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# Atlantic Canada Tourism Study: Key Findings

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**MQO**  
RESEARCH RECHERCHE



# Project Overview

## Background

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a dramatic impact on the Atlantic Canada economies, and the challenge for the tourism sector has been amplified by closures and travel restrictions. Social distancing, capacity limitations, and traveller sentiment will continue to impact the tourism industry into the future, even as travel restrictions slowly begin to ease.

The aim of the *Atlantic Canada Tourism Study* was to provide early insights into what will almost certainly be an evolving and enduring existential shift in the consumer mindset. This study will also contribute to the foundation for a go-forward plan to advance through a recovery phase.

The study was divided into two phases. The first phase was focused on Atlantic Canadian intentions and attitudes toward intra-provincial and intra-regional travel. The second phase provided updated data on Atlantic Canadians and expanded to gauge Central Canadian sentiment, specifically in southern Ontario and Quebec. Future research may expand Canada-wide.

The following document outlines the results of the *Atlantic Canada Tourism Study*, synthesizing phases 1 and 2 of data collection, highlighting key findings and recommendations.

## Project Methodology

Data for this project was collected through two online surveys, developed by MQO Research with input from Group ATN, on behalf of the Tourism Association of Prince Edward Island and with financial support from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. The surveys were programmed using Voxco software.

The total Atlantic Canadian sample collected in Phase 1 was n= 2,088. The total sample for Phase 2, which included both Atlantic Canadians and those from southern Ontario and Quebec, was n=3,314. The online survey for Phase 1 was conducted over 12 days between June 27<sup>th</sup> and July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The online survey for Phase 2 was conducted over 12 days from August 10<sup>th</sup> to August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

# Key Research Findings

## Impacts of COVID-19 on Travel

COVID-19 significantly impacted travel plans for Atlantic Canadians.

COVID-19 disrupted much of the previously planned travel for Atlantic Canadians. At the time of the Phase 1 survey, 65% of Atlantic Canadians reported that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their travel plans. An additional 19% were not sure if their plans would be affected.

## There are fewer trips planned now than before COVID-19.

As of Phase 1, Atlantic Canadians had fewer trips planned than before COVID-19. The average number of trips per person dropped from 2.3 trips before the arrival of the pandemic to 1.8 trips per person after the arrival of the pandemic. The overall number of trips reported by Atlantic Canadians dropped by 61%. However, it could have been that Atlantic Canadians were taking a wait-and-see approach before cancelling plans to visit a particular destination or reallocating funds from a trip that might still happen.

## Atlantic Canadians were holding off on making decisions about some previously planned trips.

Seventy percent of those who have had travel affected by COVID-19 were waiting for more information before deciding what to do about their travel. This could include changing the destination of travel that was cancelled or continuing on with a previously planned trip with a different itinerary or accommodation.

The ever-changing nature of the situation, from public health guidelines for businesses and individuals, to changing travel restrictions, made it difficult for respondents to plan. It was difficult for Atlantic Canadians to predict if previously planned travel would go forward and if Atlantic Canadians can, or should, book a new trip in place of cancelled plans.

## Where are Atlantic and Central Canadians currently planning to travel?

For Atlantic Canadians, most (83%) of currently planned travel is in Atlantic Canada: three in five (61%) of these trips are planned for Nova Scotia, one quarter (26%) in Newfoundland and Labrador, 41% in New Brunswick, and 19% in Prince Edward Island. Although the provincial share of Atlantic Canada travel was similar in Phase 1 and 2, planned travel to NS increased by ten percentage points, while plans for the other three provinces remained steady or declined slightly.

The bulk of planned travel for Ontario and Quebec residents is set to take place within Central Canada with a comparatively smaller share (14%) planned for Atlantic Canada. One in ten trips are planned for Nova Scotia, 5% in Newfoundland and Labrador, 5% in New Brunswick, and 3% in Prince Edward Island. Notably, planned travel to Atlantic Canada is lower than international destinations (20%) even when the US is excluded. On the other hand, travel intentions to western Canada are more modest, with only BC barely exceeding single digits (11%).

Atlantic Canadians are traveling to relax and visit with friends and family. Atlantic Canadians are planning to travel within their own province, primarily to discover new experiences, such as exploring parts of the province they have not seen, visiting new restaurants, and visiting new-to-them attractions. Ontario and Quebec residents will also be staying close to home in their planned travel and will be seeking out new experiences at home.

