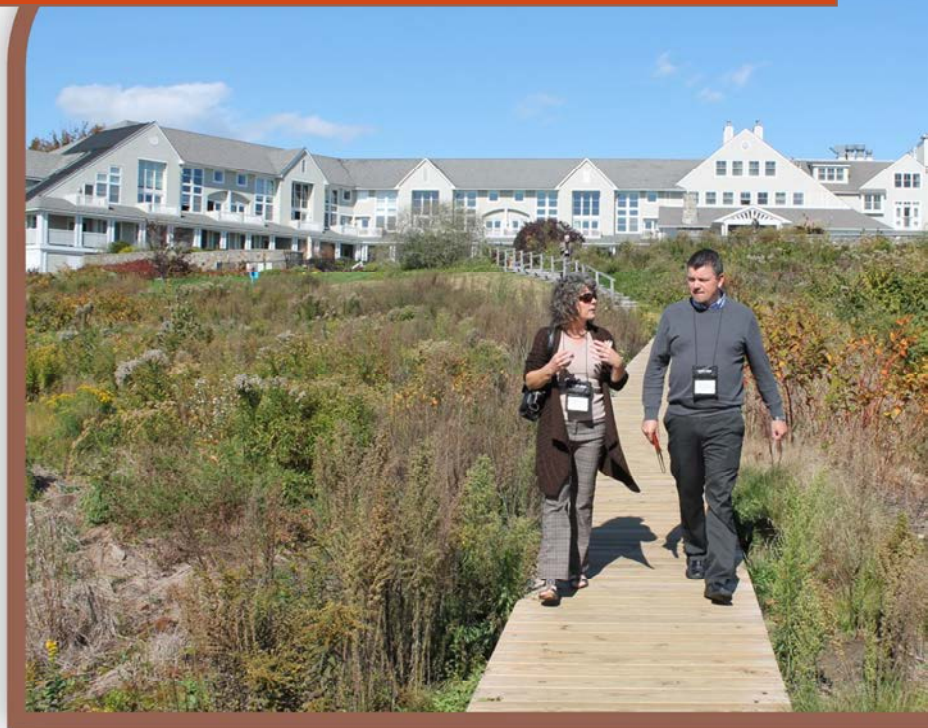


BEST PRACTICE MISSION REPORT PORTLAND MAINE | OCTOBER 2014



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Executive Summary

The Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia (TIANS) and the Nova Scotia Tourism Human Resource Council (NSTHRC), in partnership with the Nova Scotia Tourism Agency (NSTA) and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency - Nova Scotia (ACOA - NS), facilitated a Best Practice Mission to Portland, Maine between October 7-9, 2014.

This mission involved TIANS/NSTHRC coordinating a group of Nova Scotia tourism operators to identify best practices being currently utilized by operators, explore innovative tourism products offered and develop possible partnerships or packages to offer within the New England market.

While a New England – Nova Scotia ferry route had been resumed in the Spring of 2014, little initiative had been taken to coordinate industry with the opportunity to explore the possibilities to business within the crucial New England visitor market. The startup of Nova Star Cruises providing regular crossings between Yarmouth, NS and Portland, ME, provided Nova Scotia operators the opportunity to begin to rebuild New England market share which had been experiencing decline over a period of time and also to prepare for the 2015 season and beyond.

In addition to the need to restore business connections, many of the tourism operators in Nova Scotia were not familiar with the services and experiences offered on board the Nova Star. This limited their ability to promote and sell the crossing as part of the Nova Scotia experience.

The mission participants (see Listing in Appendix A) represented a variety of tourism businesses from rural and urban areas of Nova Scotia. Represented regions included the Fundy Shore/Annapolis Valley, the South Shore, Halifax Regional Municipality and the Northumberland Shore.



While in the Portland area, the mission participants met with and toured a range of tourism stakeholders and operators (see Itinerary in Appendix B) and identified key best practices and ideas which could be adapted for their own operation and regions. Of particular interest to mission participants was the opportunity to learn how to potentially leverage the new ferry service into the US, connect with their counterparts in Maine, experience how New England tourism businesses have capitalized on market trends and identify potential partnerships.

