



A BRITISH COLUMBIA CASE STUDY

ISLAND LAKE LODGE

Leveraging Your Best Assets to Develop a Remarkable Visitor Experience

This case study⁹ illuminates how:

- Island Lake Lodge is leveraging its natural and built assets to grow visitation during the summer season through a concerted effort to strengthen its brand reputation as a mecca for hiking and align with the local destination.
- Strategically layering unpaid visitor opportunities can contribute to generating new sources of revenue in other areas of the business and inspire other experience enhancements.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Collaborating with your local destination management organization, aligning efforts around specific goals — in this case, to grow the potential for hiking — results in greater success for everyone.
- Inviting partners into discussions on your strategic experience-design initiatives can offer new opportunities to strengthen partner relationships and create mutual benefits for all those involved.

- Technology, when strategically integrated into the design of an experience, can lever the power of social media advocacy to attract visitors, entice repeat visitation, and create online conversation and engagement.

THE COMPANY



Built in 1988, Island Lake Lodge was founded by a group of shareholders that included ski and snowboarding greats such as Scot Schmidt and the late Craig Kelly. Movies filmed on

site by media giants Warren Miller Entertainment, MSP Films, and Sherpa Cinema brought distinction to the operation, and it quickly became a world-renowned mecca for deep powder skiing. Located in Fernie, B.C., the lodge offers backcountry snowcat skiing adventures in winter and summer, accessible front country hiking and mountain biking, retreats, small corporate meetings, and weddings. A strong focus on staff training, attention to detail, and sourcing local, top-quality dining delivers an exceptional visitor experience.

⁹This case study was made possible through the cooperation of Mike McPhee, Director of Sales and Marketing, Island Lake Resort Group and the research team of Lesley Anderson and Nancy Arsenault, Tourism Cafe and Jane Osler, PJ Osler & Associates.

THE CHALLENGE

Its strong brand awareness and reputation as an iconic winter ski and snowboard destination has allowed Island Lake Lodge to build a thriving and highly successful winter business that sees the lodge fully-booked each ski season. However, the summer business still has room to grow. With 7,000 acres of private land encompassing the iconic and stunning Three Bears Peaks of the Lizard Range, well-maintained hiking trails and a full-service, luxury wilderness lodge operating year-round, including a spa and high-quality dining, Island Lake has all the assets needed to be an iconic summer destination as well. Innovative approaches were considered to grow its reputation as a hiking destination to increase summer occupancy, repeat visitation, and revenue potential.



THE SOLUTION

Mike McPhee, Director of Marketing and Sales for Island Lake Lodge, worked with Tourism Fernie and Kootenay Rockies Tourism to bring Destination BC's new Remarkable Experiences industry training opportunity to the small community of Fernie, viewing it as a chance for inspiration and brainstorming.

The management team had been discussing how to better leverage user-generated content to extend Island Lake Lodge's reach to new audiences, grow its reputation as a summer destination, and leverage the power of social media to increase interest in hiking at the lodge. Recognizing that some of their best assets were the often-photographed scenic locations accessible by hiking from the lodge, the team saw an opportunity to formalize a fun activity for visitors to photograph and tag the most popular spots on social media. Created in 2016, the Iconic Photo Spots of Island Lake experience is a program that identifies the best photo locations and helps visitors find, experience and share them with others.

As a company, Island Lake Lodge has incorporated the philosophy of Remarkable Experiences into its brand and staff training.

DEVELOPING THE EXPERIENCE

- In its first season, the program included 12 iconic photo spots, identified and selected by the lodge's trail crew and staff. A contest offered an opportunity to win a \$1,000 lodge voucher for those who tagged and uploaded their photos using the hashtag #islandlakelodge and the unique number of the photo spot.
- A special trail map was created to assist visitors in finding the iconic locations and identifying the trail difficulty and distance best matched to the hiking experience they sought. Standard signage in each iconic place helps visitors pinpoint the photo spots.
- In 2017, the program added several new locations, bringing the total to 15 sites. In 2018, the roster grew to 20 iconic photo spots, and Island Lake Lodge's existing partnership with sports-gear retailer

“The Iconic Photo Spots idea stemmed out of wanting to provide visitors with an activity they could do, increasing user-generated content, incenting people to come back, getting a bit of media attention and really highlighting our best assets.”

—Mike McPhee,

Director of Marketing and Sales

North Face was strengthened and expanded to enhance the annual contest. The North Face offered new, monthly prizes for the best photo and provided a grand prize opportunity for anyone who photographed all 20 locations during the summer season, ramping up the competitive aspect and providing extra incentive for visitors

to keep coming back. The ongoing user-generated content was pushed through The North Face's social and online channels, with Island Lake Lodge also running a live contest feed.

