

Explorers? Edge offers local tourism incentive program this summer



by MICHAEL RILEY Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The tourism industry in Ontario has been hit hard by the impact of COVID-19, and the tourism organization Explorers' Edge is doing something about it in the regions they serve. As part of a partnership announced several weeks ago between Destination Canada and all of Canada's provinces, Destination Canada will be investing \$30 million to spur local tourism over the next 18 months. Explorers' Edge procured funding from this grant to promote hyper local tourism in the Regional Tourism Organization 12 catchment areas of South Algonquin Township, Algonquin Park, Almaguin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka and Parry Sound. This initiative, called Cottage Country Spirit, is to provide incentives in the form of vouchers for permanent and seasonal household residents in these regions to book an experience, like visiting attractions, shops, restaurants, events, or overnight accommodations. The program will be offered from July 16 to Oct. 12, 2020. The South Algonquin Business Association's Angela Pollak describes the 'Cottage Country Spirit' tourism incentive program running this summer, offered through Explorers' Edge. 'They're giving out 3,000 \$50 voucher packages to people with residential addresses in the RTO12 catchment area to spend locally. That's \$150,000 worth of vouchers that will be circulating. We're hoping to drive as many of these people, and vouchers into South Algonquin this summer as possible, but that's only going to happen if we have local vendors accepting them and local residents signing up for them,' she says. Pollak says that Explorers' Edge will be contacting local vendors and residents to sign up to accept the vouchers. She's hoping they can surpass the sign-up record of 13 to 15 people that signed up last year for the Fuel and Fun program. 'SABA is very supportive of connecting our local tourism businesses with Explorers' Edge. They're the organization that goes to bat for us with all things tourism. The Cottage Country Spirit program is similar to the Fuel and Fun program they've run in previous years, except that it's targeted to people who live locally. Explorers' Edge is also providing support for SABA to be able to do individual advertising of our local businesses on our Facebook page,' she says. James Murphy is the executive director of Explorers' Edge, and says that they've been running voucher style programs for a decade now. 'We traditionally run a program called Fuel and Fun and it was a program we ran on promoting spring and fall. So, if you booked two nights accommodation, you'd get a \$25 gas card and two \$25 vouchers. So, with COVID-19, as we were working through this, a couple of things happened,' he says. Murphy says it was their director of strategy and communications (Kate Monk) who coined the term 'Cottage Country Spirit' but it was based on the fact that a couple of things were happening. One is that it was still a state of emergency. Phase 3 is open but they are still trying to stimulate hyper local tourism, getting people to travel in their own backyard, and spend money at local businesses. 'There's such a short window for them to make money. We wanted to make sure that our efforts back their bottom line. Over the past ten years, the vouchers were great because it's an incentive for people to go out and try something new or go to a business or a tourism operator they haven't been to in the past. And what we found is that the voucher triggers, it's usually three times the spend. So, if someone has

a \$25 voucher, they will usually spend on average \$80 or \$90, whether it's a restaurant, an outfitter or an attraction that just gets them in the door and they spend more. So, it's a great way to 'prime the pump' and get people out there exploring and spending money,' he says. Murphy says that in the regions he oversees, like many regions that rely on tourism, there's always some kind of tension between the local residents and the seasonal residents, especially with COVID-19. He says this new initiative is a way to get everybody out, being a tourist in their own backyard, and showing their support and spirit for local tourism. 'And for us, out of all those economies in Ontario in particular, we're dependent on tourism. We really need to prime the pump and get people out there exploring and spending money right now. We've always said we'll take a measured approach and you don't want to bombard the tourism business. They're just getting back into the swing of things too. They're learning and getting their protocols under way too. So, it's a measured approach; start locally, and then as the province opens up and restrictions ease, we can move into other programs that put people further afield,' he says. Murphy says he's happy to have the South Algonquin Township involved and is gratified the region and its businesses are taking such an active role in Explorers' Edge programs. In addition, one of their board members is SABA's Angela Pollak, so he says their voice is heard. 'So, it's great because we speak to those people buying vouchers in Huntsville, Gravenhurst, and Bracebridge, and it's go be a tourist in South Algonquin. Do a day trip, go to Algonquin Park, visit the Mad Musher, go over there and have some lunch and explore the area. It's good in that sense that we have an additional subregion that we can promote locally, and say they're accepting vouchers, they're aware of it. It is the consumer and the tourist experience at the end of the day. We don't want travellers going and walking into a business and they've never heard of the program. So, it's great to really have South Algonquin really step up and say we want to be a part of this and bring some of the other regions in our organization over there for a day trip,' he says. The response to the Cottage Country Spirit initiative has been amazing, according to Murphy. He says it shows that it was much needed and was a good move to make. He says that components of the program came out of the partnership with Destination Ontario and Destination Canada that the Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries Lisa MacLeod announced a few weeks ago, and that they were able to move on it very quickly. 'We've run programs like this before, but this is the biggest business response we've ever had. We have over 200 businesses signed up to accept the vouchers, and it's great to see South Algonquin involved. So, it's been a fantastic response. At the end of the day, small and medium sized businesses produce a lot of tax revenue for the province of Ontario. So, they look at this and say this is great to see, so we produce tax revenue it comes back and impacts our bottom line. These businesses need cash right now to survive. This gives them security and some piece of mind. It's a tough time for them and it gives them hope,' he says. 'We've got to get these businesses through this, so as tourism reopens and is redeveloped, that we have the businesses around to market in the future and keep them alive.'