

Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Quebec



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2016 Trip Report by Manaaki Barrett

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This trip was *made* by the support, encouragement and kindness of a large group of people who saw something of value in my journey, and invested something of themselves into it.

Two people in particular facilitated the physical connection of a Maori in Aotearoa with the Cree of Eeyou Istchee and the Atikamekw of Manawan. Virginie Chadenet and Jean-Michel Perron are both based in Quebec, and work with indigenous First Nations communities to build sustainable tourism skills and develop intercultural communication. Without either of them my trip would not have been worthwhile.

Virginie welcomed me into her home, and connected me with people from several First Nations along the St Lawrence river north of Quebec City, and took me to the Atikamekw people of Manawan. Her generosity and support made half of this trip possible.

Jean-Michel took me on a 4,000km journey through the heart of Quebec, to connect with Cree people ranging from Ouje-Bougoumou to James Bay. His experience and insight into the challenges faced by indigenous communities was shared freely during the dozens of hours on the road through the vastness of Canada. For this I forgive his request that I not play any more Stevie Wonder in the car.

Thanks also to my partner Sandra Cortes, for dealing with my long absence. Thanks to dad for lighting up this path. Thanks to Dave Bamford for encouraging me to pursue this trip. And thanks to the dozens of people who supported me along the way and shared this experience with me.

A bit of background

Indigenous people around the world face challenges to their right to a strong and sustainable cultural identity. Issues include access to land, self determination, poor socio-economic outcomes, and loss of cultural knowledge. This is a topic that I know other people are pursuing directly, with much greater focus and dedication than I am, and I approach as a concerned member of society rather than as an expert.

In my area of influence, I believe that indigenous tourism can be a positive tool to help preserve cultural knowledge, encourage a greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, and improve socio-economic outcomes.

For the last 6 years I've been involved in a small whanau ecotourism business based on Kapiti Island. Through this activity we aim to tell the stories of our tīpuna (ancestors), our whenua (land), and share our worldview and perspectives, while maintaining a physical connection to our Tūrangawaewae (place of cultural connectedness and empowerment).

Through this work, and my father's long involvement in indigenous tourism, I was able to gain exposure to other indigenous tourism operators around the world. With these connections, I set out to gain a better understanding of how indigenous cultural tourism and ecotourism can be developed and sustained within communities, as a tool to help preserve cultural knowledge. I hoped to learn of some of the challenges facing indigenous people in these roles, and see how they are being addressed.

In July 2016 my journey took me to Quebec, Canada, where I spent most of a month travelling between different First Nations communities to experience their take on indigenous cultural tourism. This report will summarise those experiences.

The Trip

Essipit, Innu

On Friday the 15th of July 2016 I arrived in Quebec City, where I was hosted by Virginie Chadenet. Virginie is a biologist and cultural tourism consultant who took me under her wing. After a tour of Old Quebec City we drove north on the north shore of the St Lawrence River to visit the Innu community of Essipit, who conduct a whale watching business on the Saguenay - St Lawrence Marine Park.

The Innu are one of 11 distinct indigenous nations within Quebec. They have been present in northeastern Quebec for several thousand years. Essipit is one of 13 communities within the Innu nation. For a local analogy: Maori could be considered the equivalent of a “nation” and an individual Iwi the equivalent of a “community”.

Along the way we stopped in at the Centre D'Interpretation Archeo, a museum and interpretation centre focussing on the archeological history of human activity in the area. Here I was greeted by an Innu man named Martin, who very passionately and articulately explained the history of his Nation. Unfortunately he did it mostly in French, but I feel I learned a lot through the force of his gesticulations. The centre itself gave context on the arrival and movement of people through the region, from the earliest indigenous nations to the french and english settlers.

Another stop in at a Beluga Whale education centre that Virginie helped establish, a night spent in the town of Tadoussac, and we reach the Innu reservation community of Essipit.

The reservation has the appearance of a small town, with reasonably modern housing and infrastructure. With strong fisheries and tourism economies, and the relative ease of access to the main centre of Quebec City, the Essipit community seems prosperous.



A traditional style Shaputuan dwelling at the Essipit community

The Whale Watching tour was well organised, hosted and conducted by local Innu people, and seemed to take advantage of the extremely rich marine environment in a low impact manner. A small zodiac took half a dozen passengers out on the St Lawrence for several hours observing Fin Whales, Humpbacks, Minke and Beluga.

