

6.6 Road Touring

6.6.1 Resource Assessment

Discussion

Road tours are guided tours that take place on paved or gravel roads. They include the use of buses, mini buses as well as motorcycles. For gravel roads, comfortably and safely equipped large Sport Utility Vehicles are preferred. Road tours require high scenic values and corresponding viewpoints and points of interest. Tours can be linked to a destination with an outstanding feature, lodge, community or as part of a greater regional / provincial tour. Tours can be linear or circle. A tour can be part of a marine cruise or rail tour.

Road tours are ideal for those individuals seeking an adventure in safety and comfort and for those who do not choose or are unable to take one of their own vehicles.

Table 6.6-1: Regional SWOT Analysis for Road Touring

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Strength | Destination feature (including the "Hill"), linkage to BC Ferries and the Chilcotin, infrastructure and community support, growing demand. Logging roads that lead to tourism features. |
| Weakness | Limited roads, road deactivation (Forest Service roads and Forest Company licensed roads), road, trail and site maintenance, lack of designated areas, safety concerns on active logging roads and the "Hill", scheduling with BC Ferries. Lack of roadside attractions and interpretive documentation. |
| Opportunity | Circle tour opportunities (local and regional), linkages with other tour types (marine and air), nature and cultural interpretive tours, linkages with other activities (hiking, air tour) |
| Threats | Conflict with sensitive wildlife habitats, high operating costs, competition. |

Road Tours and the Mid Coast

The Mid-Coast contains a single paved road suitable for this product (Highway 20 to Williams Lake) and a number of gravel roads providing access to high value features. The success of the product is linked to the BC Ferry route and the promotion of the natural beauties of British Columbia and the region.

Paved road tours along Highway 20 can link Bella Coola to the Chilcotin plateau and Williams Lake. A significant section of Highway 20 is the "Hill", a single lane dirt road wedged between sheer wall and cliff with 18 percent grade switchbacks and no guardrails to keep drivers from sliding off. There are pull-overs along this stretch to allow room for large transport trucks to pass and for drivers to cool their brakes. The road winds over Heckman Pass and descends to the Bella Coola Valley for 9 kilometers. Completed in 1953, it was built by the resolve of the community to link with the rest of the Province.

A number of paved road tours can be developed within the Bella Coola Valley including:

- a *provincial* circle tour from Vancouver that includes a marine cruise (using a private vessel or the BC Ferry route from Port Hardy), a road tour between Bella Coola and Williams Lake (includes the Bella Coola Valley and the Chilcotin), and rail or road tour from Williams Lake to points beyond;
- a *regional* tour linking Williams Lake, the Chilcotin and Bella Coola (can be part of a provincial tour package);
- a *local* valley tour to the thrills of the “Hill”, the grizzly viewing potential around Tweedsmuir Lodge and stops along the Highway to take in local features. There is the potential for linking a float down the Bella Coola River from the Atnarko River.

Gravel road tours can be linked to the many Forest Service roads within the valleys that merge into the Bella Coola watershed. The tours can include forestry practices interpretation of past and present harvesting techniques and forest practices. The most notable tours include the following.

- The 24 kilometer Forest Service road along the Nusatsum River to Odegaard Falls and Nusatsum Lake. Odegaard Falls is a fine destination for picnics or hiking, and offers a view of the falls, which cascade about 200 metres down into the East Nusatsum Valley. Trailhead for the Ape Lake Trail and trail to view of Purgatory Mountain (part of the Monarch Icefields).
- The Cacohtin road provides quick access to a small glacier. Sallompt provides access to lost lake. Shootha accesses three trails.
- In Tweedsmuir Park, a tour along the Atnarko River coupled with a hike towards the 260-meter Hunlen Falls.

Formerly, the Clayton Creek Forest Service road from the estuary of Bella Coola to the lookout in the vicinity of Blue Jay Lake provided excellent viewing opportunities. However, the road to Larso Bay and the "Big Cedar Tree (a five meters wide red cedar), have been decommissioned and due to high risks will not be reopened. Trails from Jay Lake provide access to rolling alpine.

