

# SHiFT

## Canmore Cave Tours: A SHiFT Case Study

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# CANMORE CAVE TOURS

Passionate about the world “down under” would be an understatement if you were describing Adam Walker, the owner/operator of Canmore Cave Tours.

An avid spelunker and caving guide since 2003, in 2006 Adam joined the team at Canmore Cave Tours, led by former owner Dr. Charles Yonge. Over the years Adam gained experience in all facets of the company while falling in love with the business as he watched it grow. In 2013 Adam jumped at the opportunity to purchase the company when “Chas” retired and shifted to his new role as cave guru, scouting new caves in southern Alberta’s Bow Valley.

## The Experience, the Goosebumps

Canmore Cave Tours is located in the heart of the mountain village of Canmore, Alberta, set in the heart of the spectacular Bow River Valley. Grotto Mountain, the deep soul of the local caving experience, is a mere five-minute drive from the Canmore Cave Tours office and assembly point.

Once at the mountain, friendly, qualified and experienced guides lead you on the 30-minute hike to Rat’s Nest Cave. Along the way, their tales of the area’s natural history and fascinating underground world help build anticipation for the journey beneath the surface.

The ritual of donning coveralls, kneepads, gloves, helmets, headlamps, safety lanyards and backpacks increases the excitement as the guide outlines the essential safety information and checks guests’ gear. Excitement, trepidation, curiosity, fascination and fear of the unknown can be felt as the anticipation builds and guests are transformed from hikers into true spelunkers (people who enjoy exploring caves).



*Adam Walker, Owner/Operator/Guide, Canmore Cave Tours*



“The cave offers a variety of experiences. Some parts you can easily just walk around, other parts you find yourself sliding down docks or squeezing by tight corners. But all of it is fun. I don’t know what I was expecting a cave to look like, but the formations of the rocks were definitely a highlight of the whole tour.”

*Mike’s Bloggity Blog (Oct, 28, 2015)*

The reality that – [this is a real cave](#) – quickly sinks in as the guides and guests begin twisting their way along sculpted passages, etched by glacial waters, as they work their way to an underground pool grotto. Endless goosebump moments are engraved in the memories of these newly minted cavers as they experience [squeezing, ducking, sliding](#) and feeling disoriented while developing a passionate kinship with their headlamps as their eyes adjust to the dark.

The steady, reassuring voice of the trusted guide, whose name is quickly memorized, is juxtaposed with the immense quiet of the caves and the sounds of trickling water, adding to the thrill of venturing into the underbelly of the earth, an intricate “frozen” honeycomb of ancient, soluble rock, hollowed and eroded by the patient water and immense time.

Guests feel the elemental, eternal blackness, briefly pushed back by the headlamps of their fellow visitors. The sliding pools of light help highlight the “karst” topography of sinuous mineral formations, prehistoric animal bones and other unique features. Together, everyone adjusts to the steady 5 C (41 F) temperature that keeps their minds alert and refreshed.

## A Place where Innovation and Imagination Ignite

As a dreamer, entrepreneur and new owner/operator of Canmore Cave Tours, Adam saw the potential for sharing his love of caving with a much broader audience. Reaching beyond the 4.5-hour and 6-hour tours and team building training that set the foundation for the company, in just two years Adam has diversified the company’s programs and services by adding the following:

- The new family Discovery Hike that involves a “catch-and-release” fossil experience, creek exploration, encounters with a wildlife cam and great storytelling
- One- and two-day excursions to the Gargantua Cave and Cleft Cave in Crowsnest Pass, Alberta
- The 12-hour tour of the Nakimu Caves in Rogers Pass, B.C.
- Canada’s first Spirit in the Mountain Christmas tour that featured five different choirs over five nights, performing in the cave. [Listen to the choir voices in the cave!](#)
- Two, two-day training courses in horizontal and vertical caving
- Evening caving tours targeted to skiers to provide end-of-day activity

Plans are underway to assess the potential for leading an international expedition to Spain, Ireland, England and/or the USA in 2017 for Canmore Cave Tours’ “hard-core” clients, packaging with another new Canadian Signature Experience (CSE) at Mount Norquay – “Climb Via Ferrata” – in Banff National Park, and a three- to five-day kids summer camp partnered with the Canmore Museum and Geoscience Centre.



*New Discovery Tour introduced summer 2015. Photo: Canmore Cave Tours*

## Inspired by our Travel Alberta experiential travel training program “SHiFT: Transforming products to experiences.”

“In the spring of 2015 we started the Discovery Tour, a family-friendly interpretive hike that visits the Rat’s Next Cave area. This was a direct result of the SHiFT: Transforming Products to Experiences training in Jasper a few months earlier.”

