

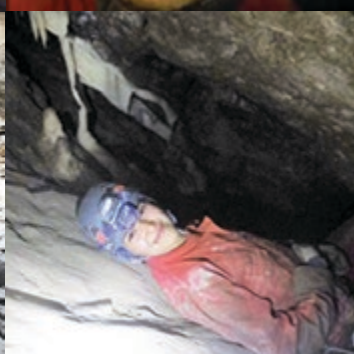
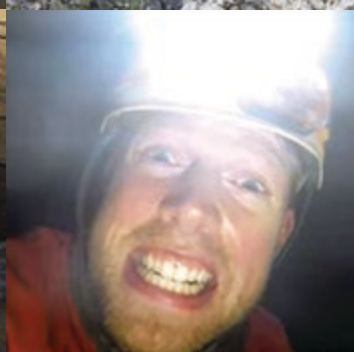
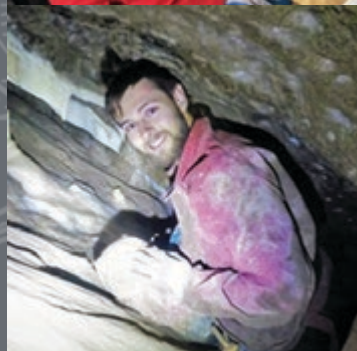
# SHiFT

## CASE STUDY

THREE YEARS LATER...A CULTURE OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION  
IN EXPERIENTIAL TRAVEL DEVELOPMENT

canmore **CAVE** tours .com







**VISION, INNOVATION, PASSION AND CREATIVITY** describes Adam Walker and his team at Canmore Cave Tours.

Inspired by his participation in Travel Alberta's SHiFT: Transforming products to experiences and his scholarship to Canada's West Marketplace, this new business owner has broadened his customer base, introduced new experiences, tapped into new markets, evolved his hiring and training practices, and more.

A veteran caving guide of seven years at Canmore Cave Tours, Adam Walker jumped at the opportunity to buy the business in 2013 when Chas Young, the company founder, decided to retire. Adam, 32 years old at the time, plunged head first into learning about owning and managing a business in the tourism industry and the opportunities for expansion.

## A VISIONARY WILLING TO TAKE RISKS

Described by his staff as a visionary, they also describe him as:

- Highly creative and inclusive, welcoming everyone's ideas no matter how crazy they may seem;
- Willing to take calculated business development risks;
- Proactive in evolving the corporate culture of the business in ways that build on the excellence of the previous owner, yet clearly defines a new future;
- A leader in how he hires and supports his team so they feel like they are part of a family and critical contributors to the success of the business;
- One who believes in creating more ways for people to enjoy the caves while remaining committed to protecting the environment;
- A collaborator who develops and nurtures partnerships that support the growth of his company while expanding the destination potential; and
- Passionate – he loves where he lives, loves caving and wants people to discover the beauty and magic of caves.

“Adam is a visionary, he sees where he wants to take the company, how he wants to increase the ways visitors can enjoy the caves, and works in a collaborative way that values everyone's opinion.”

– Lenora, Office Manager,  
20+ years with the company

“When I took over ownership, I knew we could do something that was incredibly powerful for people beyond the physical caving. I knew I had a responsibility to protect the caves and promote a different mindset and get people to love and care about caves through creating an emotional connection to them.”

– Adam Walker, Owner/Operator

## THE EXPERIENTIAL SHiFT

Adam and his team have diversified the ways visitors and the local community alike can appreciate and experience Rat's Nest Cave.

Their 'playground', as one staff member describes the south-facing slope of Grotto Mountain where they access the caves, is six kilometres east of Canmore. The site contains more than four kilometres of tunnels and represents a part of Alberta's history most travellers would never see. Rat's Nest Cave, a provincial historic site, dissolved out of limestone and is rich with palaeontological specimens of birds, snakes, fish, amphibians and mammals, pictographs, prehistoric artifacts and fascinating geological formations.

Until 2014, the majority of visitors and staff were caving enthusiasts. Today, Canmore Cave Tours has retained their core customer and talented caving staff while enticing new guests and staff interested in a softer cave experience, one focused on appreciation of place over activity as the motivator.

This case study illustrates a tourism experience developmental journey that is underpinned by the ability to co-create unique, memorable experiences through establishing amazing partnerships that allowed the company to diversify within the cave environment.

Inspired by the SHiFT training program, Adam embraced the core principle of the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) that “work is theatre and every business a stage” as he began to revolutionize Canmore Cave Tours' visitor experience.

