

## ACOA'S EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM STRATEGY

### HOOKING BY THE SEA

ACOA recently launched a new Tourism Strategy, aimed at helping the region's tourist industry adapt to a new trend – experiential tourism – providing visitors with interesting, unique and adventurous experiences in addition to the standard fare of beautiful vistas.

This summer, Rendezvous will profile a few of the industry leaders in this trend.

Today's focus is on Hooking By The Sea in Nova Scotia.

Vicki Graham gets a lot of teasing about the name of her business. "When I go on Twitter, I get some interested contributors who, when they realize what I really do, decline to continue," laughs the owner of Hooking By the Sea in Brier Island, Nova Scotia. "But it is a very catchy name."

What Vicki really does is carry on the traditional art form of 'hooking' rugs. Her web site invites visitors to her rustic location to "... create lasting memories, meet new friends, and carry on the tradition of this ancient art form of rug making."

Tourists who make their way to her studio, located in her home, can learn how to rug hook a simple pattern using the same techniques as were used in years gone by, as well as learning the history of this craft.

But that's not the extent of the experience. Vicki has partnered with other tourist businesses in her picturesque part of Nova Scotia to make any visit a total delight. "We offer all kinds of packages and retreats for any size group that can include everything from whale watching to historical tours (I dress in period costume and revert to my full name of 'Victoria') and taking in the local entertainment," she states. All her packages include breakfast, lunch, dinner & snacks featuring local ingredients and cuisine, a welcome bag full of Brier Island goodies, and wine and cheese to wind down the evening. And of course, a healthy dose of Vicki and her effervescent hospitality.

"I'm an 'army brat' and been a tourist, gone to different places, spent time on beaches, viewed sights, but never really felt fulfilled," she remembers. "I always enjoyed where I'd been, but never felt an 'umph'. I decided I wanted to create something different with my business, offer like-minded visitors something unique in a relaxed atmosphere – something to give them that 'umph'," she laughs.

Those who want to learn about rug hooking and, most importantly, the Maritime island way of life, make their pilgrimage to Hooking By the Sea on Brier Island and by all accounts, like what they find. "These are people who want to reconnect with other people and with history and their heritage. Rug hooking is a shared history because no matter where you come from, every culture had to spin and yarn and hook in one form or another."

Beyond bonding with their past, they also want to bond with others, says Vicki. "We don't just teach spinning and hooking here, I'm inviting visitors into my home to share my passion," she states. "They get the full meal deal – they come in as strangers and leave as part of the family. It's what I do – rug hooking and teaching and listening to people."

She says that her love of her work is what keeps her going, but it was an ACOA-funded workshop

that really got her started down the experiential tourism path. “ACOA and the Annapolis Digby Economic Development Agency helped sent a group of us to an experiential tourism workshop that featured a presenter named Celes Davar (owner and operator of Earth Rhythms in Manitoba, which offers a wide variety of experiences to tourists year-round). He is the epitome of experiential tourism and taught us that there is no limit to the potential in this field but your mind. He opened my eyes to the possibilities and I just ran with it.”

When she returned to Brier Island, she returned to the Annapolis Digby Economic Development Agency for help in developing her business and now offers customized packages of any size. “I’ve been up and running for two years now and it’s been so successful that my next goal is to do corporate packages for large groups,” says Vicki. “They can come on retreat, stay at the Brier Island Lodge, go back to the basics and take a break from all their technology.” She is confident in this plan because of her partnerships in her community. “I don’t run a hotel or a restaurant, but I partner with the ones that do, which leaves me to do what I do best, facilitate. Anything I can’t provide, I will book and arrange.”

A great proponent of experiential tourism, Vicki is adamant that more tourist companies need to grasp this latest concept. “I’ve seen the tourism business change just in the last 18 months,” she says. “In future, people better provide experiential tourism options or they’ll lose out.” And the options have to be authentic, she adds. “If your heart and soul is not in it and you’re not authentic, it won’t work.”

Vicki is preparing for a busy summer and is heading off to New York State in the fall to spread the gospel of experiential tourism. “I’m putting together some experiential packages for a historic inn in the Finger Lake area,” she says. “I visited them this spring to explain the concept and now they want me to help them facilitate a number of experiences for their visitors featuring glass blowing, sheep shearing, local winery tours and cheese making.” Which all goes to prove – good tourism news travels fast and far!