

“Place as Product”

A Place-Based Approach to Cultural Tourism

Steven Thorne

Cultural tourism is a fast-growing and lucrative segment of the North American travel industry. However, for a city or region to realize its potential for cultural tourism, its destination marketing organization (DMO) must:

- possess a holistic understanding of culture,
- understand the city or region’s cultural character, and
- understand the travel motivations and behaviours of cultural tourists.

These “three understandings” then become the basis for cultural tourism that is *place-based* rather than *attractions-based*. Capitalizing on a destination’s unique identity, cultural character, and “sense of place”, place-based cultural tourism maximizes a destination’s appeal to cultural tourists, and maximizes a destination’s profit from cultural tourism.

Whither cultural tourism?

For the past decade, the growth of cultural tourism (known also as cultural heritage tourism) has challenged cities and regions to capitalize on their cultural tourism assets. Once regarded as a niche market, cultural tourism has emerged as a major market segment. In the United States, 21 percent of all domestic trips now include cultural experiences.¹ In Canada, domestic trips that include museums and galleries, or cultural performances, or historic sites, far exceed trips that include downhill skiing, or golfing, or theme parks, or cruising, or fishing, or casino gambling.²

Although cultural tourists are distributed across all age and income cohorts, well-heeled baby boomers drive the cultural tourism market. Motivated by a desire for experiential learning and enrichment, culture-consuming boomers earn more, spend more, travel more frequently, and stay longer than other tourists in the destinations they visit. They are the tourism industry’s best friends. That said, DMOs responsible for cultural tourism marketing often do not understand culture – the very product they are attempting to sell. The result? Most DMOs engage in attractions-based cultural tourism that promotes the destination’s cultural icons: its first-tier museums, galleries, festivals, and heritage sites.

Like a renaissance tapestry whose mid-ground and background elements have been stripped away – depriving the foreground of its context – attractions-based cultural tourism focuses on “foreground” cultural icons while overlooking the destination’s most precious asset: its unique identity, its cultural character, its sense of place. Sense of place is the characteristic that most distinguishes one destination from another. It is the ingredient that makes a destination distinctive, authentic, and memorable. It is what cultural tourists most value.



Before outlining a place-based approach to cultural tourism, let us review the attractions-based approaches to cultural tourism as practiced by most cities and regions.

Most commonly, a destination's cultural icons – its first-tier museums, galleries, festivals, and heritage sites – are positioned within the destination's leisure travel campaign. Sometimes, a marquee attraction, usually a blockbuster exhibit or a theatrical production, will be paired with accommodation and marketed as a cultural getaway package. Occasionally, in major cities, a stand-alone cultural campaign will market the city's first-tier cultural attractions in an effort to position the city as a cultural destination. Finally, a city or region will sometimes aggregate a single type of cultural attraction (e.g., artist studios, wineries, live music venues) to form an artists' route, a wine trail, or a music “crawl”.

Each of these attractions-based approaches will lure cultural tourists. Each will return dividends. However, each is also *supplier-driven*, conceived from the vantage point of suppliers (i.e., the cultural attractions) that the destination is seeking to sell.

This is the Achilles' heel of attractions-based cultural tourism: the effort begins with suppliers, not customers.

Table 1: Attractions-based approaches to cultural tourism

Campaign type	Experiences included	Target market
Leisure travel campaign	First-tier cultural attractions + other leisure experiences	All leisure travelers
Cultural getaway	Blockbuster exhibit or play	Cultural tourists
Stand-alone cultural campaign	First-tier cultural attractions	Cultural tourists
Route, trail, or crawl	Cluster of like attractions	Specific cultural tourism cohort

Orient to the customer



As distinct from attractions-based cultural tourism, place-based cultural tourism is *customer-oriented*. It is conceived from the vantage point of the cultural tourists that a destination seeks to attract. Such an approach mirrors the manner in which most goods and services are brought to market: consumer behaviour informs product development, which then drives manufacturing and retail. Place-based cultural tourism:

- employs a holistic process for destination planning that is specific to cultural tourism, and
- markets the destination’s cultural experiences in a manner that targets the behaviours of cultural tourists.

By embracing a customer-oriented, place-based approach – an approach that targets how cultural tourists behave – a destination can achieve the ideal outcomes of any tourism initiative: to maximize the destination’s appeal, to maximize visitor length of stay, and to maximize visitor spending.

Inventory the experiences

In place-based cultural tourism, the first step is to inventory, assess, and categorize *all* the cultural tourism experiences in a given city or region.