A number of key best practices and opportunities were identified during the mission including building enhanced partnerships in New England, particularly with the Portland-Yarmouth ferry operator. There is great demand to move towards an International Marketing Partnership which would include key Nova Scotia and American stakeholders. Additional opportunities were identified regarding booking engines and online marketing as businesses struggle to compete with OTA's. A number of ideas from the New England Inns and Resorts Association struck a chord with the delegates especially as they pertained to online marketing using Trip Advisor Group Listings to drive reservations, online booking innovations and a unique gift card program that generates added revenues.

While the concept of "Green" business practices is not new; mission participants were inspired by a number of initiatives being run through the Inn by the Sea Resort. These included a sustainable seafood partnership with local fisherman, special garden and eco-focused programming for children and families and community outreach.

Throughout the mission, the strong emphasis on the culinary experiences in the area and the overall focus on quality were experienced by the group. There were a number of observations made regarding the strong sense of community within the restaurant scene. Many operations were smaller, allowing focus on personal guest experience; quality food prepared using local suppliers and a true sense of dining. More on each of these observations can be found in the Summary of Best Practices and Opportunities beginning on page six of this report.



General Overall Findings

Mission participants identified throughout the itinerary that business operators and general residents in Portland seemed to have very limited awareness of the ferry service to Nova Scotia. 60% of Maine visitors are Maine residents and their product offerings are in many ways quite very similar to Nova Scotia. Maine sees Boston and New York as key markets to capitalize on and tourism operators in the area are growing visitation with a focus on experiences and are working to mature the industry beyond the traditional lobster and lighthouse icons.

The mission participants met with a range of marketing and industry service associations that operate across the region including the Greater Portland Convention & Visitor Bureau (GPCVB), Maine Tourism Association (MTA) and the New England Inns and Resorts Association (NEIRA). The GPCVB produces a range of print guides and maintains a dynamic website, marketing the region for business travel and producing key events such as the Harvest on the Harbor Fall Culinary Event. The MTA is a membership driven industry association which also produces travel guides and operates seven visitor information centres across the state. The NEIRA is the regional marketing body for 250 inns, resorts and bed and breakfasts across New England. Participants identified the tremendous opportunity to partner with these stakeholders and develop a collaborative International Marketing Partnership that will grow visitation on both sides of the border.

The city of Portland has identified the opportunity in the culinary sector and has become a mecca for small, quality focused restaurants who specialize in locally sourced food and beverages. There was a strong delivery of the overall service experience at each of the dining locations and during our time in those operations, the owners/managers all identified the value of having skilled, trained, passionate people on their front lines. Many of the mission participants noted that attention to detail, quality and service can influence the visitor spend in various aspects of a stay.



The Danforth Inn, for example leaves a personal handwritten note for each guest each day; the banquet staff at the Westin Portland Harborview take the time each morning during breakfast service to genuinely interact with the guests in the meeting rooms. The service staff at Nosh, Piccolo and Central Provisions all displayed pride and confidence in their work.



While there were a large number of best practice ideas put forth by the industry following the mission, group, a broad summary of the best practices and/or associated opportunities for industry in Nova Scotia are outlined on the following pages. A complete contact list of businesses visited during the mission itinerary is attached (Appendix C). Presentations made by the New England Inns & Resorts Association (Appendix D) and the Inn by the Sea (Appendix E) on their sustainable Initiatives and Impact are also included. The best practice mission participant learning summaries and evaluations (Appendix F) following the mission reinforce industry's need to continue these types of locally focused best practice initiatives. Overall feedback from participants was very positive, leading to the recommendation to follow-up again in six months to document any specific changes and improvements made as a result of the mission.

TIANS and NSTHRC appreciate the opportunity to work with NSTA and ACOA-NS on this initiative. We look forward to a continued partnership which will leverage the lessons learned from this mission and assist in building a quality focused tourism industry in Nova Scotia.



Summary of Best Practices and Opportunities

1) *Enhanced Destination and Ferry Operator Partnerships*

Mission participants identified the significant *lack of any Nova Scotia feel or presence in Portland, within the embarkation area, or onboard the vessel itself as a major concern.* The ticketing and departure area within the Portland location is utilitarian and does not communicate a sense of the destination or quality of experience. There is an immediate need to address the lack of quality and visual signage in the Portland ticketing building. Industry and NSTA have indicated they are willing to support this through provision of materials already available. Suggestions from mission attendees included the use of pop up banners, signage and/or videos (existing promotional ads) playing and other similar visuals of various Nova Scotia experiences and destinations.