Essipit seems to be focussed on non-cultural business to sustain a life on their traditional land. Their activities were authentic, successful, and sustainable, but not overtly cultural. This was a positive example of tourism conducted by indigenous people, rather than cultural tourism.

We kept moving.

Wendake, Wendat/Huron

The community of Wendake, part of the Wendat/Huron nation, is located within Quebec City. Due to its location and accessibility Wendake has a well developed tourism infrastructure, which includes a very successful Hotel and Restaurant, and “traditional site”. The Wendake are proud to be the most “market ready” community for indigenous tourism. I began to learn that the definition of indigenous tourism is broad, and the application of its principles varied. My visit to the Wendake “traditional site” confirmed this.

On arrival I realised that I was visiting a recreated theme village, rather than experiencing a living culture. I was taken on a guided tour, led by a man wearing traditional clothing, but unable to speak the language of his ancestors. The Wyandot language died out in the 1960’s, although there are attempts to revive it. The loss of language seemed symbolic of the health of the Wendat culture.

The entire experience felt unfortunately contrived. Different aspects of historic Wendat life were explained with the aid of props and the carefully constructed village we were taken through. After the tour we were given a song (written by a french man and played over speakers from a recording) and dance (performed by a few somewhat enthusiastic young people), given a meal of traditional “three sisters” soup and deer mince chilli, before being filed out through an extensive gift shop.

I left the village feeling slightly depressed, saddened by the impression that this culture was not alive. It was an educational experience, but one that informed on what had been lost. It didn’t feel authentic. Later in my travels I heard the Wendake referred to as “asphalt indians” by other indigenous nations. There seemed to be a view that some of what was being portrayed as Wendat/Huron culture was appropriated from other nations, as they lost connection with their own cultural identity. This was not what I was expecting, and immediately checked my preconceived notions of what indigenous tourism is, and how success is measured.

After the traditional site visit I spent an afternoon in the offices of Quebec Aboriginal Tourism (QAT). QAT is an organisation which sets out to provide support for the development and promotion of indigenous tourism in Quebec.

We discussed some of the challenges facing the pursuit of authentic indigenous tourism development. In particular they identified the issue of a lack of tourism skills and experience within indigenous communities. Encouraging young indigenous people to pursue pathways into tourism is one of QAT's objectives and main challenges. Awareness programmes, and events like aboriginal job fairs are helping to address this.

This lack of interest from young indigenous people, and difficulties in developing skills and experience within communities, was reinforced through the rest of my journey as one of the main issues holding back successful indigenous tourism in Quebec.

Moving on from the Quebec City region, I headed northwest, towards Eeyou Istchee, land of the Cree.

Nuuchimi Wiinuu

This part of my journey took me deep into the more remote communities of Eeyou Istchee, across thousands of kilometers of Canadian landscape heading north to James Bay. I was escorted by Jean-Michel Perron, who is working with Cree communities to develop small-scale, family based cultural tourism experiences.

The first of many 6+ hour drives along increasingly remote forest roads brought us to our first camp: Nuuchimi Wiinuu. This is a newly built Cree cultural experience. With the Wendake example fresh in my mind, and the expectation of another contrived retelling of lost culture, I approached with apprehension.

I was welcomed into the home of Anna and David, a Cree family who are trying to maintain their way of life as best they can in a modern world, using tourism as a source of income that allows them to remain on their land, while constantly reinforcing their own cultural knowledge through the act of sharing it.

I knew within minutes of meeting the family that this wasn't Wendake. This was an authentic cultural experience; an opportunity to learn about another way of life, be exposed to another world view, and hear the stories of the land from people who have been there longer than anyone else.

The camp is a simple set up. A central house where the family live and where we shared our meals, sitting on the edge of the endless network of lakes that define this land. Surrounding the main house are several different styles of traditional dwellings for guests to stay in. These included Cree moss cabins, settler tents, and long houses. They were obviously of modern construction, but built as practical examples of older techniques and forms. Spruce boughs covered the earth floor, and rough local timber frames supported the canvas or moss covered walls, but we slept on beds surrounded by mosquito netting.



A winter cabin at Nuuchimi Wiinuu



Setting rabbit snares

The experience offered by the family was relaxed and simple; they gave their knowledge and experience of traditional Cree life naturally and enthusiastically. In the afternoon we set rabbit snares, our senses aided by the expertise of another Cree of the land, Lawrence, who taught us how to spot the paths run in by our prey and how to set the snare to catch them. David led an expedition on the lake by canoe to retrieve nets set the day before. We pulled in a haul of Pike, Whitefish, Suckers, and Walleye, which we prepared for the smoker back on shore.

