

Executive Summary

Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor Visitor Experience Opportunities Concept (VEOC) Orientation and Highlights

Realizing Our World-class Potential

The Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor has uncommon potential to be a world-class experiential travel destination. Its recognition by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site confirms its international significance. The challenge is now to host guests with innovative opportunities to connect with the diverse nature and culture of this special piece of Canadianna, and to do this in ways which grow the economic vibrancy of communities through sustainable tourism.

Partnership Group Initiative - This initiative has been the catalyst for an important partnership between a number of groups from a variety of interests including: the Rideau Roundtable, United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, Parks Canada, Valley Heartland Community Futures Development Corporation (representing support from Grenville CDFC, Frontenac CFDC and 1000 Islands CDC), the Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association, Lanark County, Town of Smiths Falls, and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport for the Province of Ontario.

Stakeholders Discussions - The Partnership Group brought together a wide range of stakeholders to collaboratively suggest direction to enhance and diversify experiential tourism opportunities throughout the length and breadth of the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor – opportunities which respond to the values and interests of different types of explorers and leisure travellers identified in the Canadian Tourism Commission's Explorer Quotient.

Stakeholders let their imaginations soar and shared their ideas to help the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor become a world-class destination hosting explorers and leisure travellers from near and far.

Why - The Partnership Group undertook this collaborative re-visioning of the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor to enhance opportunities for travellers to connect with the Corridor, its natural and human heritage, and to ensure that the Rideau Canal and its adjacent communities live up to their potential on the world stage, with an eye for the future sustainability of the Corridor.

How - Building upon current guest opportunities, programs and services, new and enhanced ways and means were identified to respond to guest values and traits and thereby enhance their opportunities to pursue their goals of actual and virtual immersion in the nature and culture of this special place.

To What End - The goal was to build a framework of experience opportunities to guide Rideau travel hosts in strategically enhancing and innovating opportunities and support services for their guests to connect with the diverse heritage and living realities of the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor – the unique personalities and resources of the Rideau which afford distinct travel experiences.

Through collaborative programming and services, enhanced through contemporary and futuristic technologies, guest explorers will be able to achieve different and complementary insights and immersions in these special places.

The Approach - Over seventy stakeholders from throughout the Rideau Corridor were invited to brainstorm exploration themes and experience opportunities for "Rideau guests" to better connect with the natural and cultural heritage of this special place, and how "Rideau hosts" can enhance and innovate their facilitation of their guests enjoyment and appreciation of this world heritage destination.

The Result – A Visitor Experience Opportunities Concept - An integrated "framework" of experience opportunities for the different types of explorers (EQ types). A VEOC is an outline of "what could be", to be followed, when appropriate, with "how to realize it". It is an opportunity resource base, an array of possibilities (not a strategic or tactical plan).

World-class Travel Experience Opportunities

Stakeholders sought to capitalize upon the growing recognition that the heritage of the Rideau Canal is of world significance - that this special place is a unique expression of Canada's nature and people.

Today's travellers are increasingly seeking opportunities to go beyond simply observing and recreating in their chosen destinations, they are seeking

- to immerse in the Rideau's distinctive natural and cultural environments and lifestyles,
- to taste, touch, smell, hear and see the distinctive characteristics of the Rideau,
- to explore the Rideau's landscapes and communities, and
- to meet people whose lives and heritage are much different than theirs

To this end, stakeholders identified a wide array of exploration themes through which they felt guests will be able to connect with the essence of the Rideau – some examples follow:

Stakeholders felt that guests would be drawn by opportunities to appreciate the:

- **ingenuity of canal builders**, who devised ways to float over landscape challenges using the European “slackwater” approach to canal design,
- **challenges of canal operations and maintenance** throughout decades of evolving commercial and recreational use
- **political, economic and military history and significance** of the Rideau Canal and that of the world's canals.

Beyond Canal specific experiences, stakeholders felt that natural and cultural heritage explorers and leisure travellers would be drawn by opportunities to become a part of the Rideau's living cultural heritage and to connect actually and virtually with the Corridor's:

- **heritage mills** – catalysts for the development of many communities, the design, development and operations of mills harnessed the energy of the Rideau watershed – their owners and developers, the first industrialists shaped the economics and politics of the Rideau
- **marine transportation heritage** – since its opening, the designers and navigators of Rideau's distinctive commercial and recreational boats, continue to be icons of Corridor,
- **agricultural heritage** – the initial clearing and shaping of the Corridor's cultural landscapes and settlement patterns was driven by agriculturalists and this influence continues today in the farms, orchards, model forests and innovative landscapes,
- **mining heritage** – an initial driver of the canal economy, touring Rideau mines provides unique insights into the physical resources and economic heritage,
- **culinary heritage** – opportunities to taste the foods of past eras and of today's artisans and chefs reveal a great deal about the people who founded the Corridor and those who today have chosen to harvest the natural resources of the lands and waters.