## Traveller Sentiment

**Comfort with transportation and accommodation hinges on reducing interaction with groups or strangers.**

Atlantic Canadians continue to feel most comfortable with non commercial accommodation (i.e. staying with friends and family, on their own property, or in an accommodation owned by a friend). Comfort with all accommodation types registered increases in August compared to June/July. Increased comfort was generally very modest except for privately owned rentals (e.g. AirBnB) (+7%), large hotels (+4%), and small hotels and motels (+5%).

This accommodation comfort ranking for ON and QC was consistent with Atlantic Canadians, although ON/QC comfort was generally slightly lower. Bed and breakfasts (38% and 42%) and campgrounds (44% and 52%) registered the lowest comfort level with both ON/QC and Atlantic Canadians respectively.

Many travellers feel uncomfortable with transportation modes that increase their interaction (direct and direct) with others. At best, 66% of Atlantic Canadians and 60% of ON/QC residents were comfortable travelling by ferry (remaining in their car) in August.

Atlantic Canadians feel more at ease booking accommodations than transportation, especially transport options that do not always allow for social distancing.

Survey responses suggest that Atlantic Canadians are generally more comfortable with managing accommodations than transportation when travelling, with far fewer Atlantic Canadians citing that they are comfortable with types of transportation, such as trains, taxis, airplanes, and public transit, compared to responses regarding accommodation types.

**Travellers are less comfortable with dining in, but outdoor and take-out are viable options.**

Eating at restaurants is a less comfortable option right now, but outdoor and take-out are still viable options for travellers. Year-round, outdoor restaurant dining is the norm in parts of northern Europe and some Canadian cities such as Montreal. There may be opportunities to change the consumer mindset toward outdoor dining in Atlantic Canada and providing related amenities (e.g. heaters, blankets). Diners could be encouraged to embrace outdoor dining in cooler weather.

**Health and safety are concerns for travellers.**

Travellers are most concerned with social distancing measures being in place while travelling, followed by being able to sanitize their hands while travelling, and are cognizant of the potential for contracting COVID-19. Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated that social distancing is one of the top three most important measures they would like to see while traveling in 2020. Just under half (43%) of respondents mentioned the availability of hand sanitizers.

## The uncertainty of mid-pandemic travel is also weighing on travellers.

More than half of Atlantic Canadians are concerned about availability of amenities. Travellers are concerned about losing money and possible last-minute cancellations.

Outside of the Atlantic provinces, restricted travel and public health precautions that limit capacity for tourism operators are still in place five months following the initial announcement of COVID-19 as a global pandemic. The easing of restrictions in Atlantic Canada has been, and continues to be, a gradual process that will likely not be linear. Already we have seen restrictions that were rolled back, tightened up again in some areas to keep small instances of COVID-19 spread under control.

Despite the tourism industry being poised and ready to welcome back domestic travellers from within Atlantic Canada for the last half of 2020, consumer confidence and travel behaviour suggest that recovery on the demand side of the industry may be slower to return.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations discussed here are drawn from the primary data collected by the *Atlantic Canadian Tourism Survey* and represent the consumer sentiment in late June and early July.

Overall, the results highlight the significant impact of the pandemic on Atlantic Canadian travellers and the tourism industry in the region. The survey highlights domestic travel as a source of some relief for the industry, as 51% of Atlantic Canadians select new travel destinations to replace travel that was previously planned for outside of Atlantic Canada. The uncertainty of the current climate also leaves a lot of potential on the table with the fluid situation impacting travellers' ability to plan; 70% reported that they were holding off on making decisions.

Travellers are concerned about having to make last-minute cancellations, losing money, what a vacation will look like with business closures, and enforcement of health and safety measures. At the same time, health and safety is still very much top-of-mind for travellers. People are showing trepidation to engage in group experiences and even medium-sized events. Results show travellers are leaning towards outdoor experiences and are likely to make cautious choices in transportation, accommodation, and food, in particular those over the age of 55.

### Restoring traveller confidence and trust through enforced safety measures will be key.

The data suggests that health and safety concerns remain paramount among Atlantic Canadians at this time. Increasing confidence and rebuilding trust among travellers will be essential to sector recovery planning.