Onboard the vessel there are a number of opportunities to further profile the food, beverages, music and culture of Nova Scotia. While the overnight crossing limits the impact of reaching passengers with in depth travel counseling, there is opportunity to influence their travel plans. One suggestion made by a number of participants on the mission was to *play videos featuring the various regions of the province on existing flat screens monitors on board (most of which had no programming during either crossing).* It was also noted there is little “push” on board to encourage passengers to stop at the Yarmouth Visitor Information Centre which has recently benefitted from significant investment in upgrading the center’s technology to enhance visitor services.



Mission participants reported an overall lack of any sense of arrival/destination linked to the vessel. It was also noted that walk on passengers had a very lengthy walk to and from the vessel on both sides of the crossing and while the challenge of the walk on ramps are being worked on, that it is affecting the first impression and overall quality feel of the remainder of the vessel. It was also noted that this would be a challenging route for foot passengers with disabilities as well as any vehicle passengers needing special assistance.

There is minimal information available for operators seeking direction on how to partner with the ferry operators and what the process will be. The Nova Star operators are in the process of developing marketing and packaging plans for the coming year of operation and this has limited the industry's ability on both sides of the border to develop partnerships and experiences which would build visitation. There is an immediate need to ensure the 2015 season information is available as soon as possible to help leverage other marketing efforts from individual operators and NSTA.

Mission participants reported that they believe building enhanced marketing partnerships and branding Nova Scotia with the ship will be critical to future success. *They have recommended the development of a collaborative International Marketing Partnership which would bring together key stakeholders from both sides of the border to ensure that Nova Scotia industry and government can make informed decisions around tourism marketing investment and develop stronger partnerships resulting in incremental visitation revenues.*

2) *Innovative Marketing and Booking Options for Operators*

The New England Inns & Resorts Association (NEIRA) has taken a number of bold steps to mobilize the private sector around marketing efforts to drive bookings and engage operators as a collective group with a common goal of increasing visitation to New England Inns and Resorts year round. *Their focus has been to strategically redirect potential searches and reservations through third party OTA's such as Booking.com into their own internal booking engine using an innovative 'Book with us' campaign.* Using a relatively small budget they have *redesigned their website to entice bookings through all four seasons and offer unique packages including niche markets such as family reunions.*





Another innovative offering from NEIRA is the option of a gift card available to purchasers for any amount and redeemable at any of the NEIRA 250 member properties. The organization has taken this a step further by featuring both physical gift cards as well as e-gift cards, providing immediate delivery and reducing their environmental footprint. In 2013, the gift cards resulted in over \$1 million in total sales. It was noted that the initial price of the gift cards resulted in significant incremental spending in communities by those visitors on other aspects of travel such as food, shopping, gas etc.

NEIRA has also spearheaded the purchase and management of a Group Business Listing with Trip Advisor. This collective investment has resulted in enhanced click through rates to operator websites and increased direct reservations with member properties. It was suggested this opportunity be researched further by TIANS as a possible competitive edge for industry in Nova Scotia.

The Association also partners with iconic New England brands (Boston Globe, Yankee Magazine, Cabot Cheese), for special events and promotions such as Boston Globe Travel Show. Operators pay for their experiences to be part of a broader prize package offering and have access to potential visitor contact information for marketing outreach. A full presentation of the NEIRA session can be viewed [here](#).



3) *Green Partnerships & Outreach*

The Inn by the Sea has developed a series of initiatives linked to sustainability which broaden their reach into the community at a fundamental level. Their work through a state fishery advisory group has developed into *a partnership between their food and beverage operation and local fishermen. This has led to the addition of seasonal, underutilized locally sourced sustainable seafood items on their menus* – featuring options which may not have traditionally been top of mind prior to this program.

The property has also integrated beach protection programs with educational outreach into schools, providing benefit to the local community and encouraging guests to play a more active role in directing their “green” efforts which are leveraging their position in a competitive market.