- Strategic infrastructure investments were made to enhance the visitor experience, such as developing the new Goldilocks trail through the iconic Three Bears Peaks area and adding a new series of interpretive signs around Island Lake — a high-traffic area and the site for several iconic photo spots. Additional interpretive signage is now being planned for some of the longer, more distant trails.

In 2019, further plans to augment the online visitor experience include engaging a Google-certified “street view” photographer to create an online map with 360-degree tours of all the iconic spots and embedding them within Google Maps.

Although the iconic photos endeavour is revenue neutral in comparison to the lodge's income, it creates new reasons for visitors to come, visit, and revisit. It also helps promote other lodge services such as canoe rentals, guided hikes, and spa services. The stunning location of the Bear Lodge patio is a welcome place for hikers to enjoy a meal and a cold local beer; finishing a hike with a late lunch or early dinner is becoming a tradition for many repeat guests.

As well, other packaging, partnership, and revenue-generating opportunities have sprouted from the photo program:

- Island Lake Lodge now promotes the two-night Take a Hike package that includes a custom gift item from its new Take a Hike retail line.
- In partnership with Fernie Brewing Company, the lodge restaurant now serves a unique craft beer; its label design proudly incorporates one of the iconic photo spots.

- A new line of Take-a-Hike retail items created for the lodge's on-site store.
- A new, scheduled and guided hiking program led by trail crew staff.
- Accelerating the development of new partnerships with local businesses, not necessarily related

RESULTS

Iconic Photo Spots of Island Lake has generated solid results and benefits over the three years since it was introduced:

- Incentivized visitors to come and explore the summer trails and return multiple times to conquer the iconic photo spots they haven't yet reached.
- Hiking trail use is up significantly — estimates indicate use has quadrupled.
- Added six interpretive signs on the popular Lake Trail to enhance the visitor experience, aligned with the iconic photo spots.
- Helped to mould and strengthen Island Lake Lodge's reputation as a hiking mecca.
- Summer restaurant business is up approximately 10 to 12% over the past five years, in part due to the increase in visitation from the company's investment in the Iconic Photos Spots experience.
- New partnership opportunities with The North Face, Fernie Brewing, and other retail partners that strengthen the benefits for all involved.
- Social media users are engaging with the iconic photo spots content, sharing, commenting, and conversing about the spots.
- Tourism Fernie has been inspired to consider the development of an Iconic Photo Spots of Fernie program for the town and surrounding

directly to the Iconic Photo Spots initiative, that elevates the quality of the overall visitor experience by providing access to exclusive, customized, locally-made culinary products that showcase a unique taste of place and raise the bar on the lodge's culinary reputation.

area to complement Island Lake Lodge's efforts and mutually support the growth of the destination's reputation as a great place to hike.

SELECT SALES AND MARKETING RESULTS

- At the time of writing, the Iconic Photo Spots website landing page created in 2016 has seen 887 unique visits, 1,062-page views, an average page view time of two minutes.
- 483 Instagram uses of the Island Lake Lodge iconic photo spots hashtag series to date¹⁰.
- A fourfold increase in Instagram followers and twofold Facebook followers since the inception of the program¹¹.
- Media coverage promoting Island Lake Lodge as a hiking destination and the annual photo contest with Mountain Life magazine, Fernie Fix Magazine, Tourism Fernie's The Fernie Guide, The Free Press, and East Kootenay News.
- 2018 sales of "Take a Hike" products and merchandise: 699 servings of labelled beer, 140 magnets, 67-pint glasses, 55 T-shirts, and seven mounted posters.

¹⁰Hashtag use measured as of April 8, 2019

¹¹Social media follower increases are not necessarily fully attributable to the Iconic Photo Spots program but have contributed positively to growth in social media presence and followers.



OTHER BENEFITS

The success of the Iconic Photo Spots program has increased recognition of the value of layering on different types of visitor experiences for different audiences. Although Island Lake Lodge has been offering its Winter Lunch and Spa program for several years, the inspiration gained through the Remarkable Experiences training program and the success of Iconic Photo Spots reignited interest in enhancing and promoting the winter spa/lunch package where guests enjoy a snowcat ride to the lodge, a two-course gourmet lunch, and a spa treatment. The package is crafted to attract non-skiing visitors seeking a backcountry lodge atmosphere and amenities for a day at a moderate price.

By positioning the spa/lunch package during the day when its skiing clientele are away on the slopes, Island Lake Lodge can layer on new

revenue with facilities that would otherwise be underutilized. It also grows brand awareness and reputation for a broader visitor experience beyond skiing. There has been a 40% growth in the Winter Lunch and Spa program as a result of putting more focus on it following the success of the Remarkable Experiences program and Iconic Photo Spots. As well, in 2018 a new partnership was initiated with Atlas Snowshoe Company, developing and promoting a branded snowshoe trail with snowshoe rentals to further enhance and grow revenue from the non-skiing (but not non-active) winter lunch and spa visitor experience.

WEBSITE

islandlakelodge.com