Forest Service roads are subject to closures and consideration for this possibility must be accounted for.

The road tour can be linked to the culture and heritage of the Bella Coola Valley. The Nuxalk people have historically derived their sustenance from the bounty the land and the rich marine resources and trade was an important component of life. Trade routes between the coast and the interior have a record of almost 6,000 years of use. The richness of the land and trade allowed time for arts and ritual. The Nuxalk continued presence as a people and the subtle, sometimes obvious historical evidence of their past heightens the feeling of mystery and wonder for the recreationist along the Bella Coola Valley. Later migrations of people include Alexander Mackenzie who utilized the Nuxalk-Carrier grease trail to reach the Pacific Ocean in 1793, travelling through the Bella Coola Valley. Later migrations include the 120 Norwegian settlers who arrived and settled in the Bella Colla Valley in 1894 following pastor Christian Saugstad of the Lutheran Free Church to what he called 'New Norway'. Later migrations included those who arrived to harvest and process the natural

resources. Evidence can be seen in settlements and timber harvesting. There are education and interpretive opportunities that can only enhance the road tour product.

6.6.2 Market, Economic and Social Assessment of Road Touring

Competition

At least ten bus tour companies regularly travel to Bella Coola during the summer and early fall months. Some visit Bella Coola once or twice per season, while others arrive five or six times over the season. Most of these companies use large, conventional buses that transport from 32 to 40 passengers, however there is a small but growing number of tours that use smaller vehicles, with capacity ranging from 6 to 12 passengers.

The bus tours originate in Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, Seattle, Arizona, Kamloops and other cities, and are generally on a circle trip through the Chilcotin, Bella Coola Valley and Vancouver Island. In many cases, tour buses travel west-bound, stay one or two nights in Bella Coola, and leave on the Monday morning ferry. This concentration of traffic in Bella Coola on weekends occasionally strains the capacity of the hotels. However, at least two or three tours are now expected to arrive by ferry on different days, thus diverting some traffic away from the weekends.

During their stay in Bella Coola, bus tour passengers spend time sightseeing, engaging in recreational activities such as wildlife viewing and photography, and shopping. Key attractions include the Bella Coola townsite, the museum, the heritage house, local falls, the farmers market, Walker Island, a fish hatchery and church attendance. Most of the tours employ locally-based step on guides to provide interpretation and historical information.

The volume of conventional bus tours each season is growing at a reasonable rate. Even better growth is expected for smaller tours, where visitors fly into the area to engage in specific activities. For example:

- Natural Habitat Adventures (a tour company based in Colorado) provides six day tours to visitors who arrive by airplane. A mini-bus or van transports visitors from the airport to Tweedsmuir Lodge, and provides short road trips to the Atnarko River, grizzly viewing sites, and the Bella Coola village. Linkages with a helicopter tour or boat trip to Alexander Mackenzie Rock are also offering.
- Elder Hostel has offered three packages which include the Bella Coola Valley during the past few years. One of these included a rail trip to Williams Lake, transportation by conventional bus to Bella Coola and then the usage of small local buses during their stay in Bella Coola. The visitors then flew back to Vancouver.
- Presently, there are no locally-based road tours between Bella Coola and Williams Lake, although there have been two attempts to offer this kind of tour in the past. This could represent an important opportunity in the local tourism industry. Many through-travellers during the summer months would like to learn more about Bella Coola, and a short road tour (say, of a half day duration) would give them the

means to do so. This would prove to be another way of extending visitors' stays. A representative of Visitor Information in Williams Lake points out that there is strong latent demand for this type of product. The key challenge is to sustain a new operation long enough to build ridership and profitability.

Market Demand

Touring comprises a major share of the North American tourism market. A survey carried out in several US cities in 1999 showed that 35 percent of travellers cited touring as a key motivation for travelling. Touring can include touring small towns and villages, taking driving tours, visiting large cities, visiting historic sites, visiting museums, galleries and cultural sites, and parks. Altogether this segment accounts for 9.7 million potential visitors in the US.