## POSITIVE 3-YEAR BUSINESS OUTCOMES

1. Increased employment from 2 full-time and 2-3 seasonal staff in 2014 to 4 full-time and 8-10 seasonal staff.
2. In 2017, they collaborated with 22 partners to create, deliver and support multiple new experiences. Each partner brings new perspective to the business and they can share risks with new programs, plus they become fans and recommend each other.
3. Growth in visitation from 3,500 in 2013 to 6,800 in 2017.
4. Broadened their retail line of products from caving supplies to include gift certificates, soaps and ceramics made from cave sediment, and books authored by the former owner. Products range in price from \$1.50 to \$70.
5. Grew the number purchasable visitor experiences from two tours and customized programs to five tours, two training courses, team building and one program series that offer new experiences eight to 12 times per year. In 2018, a new 'escape room' style experience will be introduced, affirming their commitment to new and evolved tourism experiences annually.
6. Diversified their price point from \$125 to \$350 (adults) and \$115 - \$145 (youth) in 2013 to \$55 - \$499 (adults) and \$35 - \$145 (youth).
7. Evolved the group size from a program target of two to eight people, to the ability for personalized adventures for one or two people up to a maximum of 25.
8. Gained exposure to a range of international travel trade companies, securing new business from 10 companies in the first two years of attending travel trade shows.
9. Revenue growth has almost doubled in four years.
10. Doubled their investment in staff training.
11. Lots of local, provincial and national earned media which has confirmed what the authors of the Experience Economy state, “Experience is the Marketing” (Joe Pine and James Gilmore).

“As soon as we broadened the experience with our staff, musicians, speakers, yoga instructors, we opened entirely new markets, broadened our exposure and appeal and increased our sales channels.”

– Adam Walker, Owner/Operator



# THE JOURNEY

## **IN 2013, CAVERS COULD ENJOY ONE OF THREE CAVING OPPORTUNITIES**

- Explorer Tour: A 4.5-hour introduction to caving (\$125/adult).
- Adventure Tour: A 6-hour Canadian Signature Experience that pushes the limits of leisure cavers (\$155/adult).
- Team Building: Custom adventures from 4.5 to 8 hours. (\$125-155/pp).



## **NEW SUMMER 2015 DISCOVERY TOUR: THE 1ST SHiFT-INSPIRED EXPERIENCE**

- Guests experience catch and release fossil hunting, wildlife tracking, geology, biology, natural history, and a visit to the cave entrance.
- Two to eight hikers, 2-3 hours, all ages.
- \$55/adult, \$35/youth, Canmore Cave Tours intentionally introduced a family-friendly rate to reach a new market: people who do not want to actually enter the cave, but instead, visit a cave.
- The first-year goal was 50 guests; they welcomed 100.
- The program model is now set. In the future, different themes such as food and geology will be introduced to diversify the experience and attract repeat visitors.
- Horizontal Caving Course launched as a two-day experience at \$250/pp then was reduced to a single day at \$185/pp.
- Vertical Caving course introduced at two days for \$250/pp but raised to \$350 due to venue costs.





**NEW DECEMBER 2015:**  
**SPIRIT OF THE MOUNTAIN,  
CHRISTMAS CAROLING IN A CAVE**

- Each night, approximately eight members of the Valley Winds Choir from Canmore, aged 40 - 60 years old, who had never caved, were escorted to the Grand Gallery, 10-stories underground to perform.
- Offered five concerts, 25-person max, \$150/pp; year one sold out in days!
- Received outstanding media coverage.
- Revealed the exceptional acoustics of the Grand Gallery and willingness of people to try a unique experience and opened the door to offering a new, and different holiday experience each year.

**NEW SUMMER 2016: UNEARTHED  
MUSIC AND CONVERSATIONS**

- Introduced the UnEarthed product line.
- unEarthed Conversations is an opportunity to show the world that the cave is so much more than a hole in the ground, scheduled from October to April at \$75/pp to support off-season visitation.
- One-hour lectures, in partnership with the local Museum & Geoscience Centre (free) and then a maximum of 16 people journey with the speaker to the cave to discuss the topic in more depth. The guest speakers, from various organizations such as the Royal Tyrrell and Geoscience Museums, reveal stories that unearth aspects of Alberta's geological past and present.
- unEarthed Music built on the success of the first Christmas concert in the cave with 4-5 performances annually.
- Each concert has a maximum of 24 people and is priced the same as the Explorer Tour, \$129/pp.

**Tell me a fact and I'll  
learn. Tell me a truth and  
I'll believe. But tell me a  
story and it will live in  
my heart forever.**  
– Native American Proverb



“ I see the strength in partnerships because the product, the experience development process, becomes much easier when you incorporate different minds, coming from different perspectives. Our team members are mostly Authentic Experiencers so rounding out the diversity and seeing the experiences from another type of traveller is important. ”

– Adam Walker, Owner/Operator



#### **EVOLVED SUMMER 2016: RETAIL DIVERSIFICATION**

- Partnered with local businesses and inspired new and creative products. The dust from the caving clothes was collected and used to create the unique pottery and soap products sold.
- Selling books authored by previous owner Charles Young reinforced the positive transition between owners of the company.
- Glass bats and pack rats, print art, and jewelry, all created by local artists.
- Continue to be the largest retailer of caving supplies not based in an urban centre.