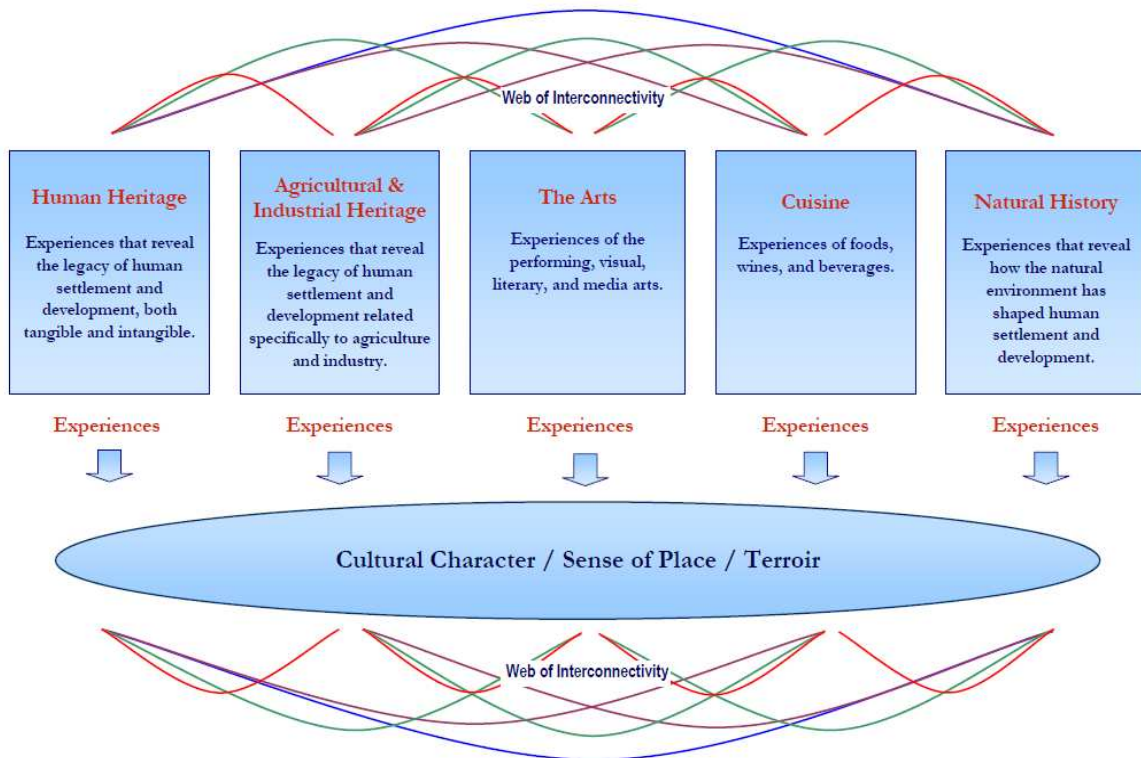
The inventory is holistic and comprehensive. Five *cultural clusters* form the basis of the inventory: human heritage, agricultural and industrial heritage, the arts, cuisine, and natural history. In turn, these five cultural clusters are sub-divided into discrete *categories of cultural experience* that capture the full range of cultural expression of a place and its people.

Of the five cultural clusters, natural history is perhaps the most unexpected. It shouldn't be. The land shapes its people, and people shape their land. Culture cannot be understood or appreciated without interpreting the land, even in an urban environment.

In a large city or region, the inventory may capture as many as 200 cultural experiences, extending well beyond the iconic museums, galleries, festivals, and heritage sites that predominate in attractions-based approaches. A smaller city or town will have fewer cultural experiences, although the number will be surprising nonetheless. Moreover, when each cultural experience is assigned to its appropriate cluster and category, the destination's cultural character, sense of place, and "terroir"³ is revealed.



Chart 1: The inventory



Cultural character

Every destination has its own cultural character, shaped by its social and cultural development and by the type, quantity, and quality of its cultural experiences. Less tangible cultural experiences such as customs, traditions, and folklore are also key components of a destination’s cultural character.

Uncovered through the inventory process, and put on paper using narrative and graphic elements, a destination’s cultural character is a central element in destination planning. It shapes the brand. It informs the marketing campaign. It provides a context for visitors to understand and interpret the destination’s cultural tourism experiences.

In cultural tourism, *place is product*. The destination’s cultural character defines the place and helps to conceptualize the product. It is the cornerstone of place-based cultural tourism.

Weave a tapestry of place

Human Heritage (Tangible)	PPM Categories		
	Lead Experiences	Supporting Experiences	Sustaining Experiences
Aboriginal heritage experiences			
Archaeological sites			
Architecture			
Archives			
Cultural & historic districts			
Heritage events & festivals			
Historic homes			
Historic sites			
Human heritage museums			
Libraries			
Living history sites			
Monuments			
Other (specify)			
Other (specify)			
Other (specify)			
Note: Categories above are representative, not exhaustive.	Totals	Totals	Totals
Human Heritage (Intangible)			
Customs & traditions			
Language & idioms			
Folklore (songs & stories)			
Religion			
Other (specify)			
Other (specify)			
Other (specify)			

PPM: Human Heritage

built heritage, its art and music, its language and traditions – along with its museums, galleries, festivals, heritage sites, and the other “usual” cultural experiences that a visitor might expect. Just as a renaissance tapestry tells a unique story, a tapestry of place reveals a unique destination – one that is like no other.

