been resting on its "Super Natural" laurels and not providing the product or experience re-investment and upgrading needed to encourage British Columbians to travel at home? If this is the case, then we can expect to see more British Columbians looking to Alberta and elsewhere for their next tourism experience.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that in April 2009, Travel Alberta was established as a stand-alone Provincial Destination Marketing Organization (PDMO) based on the Tourism BC model, while one year later, in April 2010, Tourism BC ceased to operate as a stand-alone provincial DMO when it was absorbed into the Ministry of (now) Jobs, Tourism and Innovation. Currently, the Province of B.C. is in discussions with the Tourism Industry regarding future PDMO funding and organizational options. We await the outcome of these discussions with much interest!

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