*Adam Walker, Owner/Operator*



## The Results are Impressive

In Adam's first two years of running Canmore Cave Tours:

- Visitation increased by 40 percent
- Revenue grew by 35 percent
- Received the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence in 2014 and 2015; currently there are 282 reviews of which 92 percent are five-star
- TripAdvisor ranks Canmore Cave Tours as the #1 of 43 "Things to Do in Canmore"; provincially it ranks 7th, based on 1,034 reviews of "Things to Do in Alberta"
- Diversified their program focus and tour length from 4.5 to six hours for hard-core cavers, to two to three hours and multi-day for families through to the hard-core cavers
- Price points were diversified, ranging from \$35 to \$379 per person; the lower price point tempts new people – especially the local community – to try caving for the first time
- Extended the visitor experience from one cave to four
- Generated two new full-time year-round positions and increased their summer season staff from four to six seasonal employees
- Sold-out capacity for the Christmas choral event for the entire five nights, 24 people per night; the response was so positive, many people had to be turned away
- Doubled the 50-visitor target for piloting the new family Discovery Tour
- On the basis of its Rat's Nest Cave Adventure Tour, Canmore Cave Tours is the first caving company in Canada to be accepted into the Canadian Signature Experience program

## What does experiential travel mean to your business?

"My business is entirely about the experience," explains Adam Walker. "Being able to critically assess all aspects of everything we offer and adjust to what we learn from our visitors is incredibly important. The importance of incorporating stories has really emerged as a vital part of the visitor experience. I'm always aiming to add meaning for our guests by helping them connect with the area's history, the wonders of caving and the stunning beauty of the geological formations."

## Tell us about your visitors and their expectations

"Our ideal guests are those with a sense of adventure, or even a willingness to develop that sense. We do not prefer extreme athletes over couch potatoes; we just want people to have an open mind so that we can help them experience something very unique," says Adam.

"We are starting to make it more accessible. I think the idea of a cave tour has always been scary. But with all this new media, the visuals we're able to offer, the TripAdvisor reviews, the fact that we hosted a choir in the cave and many of the choir members were over 60 years old; this changes perspectives. People start to realize 'Hey, this isn't so inaccessible, I should try it!' We can help you get there – you just have to get to our doorstep first. We've just accessed more people, more diverse backgrounds."



### "Great Experience! Max was Fantastic! Would recommend 100 percent"

"I will admit that we were a little apprehensive about doing this. Myself more so than my boyfriend. Max put us at ease immediately. He is so incredibly positive and knowledgeable about everything related to Rat's Nest Cave and probably every cave remotely close to it. I never once felt unsafe. It does take you out of your comfort zone. There are some very tight squeezes, all of which are optional and Max is with you explaining what is going to happen the whole way. We saw some incredible stalagmites and stalactites and are so glad we went. Ask for Max!"

*5 out of 5 TripAdvisor Rating Dec 2016 by Sarwarren, Calgary*



## Family Fun Adventure

“My whole family had an amazing time on this tour! Lenora at the office went out of her way to book a time to accommodate our schedule. We hiked up the mountain in the dark without headlamps. That was fun! I felt very nervous and somewhat claustrophobic prior to caving. However our tour guide, Brent, was patient, funny, and made sure we had a great experience. I’m so glad we did this together as a family! It’s something we will always remember!”

*5 out of 5 TripAdvisor Rating Jan 2016 by KFreejohns, St. Albert*

## The Guides are the Key to Success

Taking visitors into a new world means building trust for the person leading the way. Although the safety equipment and maintaining the integrity of the caves are paramount, equally important are the guides who share their passion, expertise and confidence with the guests. TripAdvisor provides a continual source of recognition of the guides, who are often mentioned individually; this is a very powerful feedback tool and builds staff pride.

## Extending into International Markets

Being approved by Travel Alberta and Destination Canada as part of the Canadian Signature Experience program, combined with the business development opportunities generated by Travel Alberta’s Canada’s West Marketplace Scholarship Program, has allowed Canmore Cave Tours to begin expanding into international markets and consider outbound travel packages.

**“The Canadian Signature Experience designation adds real credibility and it legitimizes the business to have the backing of these major organizations, with staff and networks to connect us to the right trade partners,”** says Adam Walker.

“If you are interested in moving your company into the international travel trade sphere, you have to make a concerted effort to get there. It takes time; you have to adapt your business, create the right experience, learn the rules of the game for net pricing, booking procedures, work with the different group sizes of your tour operator client, as well as factor in the timing and transportation considerations of the trade client,” says Adam.

“Given the nature of our business and its targeted appeal, if we could achieve 10 percent of our businesses from group and FIT international markets, I’d feel pretty good. The more businesses that add diversity to the perception of travelling in Canada, the better it is for all of us.”





