



Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island Tourism Case Studies
Cape Breton Taxi Tours Post-Covid Recovery Strategy
Eleanor L. Anderson



Cape Breton Island has long been lauded as one of the most beautiful Islands in the world. Cape Breton University has delivered well-established tourism and hospitality training for decades and is a leader in the field of such undergraduate training in Canada. The World Tourism Institute (WTI) at CBU is perfectly positioned and timed to leverage, support, and enhance, a growing tourism industry at home and globally.

The World Tourism Institute (WTI) was founded at Cape Breton University (CBU) in 2018 with a strong foundation rooted in the depth and diversity of the Cape Breton Island Tourism Sector, the long history of Tourism and Hospitality programming at CBU and the established industry and community relationships.

In 2022, the WTI secured \$2.24 million, 3 year project running February 2022 to 2025, for training and research funding from the Canadian government to stimulate post-pandemic recovery, build capacity and grow opportunities for Cape Breton Island's Tourism Sector. This project is called the **Cape Breton Island Tourism Training Network (CBITTN)**.

CBITTN Objectives:

- Ensure inclusivity in all development activities.
- Work with Mi'kmaw partners to explore, design and implement community-based credit programs in Indigenous tourism.
- Develop a foundation of accessible, timely and credible research which will support decision-making by the industry and act as a catalyst in innovation and entrepreneurialism in tourism.
- Identify training gaps and needs associated with labour shortages.
- Promote education and professional certifications for the tourism industry, including the development of micro-credentials and customized training programs.

World Tourism Institute

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Please note that the accuracy of these case studies is subject to change since the publication date. The individuals interviewed may no longer be affiliated with the respective tourism operations or businesses. Changes in business practices, ownership, and other relevant details may have occurred since the time of writing.



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INTRODUCTION

Simon MacKay studied tourism and travel management at Napier University in Edinburgh. He worked creating packaged tours in Europe and came to Canada in 2010, first working in western Canada for a tour company before heading east to Sydney, Cape Breton. MacKay has almost twenty years of experience in the travel and tourism sector. When MacKay learned of the taxi tour business in Sydney focused on the cruise sector, he was eager to become involved. While the taxi business was the “bread and butter” of the company, they encountered many cruise ship passengers seeking custom or curated adventures that fit their timeline and budget.

In 2018, he took over the tour component and called the business Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours. The business objective was to meet the needs of the cruise ship passengers visiting the Port of Sydney – a large and growing market. In 2019, Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours launched a website for pre-bookings of the vehicles and guides. However, 2020 brought the Covid-19 pandemic and their hard work and plans came to a standstill. A record number of cruise ships, passengers and crew members were expected that year but, like ports of call around the world, the Port of Sydney was closed with no ships docking in 2020. Since then, business has slowly been strengthening and Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours has worked diligently to expand their partnership base and tour offerings.

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

In 2019, MacKay says there were seven private tour operators in or near Sydney. However, in 2022 there were just three, a result, most likely of the pandemic shut down. Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours has between 25 and 40 seasonal employees, including full and part-time staff. Speaking in April 2023, MacKay was expecting record-breaking 2023 cruise ship visitation numbers over the summer. While he does not have a significant problem recruiting drivers and guides for the business, he says there are challenges with hiring skilled labour.

“Many of our employees are international students studying at Cape Breton University. While they may be friendly and dependable, they do not know Cape Breton Island history, culture, facts, or information to the same level that a local would know.” MacKay says to offset this disadvantage, he has provided Island Ambassador training from the World Tourism Institute at CBU, and he has hired an experienced local guide to prepare information packages and training materials. Also, he has found success by having a recorded audio description which drivers can play in the car for guests. This helps with consistent delivery of accurate information about the Island. The recording also improves safety allowing the driver to play the recording and focus on driving instead of pointing out landmarks and carrying on continuous conversations. The visitors like it because it is a different voice than listening to the driver or guide for hours. Sydney &

Cape Breton Taxi Tours are the first tour operators providing this service other than the large charter buses.

Another challenge for MacKay is ensuring the accuracy of the information that is given to guests, because passengers can now fact check in real time from their smart phones. Today's visitor is more sophisticated than in the past; they want real experiences and top-notch service whether that is in a pre-packaged or a customized tour. Both the information that is presented in the recordings and the information communicated by the driver need to be accurate and easily understood by the visitors.

Most of the clientele who choose Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours are price savvy as well. If they choose a shore excursion offered by the cruise line, there are three providers who need to be paid – the cruise line, the service/experience provider, and the transportation company. Many visitors see a comfortable, safe vehicle with a knowledgeable guide at a reasonable price as the best option for their short visit to Cape Breton Island. The lack of rental car availability in recent years has also worked in the favour of their business.

Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours is dependent upon restaurants and tourist attractions to deliver both excellence and value for their visitors. Sometimes, that means working with tourism operators to explain the expectations of the guests. MacKay has worked to develop and maintain partnerships with tours including Cape Breton Sailing, Jet Ski Baddeck, TNT Outdoor Adventures & Bird Island Boat Tours.