Human heritage is an extension of natural heritage, and it was felt by stakeholders that guests will equally value opportunities to explore and appreciate the nature of the Corridor, its:

- **evolving physiography** - geologic beginnings and subsequent shaping by glaciers, the sea which inundated the lowlands following de-glaciation and the rivers which continue to carve the landscape, all are a part of the natural heritage of this unique landscape,
- **dynamic ecology** – at the hands of nature and subsequently human use, the ecology of the Corridor continues to evolve, providing opportunities and challenges to all living things,
- **flooded landscapes** – the creation of the Canal created unique aquatic, wetland and near water environments – exploration on land, water and below the water will reveal surprising discoveries.

Often it is the people they meet, who have the most impact on what guests perceive and appreciate.

Stakeholders felt exploration themes and exploration opportunities which bring guests into contact with: **artisans, founding families, fishing guides, boat builders and navigators, heritage lodge owners, famous and infamous residents** will be highly valued and long remembered.

Highlights of Experience Opportunity Innovations and Enhancements

Reflecting the foregoing exploration themes, stakeholders suggested an array of Corridor-long and Reach-specific innovations and enhancements to support guests in exploring this world and nationally significant heritage travel experience destination.

Getting on the water - It was universally felt by discussion participants that facilitating guests in “getting out on to the water” was the most important opportunity which could be afforded to guests. As perhaps three-quarters of Corridor explorers and leisure travellers are land-based, it was felt that assisting these guests in experiencing the Rideau Canal and the Heritage Corridor from the water would be the most valued assistance a host could offer their guest.

To this end, it was suggested that:

- An expanded network of water access facilities, equipment and boat rentals and associated guiding and outfitting services would assist land based travellers to explore the aquatic environments.
- Enhanced guidance devices and information would be valued by self-guided explorers, while others would welcome guided experiences in small groups.

Everyone locks through - Participants also universally felt that the experience of “locking through” a set of locks would prove perhaps the most meaningful experience for this same group of land-based explorers and leisure travellers.

- Facilitation of this type of experience opportunity would call upon a collaborative effort involving Parks Canada and a network of boat experience operators.
- It could be complemented with animation of the lock operation and complementary opportunities for the same guests to engage in the manual operation of the lock; thereby acquiring a number of perspectives in one opportunity.

Virtual lock design and operation - To acquire insight into the challenges faced and overcome by lock designers and builders, it was suggested that perhaps a hi-tech industry representative could create a “simulation program and room” in the Rideau Canal Museum.

- Programming would provide guests with opportunities to assess the natural challenges posed by rapids and other river flow conditions in a specific reach of the Corridor.
- Guests would then have the opportunity to design a locking system and water control system to permit passage of a vessel through this particular set of river conditions.
- Similarly, the challenge could be to design the full canal system of locks; thereby acquiring an understanding of the full array of conditions and challenges experienced by Colonel By and his team of designers and lock builders.

Overnight in historic setting – To experience life as it was, it was suggested that facilitating guest opportunities to overnight in a canal related historic building or natural setting would reveal unique perspectives, for example:

- At a lock station location, perhaps using the lockmasters house or related structures or the surrounding park-like settings of some locks.
- Other built heritage settings and structures in communities and more remote locations, such as the network of historic mills.

Outdoor acoustical experiences - Relating to the positioning that the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor is “living history”, it was often suggested in different ways that heritage stories and events could be brought to life for guests through outdoor performances at strategically selected heritage rich locations along the Corridor.

- Locations suggested included acoustically and heritage resource rich settings such as Jones Falls and the Ottawa Locks, and community waterfronts such as Merrickville and Perth.
- The concept envisioned the use of theater-like techniques including lighting, sound and music, and performers to present a heritage moment or story.

- The facilitation of these theatrical experience opportunities could call upon local talent coordinated by private sector operators and non-profit groups.