Atlantic Canadians indicated a higher level of comfort with accommodations, modes of transportation, and activities that allow them to control their own level of risk. To increase travellers' comfort levels, businesses need to be able to effectively communicate that health and safety measures are being followed. Assurances such as the ability to physical distance, availability of hand sanitizer, and requiring masks will likely play a role in increasing participation in the tourism industry.



One strategy for consideration is the creation and promotion of “safe and clean” labels for businesses. A business could complete a self assessment or have an independent audit conducted of their location, if set criteria are met that business could display a seal of approval that they are meeting the province’s health and safety standards. This would instill confidence in tourists that the industry is prepared to take in visitors particularly for areas where comfort is lowest, such as small accommodations, eat-in dining establishments, and indoor event spaces.

**Communication strategies should involve additional messaging around visitor responsibility to follow public health guidelines.**

The health and safety measures that are emphasized by public health are clearly reflected what travellers want to see implemented on their travels. Encouraging provincial public health officials to emphasize travel safety in the context of overall health protocols will increase confidence in travel safety.

Provincial protocols vary across the Atlantic Provinces. Individual provinces should highlight protocols that are likely to differ between home province and destination province (e.g., mask requirements in indoor public spaces) to help visitors adjust expectations and prepare accordingly.

Tourism promotion may include supplementary messaging about the visitor’s responsibility to adhere to guidelines. This serves the dual purpose of supporting safe practices among guests, while reassuring other guests that their fellow travelers will behave responsibly.

**Strategies for stimulating demand can include targeted messaging and sharing of critical information.**

To stimulate demand, promotional campaigns targeted at attracting Atlantic Canadians and emphasizing regional travel and may push people considering postponing travel to participate in the 2020 tourism season. Focus of the messaging should be on promoting the idea of “safe travel” within the region and showcasing local experiences as a great way to still experience travel in 2020 without travelling outside Atlantic Canada.

Part of this promotion could include working with businesses to communicate critical information on online platforms for potential visitors, such as information on last-minute booking availability, packages, and any discounts and promotions, as well as promoting flexible cancellation policies.

Although promotional campaigns should be targeted to all potential visitors, one key target group for this should be the individuals who are undecided (i.e. the people who are unsure about whether they want to travel in the current situation, but who can be swayed through communicating the right information about safety and public health).

**The industry can act to support businesses in their efforts to adhere to public health protocols.**

Government and industry associations recognize the financial strain that many small businesses are facing at this time. Smaller operations may find it challenging to meet public health requirements and regulations, or source in-demand materials such as disposable masks. In order to help businesses gain trust of potential visitors, it is imperative the industry associations and government organizations support smaller businesses so that they are safe for visitation and are meeting public safety standards.

## Shifting sentiments around lifting travel restrictions will require building confidence and trust in Atlantic Canadians.

Lifting travel restrictions is essential to bring in tourism dollars from visitors outside of Atlantic Canada, however it is important to be cognizant of and prepare for the impact that the lifting of travel restrictions may have on local traveller sentiment and intent. Seventy percent (70%) of local (Atlantic Canadian) travellers stated they will wait for more information to make a decision about their travel plans. Given the degree of concern among Atlantic Canadian tourists about health and safety related to COVID-19, there is a risk that opening borders to the rest of Canada may heighten their fears surrounding travel, which could further dampen domestic travel. In other words, Atlantic Canadians may feel more reserved about travel if Canadians from outside the current “Atlantic Canada Bubble” will be visiting the region. This may pose a challenge, as the loss of local tourists due to this fear may not be made up by the proportion of tourists that may come from other Canadian provinces.

In order to encourage Atlantic Canadians to travel in the region (and not lose potential travellers out of a potential fear of COVID-19 resurfacing from other Canadian travellers), focus should be placed on continuing to build confidence and trust in our health and safety measures and on messaging specifically, communicating the effectiveness of the health and safety measures and the importance of welcoming visitors from throughout Canada

Physical distancing and hand sanitization and, more recently, wearing masks, have been some of the most prominent and consistent messaging coming from leadership in public health. That these measures are the top things that Atlantic Canadian travellers want to see when travelling suggests that the public is listening. Messaging from public health leadership that travel and lifting travel restrictions is safe will significantly reduce any potential negative impact of lifted restrictions on traveller sentiment.