While the business is open year-round, 75% of Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours' business is from cruise passengers. Via a comprehensive website, the tour company shares information with guests before they arrive including the rates for customized hires, the definition of a shared tour and a private tour, the cancellation policy, information on insurance, fees, and how to book and how to pay. They anticipate potential visitor questions and provide the answers online demonstrating they are an experienced customer-centric company. Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours has an active Facebook page, and they encourage questions and dialogue with visitors and, following their experience, they request feedback and online reviews. Tour operators understand that customer feedback is key to growing their business and providing tours that customers want and will recommend to others. In 2023, Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours proudly won a Trip Advisor Travellers' Choice Award.

Simon MacKay is passionate about the fact that if Cape Breton Island is to be successful, it must be competitive, and to be so, the tourism operators must work together. He has seen first-hand that the visitor expectations are on the rise, and this is an important fact that cannot be ignored. Increased training and attention to detail are key to meeting and exceeding those expectations. He notes two examples of tourism industry collaboration in the Ingonish area – Keltic Lodge and Cape Smokey. Both operations are being collaborative and listening to the

feedback that Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours can provide – 6 hours in a vehicle is a wonderful opportunity to hear reactions from guests about their experiences. Also, both Keltic Lodge and Cape Smokey are working with MacKay as a preferred transport provider for their guests. These examples of successful partnerships that can be nurtured and grow over the years due to their mutual benefits.

CONCLUSION

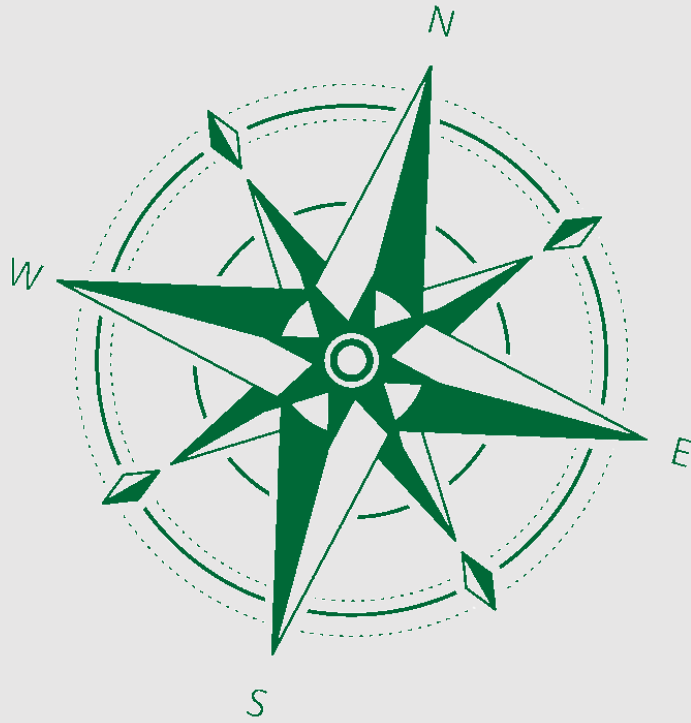
Simon MacKay has grown and diversified his business based on market demand and he has a sincere desire to meet and exceed his guest's expectations. He understands the importance of having his drivers and guides present themselves as professional, knowledgeable, and friendly ambassadors of not only Sydney & Cape Breton Taxi Tours, but of Cape Breton Island. He sees the value and impact of positive referrals from the visitors, and he is focussed on delivering a quality and memorable experience. If he could share a few key messages with the Cape Breton Island tourism industry it would be to welcome new ideas and focus on creating authentic, first-class experiences so that all who visit Cape Breton Island will tell their friends and family and will want to return.

ALTERNATIVE DECISIONS

1. Sydney Taxi Tours could negotiate a deal with the Port of Sydney to be the exclusive small vehicle (6 passenger or less) tour provider to build its business and optimize the growing cruise market.
2. Sydney Taxi Tours should lock down its unique selling proposition and not try to be all things to all people. This would reduce the considerable amount of time required to build, maintain, and grow numerous tourism operator relationships.
3. Sydney Taxi Tours should concentrate efforts on building a compelling brand identity which will not only set them apart from the competition, but it will impact and influence locals who will then either use the tour service or recommend it to others.
4. The power of local influencers can be significant and game-changing for a small company. Consistent messaging in all marketing materials and across all media channels can further grow the business.

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE: STUDY CASE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. How could Sydney Taxi Tours diversify their business, so they are not so dependent on the cruise ship passenger market?
2. How could Sydney Taxi Tours enhance its online/social media presence to maximize its digital marketing strategy?
3. If more tour operators are launched servicing the Unama'ki Cape Breton Island area, and the rental car availability challenges are overcome with plenty of available stock for visitors to choose from, what will be the impact on Sydney Taxi Tours and what actions should they take to ensure their long-term success?
4. How could Sydney Taxi Tours improve their guest experience during longer trips?



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