Year-long network of festivals - As many communities within the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor host long standing heritage and lifestyle festivals, it was suggested that the profile of these individual festivals might be heightened through association within a year-long series of festivals and events.

- Heritage festival series - It was envisioned that the list of natural and cultural heritage exploration themes might serve as a foundation for expanding the array of festivals in a framework which would celebrate the array of themes. The individual themed festivals could be located in the most appropriate communities, building upon the current festival model.
- Music festival and event series - In addition to annually recurring festivals and events, some communities such as Westport have monthly recurring festivals and events, such as the Cove “blues festivals”. This model has applicability to other communities and would expand the drawing power of communities throughout the year.
- On the water concerts - mobile barge stage - There has been some initial success with concerts on the Rideau lakes. Participants felt that this types of attraction might successfully draw both boaters and land based travellers – supported by boat rental and outfitted and group boating services. The Cow Island event may be a model to build upon.
- Symphony in the locks amphitheater - Some participants felt that the acoustical properties of some lock station areas might provide unique opportunities for small symphony experiences. These included the Ottawa Locks, the Jones Falls Locks, and perhaps some of the more sheltered smaller lock areas. These might host smaller musical performances, for example quartet presentations.

Celebrations of founding peoples - Recognizing that often it is the people you meet, who facilitate the most memorable experiences or immersing within the living heritage, participants suggested a number of ways to celebrate the founding people of the Corridor. Their thoughts focused upon connections to the heritage of:

- First Nation peoples and their use of the Corridor;
- Connecting guests with the challenges and realities of the canal builders;
- Linking guests with the lifestyles of mill operators and farming and forestry family lifestyles.

The concept saw performances of heritage events and lives; heritage festivals celebrating historic people and events, and opportunities to live in a style and circumstance of the founding people.

Rideau routes innovations for minds and bodies - There is a myriad of trails throughout the Corridor’s landscapes; however, participants felt there was opportunity for enhancement and innovation for explorers. They saw expansion of trails into wetlands, rivers and lakes in the forms of

- floating trails,
- trails on stilts,
- canoe and kayak exploration routes.

The water’s edge is a mecca for all guests. To assist guests, participants envisioned new and enhanced routes along lakes and rivers and community waterfronts.

QR post information on demand network - . In support of inquiring minds, the trail network was envisioned to have floating and land based “QR code” information buoys and posts, and guidance to a network of outstanding vantage points to see and connect with the Rideau’s natural and cultural heritage and current lifestyles.

- Responding to current trends in personal communication devices and their ability to read data from QR codes, a Corridor-long network of QR posts would provide multiple levels of information respecting specific locations and resources of interest to explorers and leisure travellers.
- This network would be found on land and water, in communities, at lock stations and all attractions.

- Such an integrated network of exploration guidance devices will contribute to the unique and contemporary positioning of this world-class heritage experience destination.

Corridor-long network of shuttle services - Building upon the “Cinque Terra - Italy” shuttle concept, it was frequently suggested a network of shuttle services could support Corridor explorers:

- Hiking and biking the interconnected network of trails and backcountry roads,
- Canoeing and kayaking the network of water exploration routes,
- Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing,

The land and water based shuttles could provide guests with ready linkages between

- Nearby communities, expanding day trip explorations,
- The network of roofed and camping accommodations,
- The network of land and water based equipment rentals,

Network of outdoor gathering places - In a somewhat related enhancement, it was suggested that a network of “gathering places” be made know to guests exploring the length of the Corridor.

These would include:

- Selected lock stations and even perhaps selected locks or nearby places,
- Community waterfronts, park setting, historic places and public areas,
- Museums and heritage gathering places,
- Green spaces: parks, conservation areas, accessible natural areas.

Taking a lock station and lands for example, these places would be positioned as gathering places and exploration launch points, for both land and water based travellers. They might offer guest personal information distribution services and/or non-personal information signage.

They could be a location for scheduled performances and special events; and/or simply a place to meet other travellers and local people.

Network of vantage points and “Rideau chairs” - Participants recognized a wide array of special places from which guests will be able to experience both macro and micro perspectives of this natural and cultural heritage corridor. To add to the guest experience opportunity:

- A distinctive Rideau chair could be designed to support day and night sky viewing.
- Chairs would be positioned at select places to encourage guests to pause and contemplate what can be perceived from these special locations.
- The experience opportunities of some of these places might be augmented with traditional or contemporary communications to inform guests and explain the less visible aspects of the views.