The inn worked with state officials to restore habitat for the endangered New England Cottontail Rabbit found in the area and has redesigned their landscape to better support indigenous habitat for these animals as well as protect an endangered Monarch butterfly species found in the area. *During the growing season guests are invited to classes on “How to Plant for Wildlife” and children enjoy “Bug’s Life Garden Tours” where they learn about local eco systems from a bug’s view point.* Monarch Watch, which registers properties that provide food and shelter for the endangered butterflies as they migrate through North America, has designated the Inn as a Butterfly Waystation and the inn has earned Wildlife Habitat certification from the National Wildlife Federation.



In addition to all of this, the Inn features a number of green initiatives and design features which helped them achieve both SILVER LEED® and Maine's Green Lodging certifications. These *include installation of solar panels; recycled sheet rock walls; recycled cork floors; recycled rubber floors; air to air heat exchangers; dual flush toilets; heating with bio fuels; preferred hybrid parking; sheet and towel reuse programs and purchasing renewable electricity.* A full presentation outlining these and other key green initiatives from the Inn by the Sea can be seen here.

4) *Elevated Culinary Experiences & Focus on Quality*

The range of dining options during the mission was a pleasant surprise for many of the participants. Portland has become a “foodie” destination in the Northeast U.S. The business atmosphere has adjusted to reflect the individuality of many operators while still creating a sense of community within the food business.



A number of the restaurateurs spoke to the support extended to them by existing businesses in the city and that many of them cook in each other's kitchens and share staff on a regular basis to enhance skills and cross train. They also spoke to the collaboration that exists within the food community and that it has fostered many new startups in both food and beverage offerings. The menu items featured locally sourced, sustainable options and also made excellent use of seasonal offerings and local beverage purveyors. Many of the operations were smaller in nature, allowing for personal dining experiences and ensuring overhead costs were kept relatively low.

Communal dining, tapas style menus and shared plates were very common dining themes. At both Piccolo and Central Provisions, it was noted by the owners/chefs that a main driver in relocating to the region was the opportunity to operate their own establishment in a creative business friendly atmosphere and also that it was seen as a wonderful place to raise a family.

Unique tours of the region, such as the Maine Foodie Tour Experiences demonstrated the impact of offering a *short tour focused on tastings of food and beverage in the area during a 2-hour walkable timeframe. The tour showcased a collection of experiences and builds sales/exposure for Maine based products.* There was a significant sense from within the participants that a similar type of product could easily be developed in Lunenburg, Wolfville, etc.



Overall, there was a sense of quality threaded through many of the businesses and organizations during the mission. In an early discussion with *the Maine Tourism Association, their CEO identified that they have partnered with the University of Maine to offer a free online service training course to anyone who wishes to take it. Entitled, "Welcome ME."* The program is comprised of 4 separate modules, each taking approximately 15 minutes to complete. Response from Industry has been very positive and thousands of individuals have completed the course over the past few years.





Best Practice Mission Follow-Up

Following the conclusion of the Best Practice Mission, a number of follow up activities and discussions have taken place.

- ▣ A follow-up meeting was held with the NSTA, ACOA – NS and Mission participants to further discuss potential action items on December 18th.
- ▣ Nova Star Cruise ferry operators hosted a series of Open House events in Portland for various tourism partners. The events were enhanced by the addition of Nova Scotia materials including pop up banners and visuals to add impact to their presence.
- ▣ Opportunity was investigated to conduct a session during the Tourism Summit, however due to scheduling challenges linked to American Thanksgiving, the speakers were unable to participate. This opportunity may be revisited in 2015 with earlier invitation allowing for plans to accommodate.



- ▣ The Nova Scotia Black Cultural Tourism Network and the Museum of African Culture are exploring exchanges of artifacts and educational programming.
- ▣ The possibility of the extension of the self-guided tour of the “Freedom Trail” in New England into Nova Scotia is being explored.
- ▣ A number of other experiential product development ideas are being discussed (foodie tours, biosphere experiences etc.).
- ▣ TIANNS/NSTHRC is furthering research into the training program “Welcome ME”.
- ▣ Mission participants reiterated the value of initiating an International Marketing Partnership and the need for NSTA and TIANNS to discuss what framework and process could be. There is definite interest from the New England side to organize such a body but the sense is that there is no clear understanding on who/how to advance it.
- ▣ Communication regarding additional outcomes from the mission will be ongoing and TIANNS will facilitate a six-month, follow up meeting with participants in April 2015.

