

Our operation is located southwest of Whistler in the beautiful Callaghan Valley. We are a privately held corporation with 23 local shareholders and have been in business since 1981. Presently, we employ nine full time employees and 4 part time to run our commercial adventure tourism winter product based on ski and snowshoe venues.

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, we operated a 24-person, full-service backcountry lodge which enjoyed an occupancy rate of 87% for our 120-day winter program. Our customer base was largely local Vancouver area (60%), Seattle/Portland (20%) rest of Canada (10%) and other (10%).

A good portion of our clientele is repeat business. Our web-based reservation system books out significant blocks of time, typically one year in advance. Our target demographic is a mid-aged, affluent, educated, active lifestyle persons looking for authentic experiences. Marketing is largely web based.

This past year, after a monumental amount of work producing a variety of safety plans (accommodation, F&B, transport and operations) tailored to our modified capacities, we were able to open up under full compliance with Provincial Health Officer regulations. I can not stress how much additional work this entailed. Everyone of our customers had to be screened, educated on new protocols, administered Covid Risk acknowledgements and briefed on changes in venue format. Extra personnel were hired for cleaning, sanitizing and monitoring for compliance. With these precautions, we were successful in operating for the period December 1st through to the PHO ordered shut down on March 29th without any positive cases of Covid contact or transmission.

Bookings for the winter season have fallen about 58% from last year's numbers. While the wage benefit subsidy program has proved to be the difference between viability and insolvency, it remains very uncertain whether the business can absorb any further instability in the marketplace. The capital projects we had budgeted for have had those accounts fully utilized just to stay afloat and with that loss so goes the ability to add or re-invent products that might drive increased visitation. Adventure Tourism truly needs more help in the way of infrastructure enhancement and/or marketing initiatives if it is to survive.

Travel restrictions have been the real killer. Here in the Sea to Sky Corridor the PHO surprisingly drew a demarcation line within Vancouver Coastal Health Unit and declared Whistler as a non-local ski destination and specifically told Vancouverites not to travel here. On the night of that announcement, we lost a substantial portion of our bookings for the year. We were left to eke out a living from local area residents.

We pursued that local market with determination. Fortunately, the efficacy of the PHO operating guidelines proved correct. With the appropriate measures in place, it showed that it was possible to provide safe multi-night visits to unrelated persons in accordance with strict operating guidelines.

However, this effort was diminished on March 29th and the PHO order when we, who out of necessity, are also in the food service industry, were all tarred with the same brush, summarily branded the bad guys and shut down with less than 24-hour notice. Certainly, there was a lot of room for a better roll out including consultation prior to such a drastic measure being taken. Not only are we left with spoiled groceries, unemployed loyal staff and a whole range of clients holding us responsible for the loss of their reservation fees, but also, so discouraged by the unilateral action when we had demonstrated having been Team players the entire time. The decision to make a single sweeping shut down of indoor dining without advance warning is the single biggest and costly blunder to BC's Tourism sector coming out of the pandemic.

I am sure that some people in the accommodation/f&b sector will survive. Tourism will suffer from morale problems as we all try to dig our way out of accumulated debt. Creating new buzz will be a challenge. Not sure anyone in this sector will be keen to join government initiatives given the Province's insistence that it was the private sector's responsibility to effectively control the pandemic. My personal feeling is that we were led to believe that we were all in this together only to find that government abrogated their responsibility and authority and pinned all of the negative outcomes on the private sector who was only following the PHO guidelines.

Sorry to sound so bitter but this past year in Tourism has not been pleasant .

Brad Sills
Principal owner
Callaghan Country Wilderness Adventures Ltd (CCWA)