## The Big Challenges

### THERE HAVE BEEN TWO KEY CHALLENGES.

The first is generating awareness with different audiences, particularly with those who enjoy adventure but have never thought of caving. Adam has found that optimizing TripAdvisor and inviting bloggers and travel writers to engage with visitors and write about the business is an effective strategy to acquire 'the language of a visitors' perspective' and harvest the credibility from the reach of their stories.

The second challenge has been in transforming staff (who originally saw themselves as mere cave guides focused on the activity at hand) into valued storytellers, enriching their ability to share relevant stories that personalize the experience. This personalized attention, coupled with these newfound abilities, helps establish a unique sense of place and strengthens the relationship with the staff.

### Key SHiFTS

1. **FROM:** The activity beginning once you are at the cave ...  
➡ • **TO:** The journey beginning with the story online, meeting the guides, the journey to the cave, donning gear, then the caving experience.
2. **FROM:** Thinking about the cave as a place that would only attract caving enthusiasts ...  
➡ • **TO:** The cave as a stage for everything from a family-friendly Discovery Tour to a unique location for a concert series.
3. **FROM:** Focusing on the activity and physical aspects of caving ...  
➡ • **TO:** The importance of incorporating stories into the visitor experience.
4. **FROM:** Offering their own programs, focused exclusively in the caves ...  
➡ • **TO:** Actively seeking like-minded partners and businesses that want to create something new together and also help share the guest and the development risk.

### Unique experience to begin the new year!

"When researching the area, we found Rat's Nest Cave on TripAdvisor and decided to give the cave tour a try. We set up our tour for New Year's Day, 2016. It is as amazing as everyone says and a great way to start the new year! The experience is so unique. This is not a cave tour with lighted paths carved out for you. The only light you have is the headlamp on your helmet. You climb and crawl your way through the cave. Our guide, Brent, was knowledgeable and kind and made sure everyone felt comfortable with all the obstacles we undertook that day. If you are looking for something totally different, an exciting adventure with lots of twists and turns, then make sure to sign up for a tour of Rat's Nest Cave!

"Before you go: The company's website is very informative (great introductory video!) and the people who set up the tours are friendly and helpful, too. But make sure that you understand that if you do the tour in the winter, the 1-km hike to and from the cave entrance is snow and ice covered and quite steep. So make sure you wear appropriate clothing and boots for those winter conditions as it is slippery."

*5 out of 5 TripAdvisor Rating Jan 2016 by KTA89052, Nevada*



## Advice for others interested in experiential travel

1. **Keep a list of “anything goes.”** All ideas have merit in product development – even the craziest and seemingly bizarre. If some don’t pan out, they’ll often lead to variations or other ideas that do work. Often it’s the “crazy” ideas that lead to the most unique experiences.
2. **Collaboration** is a very effective and important element of product design.
3. **Tell stories.** Engage people. Create meaningful experiences.
4. Work with your destination marketing organizations and find ways to invite your community to experience – and enjoy – what you are offering. (Word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool, but remember: it cuts both ways.)
5. **A truly great experience really can sell itself.** Canmore Cave Tours’ Spirit in the Mountain Christmas concert series sold out with virtually no paid advertising – just a unique, local, authentic and engaging product.

When asked about the value of Travel Alberta’s SHiFT: Transforming products to experiences, experiential travel training program, Adam Walker responds “It’s a venue for getting ideas out and discussing them with like-minded people. Even if some ideas are extreme or off the deep end, you can dream out loud and have entrepreneurs who care critique and challenge you to help you refine your thinking.”

Frank Verschuren, manager of the [Destination Canada Canadian Signature Experience](#) program, who has been a content advisor to the course states, “Opportunities for experiential travel should always respond to travellers’ desires to venture beyond the beaten tourist paths. In Canada, that means travel that dives deeper into our country’s natural and/or urban environments in addition to connecting our authentic, local culture that connects with people and enriches their lives. Experiential travel should engage visitors in a series of memorable activities, revealed over time, that are inherently personal and engage the senses. Just like Adam Walker has done, keep this in mind when you SHiFT your thinking on product development.”

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## Thanks!

“Paula Rempel used to work for the Travel Alberta Visitor Information Centre. She came on a tour with us and I swear our bookings jumped ten percent! She started telling everyone that she went caving as a grandmother and they should do it. Her enthusiasm spilled through their team and got everyone excited!

“As a new business owner, this type of support, along with Canada’s West Marketplace, the Canadian Signature Experiences Program and the SHiFT experiential travel training, provided me with the things I needed to learn quickly. It’s really the only way to go.”

*Adam Walker, Owner/Operator, Canmore Cave Tours, AB*