The touring market in US cities tends to be characterized as follows:

- more than half are female;
 - less likely to have children under 18 in their household (30 percent);
 - 13 percent between ages of 65 and 74;
 - higher education attainment.
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- Bus tours also appeal to the “mature” segment of the tourism population. This is defined as travellers between the ages of 55 and 74 with annual household incomes over US\$50,000. Mature travellers generally do not have children, and are the most likely to be married (75 percent). The Pricewaterhouse Coopers survey results show that a high proportion of “mature tourists” have a preference for visiting Canada.

Travelers are drawn to bus tours for a number of reasons. Tours provide a comfortable means of transportation, as well as safety and variety. They can provide passengers with culture, education, adventure or romance. Generally speaking, tours provide enriching experiences to a market that is aging. They also offer a wide variety of links to other experiences, such as nature and wildlife observation, historical or cultural interpretation, and travel by other modes of transportation, such as boat or ferry.

The demand for road tours is growing worldwide. A Vancouver-based tourism broker indicates that the number of bus tours in BC has increased during the past five years. The clientele on larger, conventional buses tends to be older, particularly visitors from overseas. Tours by smaller buses or mini-vans attract younger tourists seeking a more active experience, possibly off-road.

Bus tour passengers generally prefer a circle route, and prefer not to repeat the same terrain. This explains the increase in bus tours travelling from Interior BC to the Mid Coast and the North Island.

Land Use and Planning Impacts

Existing Recreation Uses

No conflict with existing recreation uses is likely.

Other Land Uses

Off-road tours depend on the availability of Forest Services roads. As it is Ministry of Forests' policy to decommission forestry roads after a certain length of time, it could reduce the number of options for off-road tours. Harvest practices may also affect visual quality near paved or Forest Service roads. No other conflicts with land use is foreseen.

Community Use or Planning

The development of local road tours will generate economic benefits for the communities of the Bella Coola Valley because:

- all revenues would be realized at the local level; and,
- the tours will extend the average stay of some through-traffic, and likely generate more spending at local hotels, restaurants and stores.

Tours that impart historical or cultural education would have the added benefit of reinforcing awareness on the part of both native and non-native residents and visitors to the Mid Coast. Educating visitors about the past and present Bella Coola Valley will contribute to its image as an interesting and exciting place to experience.

Employment Impacts

Seasonal employment would be generated for drivers, guides, and in the areas of marketing and operations. Training will likely be required for drivers and guides, therefore contributing to the caliber of the local labour force.

Regulatory or Crown Tenure Requirements

Park use permits are required for operating an off-road tour in any provincial parks, such as Tweedsmuir. Liability insurance is also an important consideration.

Level of Community Support

Locally-based road tours comply with the economic development goals of the communities of the Bella Coola Valley. Most existing tours in the area have been initiated by non-locals, however it is recognized that these generate ongoing revenue for the business of the Bella Coola Valley. A venture initiated locally would very likely receive local support, although the inclusion of First Nations attractions must be treated with sensitivity and the full cooperation of the Nuxalk. As the Nuxalk are concerned with protecting their cultural and spiritual sites, and developing tourism at a different pace, a tour operator that plans to include any First Nations attractions or interpretation should work in close consultation with the Nuxalk.

Infrastructure Requirements

A bus, mini-van or possibly four wheel drive vehicle will be required for delivering road tours. If it is a circle tour that include water transportation, then a small craft that seats at least 5 or 6 passengers would be required.

General Capital Requirements

Typically, a moderate initial investment is required for a road tour venture. The cost of purchasing a van or mini-bus will likely range from at least \$25,000 to \$50,000, depending on whether it is new or used. It may be possible to make vehicle leasing arrangements instead of purchasing. It is also our understanding that there is a small fleet of school buses in Bella Coola that may be available for hire during the summer months, although this would depend on availability and school district policy.

Table 6.6-2 analyses each geographical unit using resource, market, economic and social criteria. The rationale for the boundaries of these geographic units is discussed in Section 5.2 of this report. Areas with the highest potential for the Road Tour Product have been identified as *polygons* on the map and are described in Table 6.6-3.