Design themed routes

Guided by the destination’s cultural character and by each PPM, themed routes will emerge to link the destination’s cultural experiences – each route a thread that helps to reveal the larger tapestry of place.

Of course, different cultural tourists have different areas of cultural interest – different threads they will want to explore. To this end, each route should target one or more of the four *cultural tourism cohorts* that

When a place-based destination is taken to market, each cultural experience is positioned strategically. To this end, a product positioning matrix (PPM) is developed for each of the five cultural clusters. Each PPM is divided into three categories: lead, supporting, and sustaining experiences. These three categories correspond to the foreground, mid-ground, and background of the renaissance tapestry referenced above. Depending on which PPM category each experience is assigned to, each will have greater or lesser prominence in the marketing campaign.

Taken as a whole, a place-based cultural tourism destination might best be described as a *tapestry of place*. Among other elements, the tapestry is composed of the destination’s people, its history, its folklore, its cuisine, its natural and



compose the larger population of cultural tourists: heritage enthusiasts, visual arts enthusiasts, performing arts enthusiasts, and wine and culinary enthusiasts.⁴ By so doing, the destination will offer its visitors a variety of tour options and experiences from which to select.

Market the place as the product



When taken to market, a place-based cultural tourism destination invites the visitor to experience much more than the destination's cultural "attractions". The attractions are there, but they are *expressions* of the destination's culture rather than its embodiment. The branding, imaging, and messaging developed for the marketing campaign communicates the destination's cultural character and sense of place as much as it profiles the attractions.

Research shows that cultural tourists rely extensively on the Internet to plan their travel.⁵ Accordingly, a destination website/portal, featuring a place-based aesthetic combined with high functionality, will pay significant dividends. Fully realized, it should enable a visitor to "sense the place", explore the destination and its routes, search for cultural experiences by type and by timeframe of the visit, build custom itineraries, and book accommodation.

Conclusion

By the year 2020, the combined Canadian/U.S. population between the ages of 55 and 74 will swell to 83.5 million – a 39 percent increase from 2008.⁶ This is the Canadian/U.S. baby boom – the most affluent and educated generation in North American history. Boomers are driving the market for cultural tourism today. Once retired, they will drive it for years to come.

Culture-consuming boomers are savvy, sophisticated travelers who seek learning and enrichment. In the ever-more competitive world of tourism, destinations that embrace holistic, customer-oriented, place-based cultural tourism will eclipse other destinations that cling to conventional, supplier-driven, attractions-based approaches.

At the same time, evidence is mounting that destinations which embrace place-based cultural tourism come to know and value their culture more fully, ensuring its preservation and stewardship for the benefit of citizens and tourists alike. To this end, the principles and practice of cultural planning can facilitate civic engagement with, and contributions toward, place-based cultural tourism.⁷

In sum, through place-based cultural tourism, cities and regions can reap tourism dividends *and* sustain the sense of place that makes each destination one to treasure.

¹ Travel Industry Association of America. *The Historic/Cultural Traveler*, 2003 Edition.

² Statistics Canada. *Canadian Travel Survey, Domestic Travel 2004*.

³ A term borrowed from French viticulture, "terroir" can be loosely translated as "the essence of the earth". It denotes the unique cultural character of a place and its people.

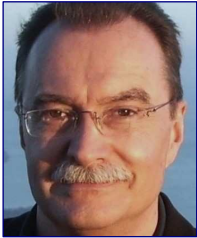
⁴ The four cultural tourist cohorts are profiled in the Canadian Tourism Commission's *Travel Activities and Motivation Survey (TAMS)*, Segmentation Reports, 2000 - 2003.

⁵ According to the 2003 edition of *The Historic/Cultural Traveler* (Travel Industry Association of America), 58 percent of frequent cultural travelers report using the Internet for travel planning. This figure has undoubtedly risen substantially since 2003.

⁶ David Baxter, *Urban Futures*, Vancouver, BC.

⁷ With roots in Australia, Europe, and the U.K., cultural planning is a holistic approach to the development of creative cities that is being embraced by a growing number of Canadian and U.S. jurisdictions. Proponents of place-based tourism such as Dan Shilling (*Civic Tourism, The Poetry and Politics of Place*, 2007, Prescott, Arizona: Sharlot Hall Museum Press) espouse precepts of cultural planning and civic engagement in the service of destination development and management.

About the author



Steven Thorne has worked in Canada's cultural sector for 30 years. For the past decade, he has specialized in planning, developing, and marketing cultural tourism destinations. His clients have included Parks Canada, Tourism British Columbia, Ontario's Ministry of Tourism, and the Province of Prince Edward Island. In 1999, Steven helped to develop *Packaging the Potential* – the Canadian Tourism Commission's national business strategy for cultural heritage tourism. More recently, he authored the 100-page manual *Building Place: Planning & Developing a Cultural Tourism Destination* for the Bonavista Institute of Cultural Tourism. Steven works independently and as an associate of Edinburgh-based

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