In the evenings we ate roast Moose, smoked fish, and fried bread. I wondered how many times in human history a Cree prayer and a Maori karakia were spoken before the same meal. The first time those aspects of our cultures came together in the remote wilderness of Eeyou Istchee, was an intense experience for me, and one we took pleasure in repeating.

I spent some time speaking with Thomas, one of Anna and David's twelve children, about his connection to Cree culture. He felt he had become disconnected with traditional life in his teens, when he stopped going with his father on hunting trips, and moved off their land to find opportunities elsewhere. In his mid twenties he returned, and expressed a desire to continue learning about his culture, and to continue the work his parents had started. He observed that sharing his culture with others was helping him maintain it within himself, and saw this as an important tool in preserving knowledge.

A couple from The Netherlands were staying with the family at Nuuchimi Wiinuu for a week while I was there. They travelled specifically to experience and learn

about how different indigenous cultures live on the land. In their time at the camp they learned about preparing moose hide and making moccasins from the resulting fragrant leather. They carved canoe paddles and stitched beads. They caught and ate the food that had been sustaining people on this land for thousands of years. In winter they would have gone ice fishing and snowshoeing, and learned of other aspects of Cree traditional arts and crafts.



Anna making moccasins from cured Moose hide

Shammy

After 3 days feeling at home at Nuuchimi Wiinuu, we continued deeper into Eeyou Istchee. The next leg of my journey included the company of Victoria and Dorothy, who work for the Cree Outfitters and Tourism Association, an organisation that supports people like Anna and David in their activity.

Together we drove another 7 hours to a dormant Cree hunting camp. These camps are dotted throughout Eeyou Istchee, and are occupied in the winter hunting season. Today it was where we were to meet Angus, the tallyman, or steward of this land. Angus picked us up in a Cree style freight canoe, and took us up river for an hour or so, until we reached rapids that the canoe could not cross. From there our journey was on foot for another hour to reach camp Shammy.



Angus arrives to ferry us to Camp Shammy

Shammy is a similar concept to Nuuchimi Wiinuu, with the central house surrounded by huts and cabins, but was still in development when we arrived. Due

to the extremely remote location, building anything on site is slow and expensive. The hot water wasn't working, and the toilets weren't plumbed in. Most of the cabins were still just skeletal frames of lashed branches, waiting for their stretched canvas skins, and I slept on the floor of the main house. The family was hesitant to be hosting anyone yet, so I was lucky they let me visit at all.

Despite its incomplete nature, I was welcomed by Angus and Stephanie, and felt immediately at ease. Angus showed me around his land, and instinctively passed on cultural knowledge as we went. He showed me how they could store meat in the depths of wet, cold mounds of moss that stayed cool even through summer. He showed me where to collect blueberries, and how to look for signs of bears that may be doing the same thing. Together we collected spruce boughs to cover the floor of a new hut. We cleared the old boughs from the teepee they use to smoke meat.



Collecting Spruce boughs

All the while I was treated to the natural chattering of family working together on mundane tasks, in the unfamiliar Cree language. So similar to family life in Aotearoa, and so different. The women gossiped excitedly in Cree before trying

their best to marry me off to a good Cree woman in English, and Angus tried his best to correct my pronunciation of the simplest Cree words to allow my diplomatic response.

On the second evening Stephanie's parents arrived by canoe. We ate boiled goose and dumplings, and I sat for hours listening to the family laughing and speaking in their Cree tongue, not understanding a single word but recognising their tone and participating in the happiness they found in each other's company.



Angus, Stephanie, and family.

For the second time in Eeyou Istchee I was granted an intimate view of the lives of Cree people, and a view of the world through a Cree lens. This experience lies at the heart of what I hoped to find in Canada. Authentic experiences with people of the land, who by sharing their lives with outsiders have an opportunity themselves to sustain a lifestyle that is becoming increasingly threatened by a modern way of life. I didn't feel like an intruder or a customer, I felt like I had been invited into their lives, even if only for a few days.

We left before the sun rose, to hike back to the river and ride back out to the nearest hint of civilisation. We startled a couple of Moose from the riverbank as we went; the last envoys of the wilderness we were beginning to leave behind.