#### **EVOLVED MAY 2016: STAFF ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES**

- Expanded staff training from two days to four; adding a full day to the beginning of the training focused on the customer and concluding with stories and storytelling.
- Introduced tour feedback forms that are discussed and regularly shared with staff.
- Created a culture of sharing the stories each guide tells to highlight the unique background each staff person brings to the company and how their stories get visitors excited.
- Taking his full-time staff on an annual off-site retreat to learn and be inspired by other businesses. Year one was Mexico, year two, Vancouver Island.



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### **EVOLVED DECEMBER 2016: SPIRIT OF THE MOUNTAINS**

- Repeated the experience in 2016 with another choir, but poor weather caused the cancellation of three of the four performance dates.
- In 2017, the concerts evolved to offer three different bands over three nights, \$130/pp.



### **EVOLVED 2017: UNEARTHED SERIES**

- From concerts, to conversations, to movies, Canmore Cave Tours introduced a Halloween horror movie – another way to enjoy the caves, with yet another audience.
- In February 2018, they will extend movie night to additional times of the year in the cave.

### **NEW SPRING 2017: SOLITUDE**

- Launched personalized experiences that invite guests to be the creator/designer of their own experience, supported by a Canmore Cave Tours' guide.
- Minimum two people, \$499 per couple; maximum eight people, \$129 per additional guest.
- Six-hour experience, four hours underground.
- To date, people have enjoyed meditation, photography, and proposed marriage.

“Each year our Spirit of the Mountain musicians create very different, powerful experiences. The feedback we’ve had from our guests is phenomenal and what stands out from a development perspective is our partners latch on to this unique opportunity, own it, run with it, let fans know, and help sell it. At the same time our staff have become experts at bringing musical instruments and non-cavers safely 10-stories underground for an acoustically mind-blowing experience.”

– Adam Walker, Owner/Operator





## JANUARY 2017: THE HUB

The Hub currently represents 19 businesses from Canmore, Calgary, Sundre, Kananaskis and Banff who partner in a cross-selling platform that allows them to share resources, the cost of selling, and it creates a community to bounce ideas off. The concept was launched in January and became a reality by September. The goal is to help sell each other's products to retain guests in Canmore longer – or create the reason to stop and stay on route to Banff or Lake Louise.

## 2018: STAY TUNED!

When Adam departed the SHiFT program in February 2015, he had a list of eight ideas. Today he says the list is even longer. But, being an astute businessman, he recognizes that growth needs to be strategic – one program at a time, with the right partners and sales channels. What is consistent in his approach to development is:

1. Incorporate stories;
2. Develop strategic partnerships;
3. Hire and invest in people who share your passion and vision and pay them well;
4. Create a corporate culture where people want to work for the company and recommend like-minded, talented friends; and
5. Build experiences that can serve multiple purposes or be repurposed in unique ways without always having to reinvent the wheel.



## IS IT ALL A BED OF ROSES?

Ask Adam that question, and he just laughs; the answer is no!

Each new program brings new opportunities and challenges. But with each new program, each new type of guest, and each new partner invited to be part of a Canmore Cave Tours experience, the team members are learning how to be efficient hosts, facilitate memorable experiences, and tell stories that go well beyond their technical roles as qualified cave guides.

“We also include some offers that just break even, like the Christmas concerts, but the return we get from media coverage and raving fans is worth it.”

# THE POWER OF SHIFT

Reflecting on his business development journey since SHiFT, Adam highlights that the program gave him the confidence, tools and support network to expand in new ways, that appeal to an entirely new base of visitors who are less interested in caving and more interested in appreciating the majesty of the caves themselves, without sacrificing our core business.

SHiFT changed his mind set on how to approach products and activities. Now, every time they build an experience it is done through the eyes of the customer and their partners. When they create new experiences they always address three questions:

1. Where are there gaps in visitors, themes or topics that could drive new business?
2. What framework do I have that can be tweaked and repurposed (instead of re-inventing the wheel)?
3. Can the new product serve multiple purposes?

In closing Adam's advice is, "I encourage everyone exploring the potential of experiential travel to keep an open mind, even if some ideas seem crazy. Your only true limitation is your imagination. Three years ago, no one thought of our caves as a place for music and meditation."



“Reflecting on my SHiFT experience, it's the only course that lets you stop and have time for ideas to grow, listen to others dream out loud, get friendly critique on your ideas, refine your thinking and be supported by Travel Alberta and the facilitators after the course. Combine this with Canada's West Marketplace that gives you the selling skills – it's an unbeatable combination.” – Adam Walker, Owner/Operator

Adam Walker, Owner/Operator, SHiFT Graduate  
Max Koether, Experience Manager, SHiFT Graduate  
Lenora Barnes, Office Manager  
Brent Arnold, Equipment Manager  
Ryan McKay, Guide Manager  
Tiffany Hassett, Senior Guide

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