Enhancement of guest welcome and orientation services - Adopting the role of hosts, discussion participants recognized the importance of communicating a clear sense of welcome and arrival to each and all types of guests; a welcome which would communicate the diverse array of natural and cultural heritage experiences opportunities afforded throughout the Corridor and one which would encourage guests to explore the many component reaches of the Corridor.

The information and welcome services and facilities would be a shared undertaking supported by the travel industry of the Corridor. It would be standardized to ensure quality service and consistent and up to date information distribution.

Collectively, the following array of services will contribute to the growing the Corridor’s identity:

- A full service website for the Corridor,
- Two Gateway guest orientation facilities and a network of guest information services,
- Geo-fencing - virtual welcome and online information / orientation service,
- Concierge services and vested ambassadors.

Networking - The orientation to motivate corridor-long exploration and recreation experiences, in part, calls upon the tourism industry and associated hosts to devise means to offer a more seamless array of guest services and perhaps to align experience opportunities into packages or collaborative offerings of complementary programs and services.

Participants suggested that a movement be initiated to strengthen the networking between like service providers, such as:

- inns and B&Bs,
- private and public sector camping providers,
- day and multi-day experience opportunity outfitters,
- artisans and their boutiques and displays,
- marinas and boat associated rental services,
- bicycle and other associated land based exploration equipment rental services,
- natural and cultural heritage experience facilitators, such as Parks Canada, Ontario Provincial Parks, conservation area agencies, nature trusts, museums and other heritage sites,
- heritage mills and other heritage buildings and associated experience opportunities,
- festival organizations.

Further, these networks of like hosts would have a strengthened basis upon which to align between networks to create complete attraction, accommodation, transportation and culinary experience opportunities.

Adoption and growth of “Host / Guest” culture - The foregoing welcome and orientation services are extensions of a fundamental orientation to “hosting guests” which it was recommended for adoption by the Corridor’s travel industry, as a whole.

The adoption would require that all staff providing information and guidance to guests have a basic awareness and understanding of the experience opportunities and support programs and services available for guests. This knowledge would be most highly developed for the immediate area of its distribution, i.e. the community or the attraction and its surrounding area; and would also include a basic knowledge of these same attributes of the Corridor as a whole.

Hosts would have an awareness of the information distribution system and how to advise and support guests in benefiting from the system. To this end, they suggested the following investments in staff knowledge development:

- Provide opportunities to acquire first-hand knowledge of the experience opportunities
- Provide special training for staff to enhance hosting capacities of guests (EQ based)
- Equip staff with web-based terminals to support the dissemination of up to date information
- Develop a Rideau Quality Assurance program respecting experience opportunities and services.

Working Together - Throughout the stakeholder discussions, it was repeatedly expressed that to fully realize the tourism potential of the Rideau Canal Heritage Corridor significant change within the tourism industry ability and orientation to “work together” was required.

Participants noted that while guests may perceive the Corridor as a single experiential tourism destination – particularly in light of its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site – the reality is that the Corridor is a loosely linked conglomeration of tourism entities.

In all stakeholder discussions it was repeatedly suggested that, perhaps based upon an assessment of the VEOC:

- A shared direction should be established,
- A single leadership body should be established,
- A single industry development plan for the Corridor should be developed,
- A single marketing strategy for the Corridor should be developed.

A VEOC contains an array of ideas and initiatives, some actions “doable” immediately (simple innovations and enhancements), some in the first few years and some when opportunity permits. It is future oriented and immediately relevant.

This integrated VEOC document outlines at the Corridor level:

- Stakeholder expectations for change
- Enhancements and innovations for experience opportunities
- Opportunities for working together
- Short and medium term “doable” actions

The integrated VEOC is followed by highlights of Reach specific discussions respecting these four items.

- Reach: Lower Brewers to Newboro
- Reach: Newboro to Rideau Ferry
- Reach: Rideau Ferry to Merrickville
- Reach: Merrickville to Long Island Locks
- Reach: Long Island to Ottawa Locks
- Reach: Kingston to Lower Brewers Lock

This VEOC is a resource tool - an interconnected series of Corridor and Reach-specific idea frameworks. Its components are designed to stand alone and as a collective reference. It is a basis for hosts to collaboratively advance in their realization the Rideau’s uncommon potential.