Norwegian house in Bella Coola: photo by Warren Fox

Table 6.6-2: PRODUCT ANALYSIS TABLE: ROAD TOUR

| Unit Name and Number | | Mountains & Trade Routes (5) | | |
|--|----------------------|--|--|--|
| Resource Analysis | | Regional | Local - paved | Local - off road |
| Uniqueness of Key Features | Setting | High | High | Medium |
| | Geography | Medium | High | High |
| | Wildlife | Medium | Medium | Medium |
| Supportive Resources | Scenic Values | High | High | High |
| | Number of roads | Low | Low | Low |
| | Significant features | Medium | Medium | High |
| Existence of Supportive Infrastructure (lookouts, stops) | | Low | Low | Low |
| Associated Products | | Cultural Observation, Nature Observation, Adventure, Marine Touring, Hiking | | |
| Significance of Associated Products | | High | High | High |
| Access to Sub Unit Area | | High (BC Ferry and Highway 20) | High (BC Ferry and Highway 20) | High (BC Ferry and Highway 20) |
| Access from Staging Area to Optimal Features | | High (Bella Coola) to Medium (Odegaard Falls and the Big Tree) | High (Bella Coola) to Medium (Odegaard Falls and the Big Tree) | High (Bella Coola) to Medium (Odegaard Falls and the Big Tree) |
| Prime Season | | Spring, summer, fall | Spring, summer, fall | Spring, summer, fall |
| RESOURCE DISCUSSION | | - the Road Tour along Highway 20 includes views of the high peaks that flank the valley, the Bella Coola River as it winds to the coast, the changing biogeoclimatic zones and the opportunity to see wildlife including grizzly bear. - Where there is the possibility for a circle tour, the opportunity should be undertaken. - Culture interpretation of the rich First Nations and immigrant histories. High quality features include the petroglyphs close to Bella Coola and the town of Bella Coola. - Nature interpretation associated with the vegetative changes, the relationship of the river to the grizzlies and salmonid species and rural relationships to the landscape. | | |
| COMMUNITIES MOST ABLE TO BENEFIT | | Bella Coola, Hagensborg | | |

| Market, Economic and Social Criteria | | |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Level of Competition | | - regional: low - provincial: medium - international: high |
| Market Demand Potential | | BC, regional and international: high |
| Impact/Conflict | Existing Recreation Use | Low |
| | Other Land Uses | - possible conflict with MoF decommissioning of roads, harvesting plans |
| | Community Use or Plans | - will complement other tourism initiatives, reinforce historical importance of Mid Coast |
| Local Employment Impacts | | Low, seasonal; training requirements |
| Regulatory or Crown Tenure Requirements | | Park use permits |
| Level of Community Support | | Bella Coola: Positive; Nuxalk: unknown |
| Infrastructure Requirements | | Vehicle, roads |
| General Capital Requirements | | Moderate |
| | | |
| POLYGONS WITH GREATEST POTENTIAL | | 1 - The Bella Coola Valley and Tweedsmuir exhibit the greatest potential for product development. |

Refer to Table 6.1-1 for definition of foregoing criteria.

Table 6.6-3: Descriptions of Highest Potential Polygon for the Road Tour Product

| Polygon Number | Description of Polygon |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1 | Focus: Highway 20 Staging Area:: Bella Coola Highway 20 travels through the spectacular scenery of the Bella Coola valley with glimpses of the river and the continual presence of high mountains and steep rock faces. The “Hill”, an 18% section of road is a tribute to the determination of the residents of the Valley to connect to rest of BC - they built it themselves. Historical values mix with the scenic values. Complimenting the highway are the logging roads that lead to Odegaard Falls and the trailhead to Ape Lake (Nusatsum), to a Glacier (the Cacohtin Creek) and the Atnarko Road towards the Hunlen Falls. Road Touring associated product:: Nature Observation, Cultural Heritage Interpretation, Hiking. |