Angus's grandfather with a bear trap, and Angus with the same trap

Wemindji

The epic road trip through Eeyou Istchee ended in Wemindji, a small Cree community on the shore of James Bay. This was as far north as my journey took me. My other experiences in Eeyou Istchee had been with people still living on their land, rather than in communities. Wemindji was different.

Originally the community had been situated on “Old Factory” island, 45 km north of Wemindji. In 1959 the community was relocated to its current site. We stayed at a small hotel run by the community, which caters to contract workers moving through the territory on work for the Hydro or Mining companies.



A smokehouse teepee in the community of Wemindji.

Immediately apparent were the issues already highlighted around human resource and skill development. The Cree people are in a stronger financial position than some nations, due to a treaty signed with hydroelectric producers which granted

them incomes from the hydro schemes on their land. This has allowed the development of some infrastructure, like the hotel, and also made clear the lack of skills within the community to operate these services. We were left to our own devices to check in and check out, and couldn't track down anyone able to man the reception desk in order to take payment for our stay.

After a night in a proper bed and our first shower in many days, Dorothy's cousin took us out on a boat trip on James Bay. Calling it a bay doesn't do justice to the scale of James. Like all the landscape so far, this place is endlessly vast, and is only a vassal to Hudson Bay. We spent a few hours skimming over the ocean to Old Factory Island, where the Wemindji community once resided. Old houses and simple communal halls still stand, and every year the island hosts a gathering of the old families. We visited the day before the gathering, and the island was already alive with activity in preparation for the celebration of community life.

Returning to Wemindji, after a stop off at Walrus Island (an immense boulder of an island, criss crossed with thick veins of white quartz, and home to no Walruses), I was taken on a tour of the community. Dorothy explained the structure of society within these communities. A "band council" manages many aspects of life in the community. This is an elected council, led by an elected Chief who can serve a maximum of 2 terms. All decisions are made by the group, and can apparently take a long time to reach.



Old Factory island.

Manawan

After a long drive, and a night hosted by Jean-Michel in his hometown of Rawdon, near Montreal, I was picked up again by Virginie and we made our way to Manawan, one of 3 communities within the Atikamekw nation, only a few hours drive north of Rawdon.

On arrival in Manawan I got the immediate impression that they faced a different set of challenges to the Cree of Eeyou Istchee and the Innu or Wendake. The town seemed more run down, poorer financially if not culturally. Virginie dropped me off with my Manawan host, Patrick, who runs Tourism Manawan, a small organisation encouraging the development of a similar style of cultural tourism to what I experienced in Eeyou Istchee. One immediately obvious difference was that the Atikamekw speak french as their second language, where the Cree speak english. This was to be a week of limited verbal communication.

Patrick speaks a little english, enough to lead me to a canoe, which transported me 30 minutes up river to Camp Matakan where I spent the next week.

Camp Matakan feels as remote and underdeveloped as Camp Shammy or Nuuchimi Wiinuu, despite being closer and more accessible by road. We sleep in large teepees, with fires burning inside all night to keep the chill from your toes, and a share meals in a central eating house. The camp is located on an absurdly picturesque island amongst the familiar never ending network of lakes.

It hosts a small number of guests who typically stay for several days, and much like the Cree experience, is focussed on sharing everyday aspects of traditional Atikamekw life. We spent our days fishing or searching for beavers. We helped construct a new longhouse by gathering, bending and lashing together the trunks of small trees. We cleared a site for a new teepee, and replaced the canvas of one of the settlers huts. I earned some small level of respect from the locals by displaying a familiarity with a filleting knife and a willingness to get my hands dirty, which

overcame the complete language barrier.



Accommodation at Camp Matakan

My stay at Camp Matakan was interrupted by a trip back into the reservation to celebrate Manawan's 110th year as a community. Celebrations included a large lineup of First Nations music acts from across Quebec, community gatherings, and a horseshoe throwing tournament. I met the chief of the Atikamekw people, and several community leaders who were pleased to have a chance to share their history with me.

Manawan has the feel of a small, rural New Zealand town. Being a reservation community it's entirely culturally homogenous, and being remote means very limited employment opportunities. I spent my time wandering the town, followed by a pack of friendly neighbourhood dogs, feeling very out of place. The residents came across as tolerant and suspicious of my presence there. With no language common ground it was difficult to really understand the wider community's attitude to outsiders, but I couldn't help but sense some level of wariness on their part.

