

The business of experience

Workshop offers insight into new tourism product development

By Carolyn Sloan
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For rural Canadians, it's the 64 thousand dollar question: How can small communities sustain themselves in the face of economic and industrial change?

Celes Davar has been on a quest for find the answer and discovered his life's passion in the process. In 1996, he established the award-winning learning adventure company Earth Rhythms, offering travellers customized, intimate, interactive experiences that delve into the cultural traditions, cuisine and natural beauty of community life in southern Manitoba.

It's aimed at a growing market for experiential travel, where tourists aren't simply observers, but participants in local life.

When travelling within a community, they want to know what it's like to live there, to experience local flavours,

activities and traditions first-hand.

Davar now travels the country to share his knowledge about how communities can develop new tourism products based on the potential for extraordinary experiences in their own backyard, experiences which, at the local level, may seem quite ordinary.

At an experiential tourism workshop for the Annapolis-Digby area, November 20 and 21, Davar, as facilitator, asked participants to look at their own communities through a visitor's eyes.

"When we put the visitor's hat on, the people who are here, the people who are within this region offer, not ordinary experiences, but to the visitor, extraordinary experiences," he explained. "For the people who live in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, we have this wonderful mystic, absolutely wonderful perspective about the Maritimes. We don't have salt water. We don't have your kitchen parties.

"Look at what you have in your backyard very much from an extraordinary perspective, and that's what you can offer the world."

The workshop, entitled Fundy Riches & Valley Traditions, aimed at providing 50 local tourism operators, business owners and community organizations with the tools for developing, pricing and marketing local experiences as tourism products. Funded through Nova Scotia Economic Development and Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage, the program was organized by a number of individuals and community organizations, including the

Annapolis Digby Economic Development Agency and the Applied Geomatics Research Group.

On the first day, participants not only learned about experiential tourism and existing examples of



Theresa Bunbury, left, and Olga Comeau enjoy a geocaching quest along a stretch of marshland.

All photos by Carolyn Sloan

products, they were divided into groups and sent on one of three experiences within their own community, including painting with artist Wayne Boucher at his studio in Parker's Cove, harvesting and cooking periwinkles along Gulliver's Cove, and going on a geocaching quest with AGRG researcher Heather Stewart.

After the workshop was over, participant Carolyn Smith from the Digby Area Tourism Association was already starting to dream about opportunities in her own community – a sunset cruise with a local astronomer, an intimate evening by the fire with a local storyteller – and having networked with potential partners across the region and been given an inside look into the growing trend of experiential tourism, she came away with a newfound confidence.

"It's very hard to represent tourism in an area and to help tourism enterprises develop if you don't understand the trends and the issues and where the marketplace is going," Smith

explained. "I'm feeling a whole more optimistic about [tourism]. The wheels are turning, big time.

"I think we have to be really creative about using some of our assets to draw people into our community.

There's an abundance of assets we haven't capitalized on."

One of three Parks Canada representatives at the workshop, Theresa Bunbury came away with opportunities to work with the community.

"Clearly there is a developing trend in tourism for experiential travel and we're looking to discuss how we can participate in the community," she said. "Our challenge is how to translate that [local] knowledge and that familiarity, that richness into an experience for a visitor."



Participant Sharon MacAulay, left and above, paints with artist Wayne Boucher at his studio in Parker's Cove, as does Annapolis Royal's marketing director Sally Burnie, on the right.



Heather Stewart, right, of the Applied Geomatics Research Group, goes geocaching.