Returning to Camp Matakan reassured me that there was a place for outsiders like me who wanted to experience the Atikamekw culture, and that the people were indeed eager to share it. I spent several more days at Matakan, during which time a young man named Sunshine arrived. Sunshine spoke english better than any of the Atikamekw I'd met so far, and was my first opportunity to have any level of real conversation since arriving in Matakan.



Exploring Matakan

Sunshine is a young Atikamekw who lives in Montreal, but spends time working as a guide and host at Camp Matakan. He helped me to understand some of the challenges for young indigenous people trying to maintain a connection with their culture. Employment and education are more easily found in the city, so many are leaving the reservation communities behind. Places like Camp Matakan provide a crucial opportunity for youth to learn about their culture, and find a purpose and livelihood in the sharing of it. It is still a challenge for him to stay engaged in the community and continue to learn about his culture, but Matakan at least gave him hope that this way of life has a future.

After over a week with the Atikamekw people, I said goodbye to camp Matakan and took a ride with Patrick's mother to Montreal, and my flight out of Quebec.



Matakan the dog and mascot of Camp Matakan, saying goodbye.

Challenges

My trip highlighted several shared challenges facing the successful development of cultural tourism.

Cultural authenticity

For tourism to be useful as a tool for retaining cultural knowledge, authenticity is crucial. If the knowledge being shared is adulterated to meet the expectations of a particular market, or appropriated to build a certain product, the continued loss of cultural knowledge and identity could be encouraged rather than discouraged. The differences between my experiences with Wendat/Huron, and with the Cree or Atikamekw, demonstrated that authenticity can be the difference between cultural exploitation and cultural empowerment.

Skill Development

The struggle to develop interest and skills with young indigenous people is a major challenge to the sustainability of cultural tourism opportunities. The common theme throughout my trip was a lack of skilled staff, or trouble retaining them within the community when economic prospects are better elsewhere.

Social Sustainability

Without interest, engagement, and skill development among indigenous populations, there is a risk that these opportunities will not be sustained long enough to achieve the goal of preserving cultural knowledge. This was more evident in Quebec than in Aotearoa where tourism is more of an established pathway. Work is being done by local, provincial and federal organisations to develop these pathways in Quebec. There was a common feeling of pessimism around the continuation of existing cultural tourism activities in Quebec, with little interest from the next generation.

Environmental Sustainability

Indigenous cultural tourism often includes elements of environmental knowledge and guardianship, and environmental sustainability lies at the heart of many people's desire to stay connected to their land. Risks around climate change, habitat loss, resource exploitation, and the degradation of ecosystems relied on by indigenous people are of concern around the world.

Quality and Consistency

Fundamental to the success of any tourism activity is quality, and this can only come with continued capacity building within indigenous communities. I feel that Aotearoa has an advantage in this respect, and faces less of a challenge in building quality than is seen in Quebec, where the idea of cultural tourism is still new to many communities.

Accessibility

The vastness of the Canadian landscape presents challenges around accessibility. Remote physical locations, limited transportation options, and resulting high prices, all conspire to make the prospect of developing cultural tourism in remote locations daunting. This is less of a challenge in New Zealand.

Labels and Expectations

What *is* indigenous tourism? What is cultural tourism? What is ecotourism? How can authentic indigenous experiences be promoted to wider markets, and what expectations do those markets have? Many smaller communities lack the expertise and experience needed to connect with these markets, and rely on central organisations to promote their experiences.

Conclusion

I left Canada feeling empowered about the opportunities available to indigenous people to share our cultural knowledge, and to help preserve that knowledge in the process. I left buoyed by a much greater appreciation of the strength of Maori culture to overcome challenges, and felt more keenly the onus that rides on every generation to ensure our culture is kept alive.

My experience in Quebec reaffirmed my existing belief that indigenous cultures around the world face many challenges, and as a wider society we risk losing the cultural diversity that helps defines us. We need to learn to utilise all the tools we have available to preserve indigenous cultural knowledge, and encourage cross cultural understanding.

It is clear to me that indigenous tourism is one of these tools.

I didn't leave with any clear answers to the challenges facing us in Aotearoa, or facing our friends in Quebec, but I did leave with a renewed interest in finding better ways of sharing our stories and world view, and a greater appreciation of the benefits to our society of maintaining the rich cultural tapestry that gives our world colour and texture.

Kia ora.