

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONE

# David Thompson



DISCOVERY  
REPORT  
2023

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Front cover:  
Girth Hitch Guiding, Nordegg

Abraham Lake

# PREFACE

The David Thompson Tourism Development Zone (TDZ) has the potential to rival Jasper National Park as a tourism destination. The David Thompson's prime location represents a valuable, but unrealized opportunity to provide Canadian and international visitors with the services and amenities they demand, and showcase Alberta's natural beauty, one of the reason millions of people from all over the world come to the province each year.

To achieve its full potential as an integral part of Alberta's evolving identity as a tourism destination, the David Thompson TDZ requires an unprecedented commitment to prioritize tourism. In order to build up a sustainable and prosperous local tourism industry, communities, industry partners and other stakeholders must accelerate their efforts to come together to address gaps and quality issues in existing tourism products and services, enhance the quality of life for residents, and protect the ecology of the natural environment.

The following Destination Development Discovery Report for the David Thompson TDZ:

- Highlights those tourism assets most likely to attract high-value visitors from across Canada and around the world
- Provides insight into the area's natural, cultural, and economic environments
- Identifies specific challenges facing this TDZ and proposes initiatives to address them
- Builds a strong business case for investing in the David Thompson TDZ in order to catalyze future growth and prosperity
- Demonstrates that it will be key to the development of this area to address access to land, which is currently hindered by both provincial and municipal processes

**This Discovery Report informs and identifies specific actions Travel Alberta, the Government of Alberta and communities within the David Thompson TDZ should take to support the design of a comprehensive Destination Development Plan. This report aligns the tourism development ambitions of local stakeholders with the province's goal to double tourism revenue by 2035.**



The Prairie Creek In, Rocky Mountain House

# 03 INTRODUCTION



Western Canyoning Adventure Ltd., Nordegg

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of respect, reciprocity and truth, we honour and acknowledge the traditional territories of the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Alberta. We value these sacred gathering places and aim to inspire others to appreciate and embrace stewardship of the land as they explore our great province.

The David Thompson TDZ lies at the intersection of a number of historical and present-day lands that Indigenous Peoples have cared for and lived on for generations. We honour the traditional lands of the Treaty 6 signatories, including the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Saulteaux and Nakota Sioux homelands. We also acknowledge members of the Red Deer Métis District within the homeland of Métis and the Otipemisiwak Métis Government, as well as Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas throughout David Thompson. We appreciate that modern borders do not align with traditional land use, and we honour the neighbouring Indigenous communities who have travelled and inhabited this land throughout history.



Treaty 6

## APPRECIATION

Travel Alberta would like to thank all those who participated in the creation of this Discovery Report.

*Please note, Indigenous engagement is currently underway.*

- **JP Fortin** – owner, Nordegg Adventures
- **Jeff Hartling** – economic development officer, Town of Rocky Mountain House
- **Jerry Holik** – owner, Nature's Getaway Nordegg
- **Roy McConnell** – chair, Nordegg Community Association
- **Michelle Meatheringham** – executive director, Rocky Chamber of Commerce
- **Brett Pawlyk** – lead guide, Nordegg Adventures
- **Jerry Pratt** – economic development officer, Clearwater County
- **Jodi Reynolds** – owner, Expanse Cottages
- **Celina Whiteknife** – owner, Beehive Artisans Market

## COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY & REGENERATIVE TOURISM

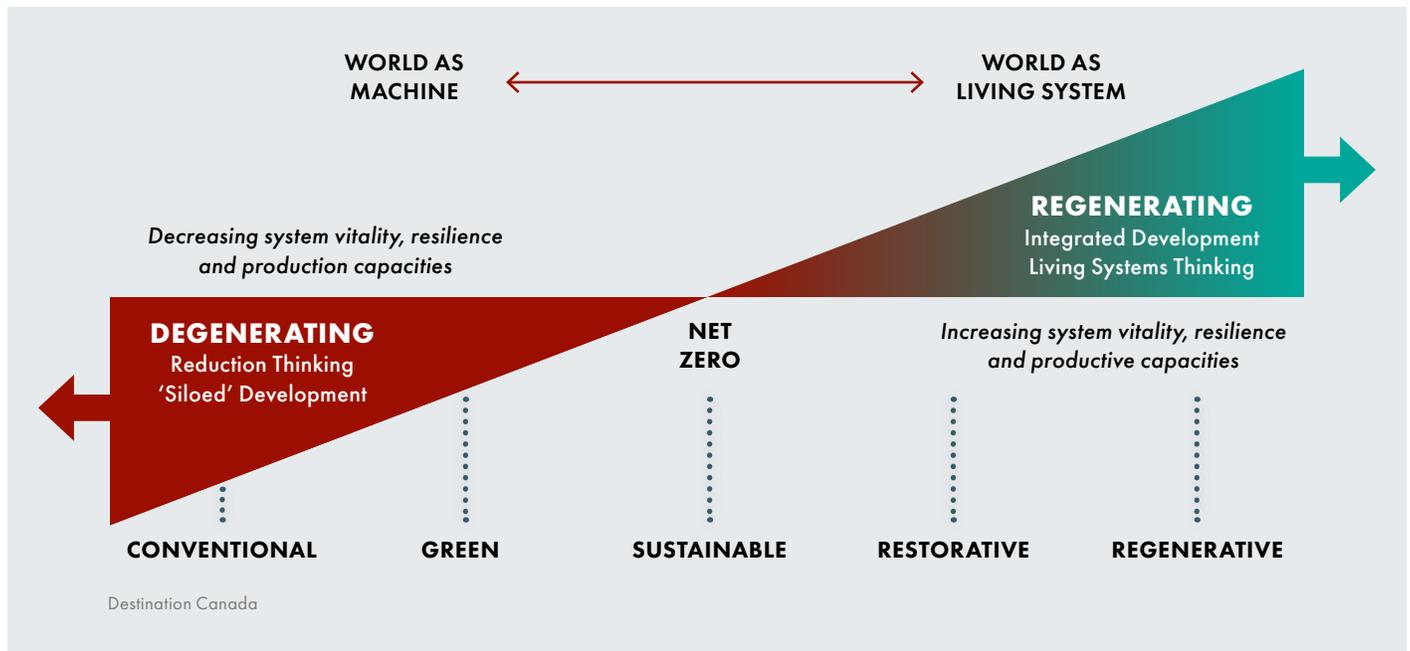
Tourism is a key economic sector in Alberta with strong potential to diversify the economy, create jobs, grow Indigenous tourism businesses, bring the “taste of place” to our guests’ tables and build vibrant communities. It also allows us to preserve and share culture and history, maintain or enhance the environment and foster innovation.

However, as outlined in Destination Canada’s report titled, “A Regenerative Approach to Tourism In Canada”, more and more communities are rejecting uncontrolled tourism development. The rising sentiment is that current approaches:

- Are too often extractive and degenerative
- Reduce quality of life for residents
- Damage ecosystem health
- Diminish local culture and community in the interest of efficiency and scale

An alternative approach is gradually emerging — and in many ways re-emerging. It recognizes the world not as a machine but as a living ecosystem, with humans playing an integral part. And it is from this worldview that the concept of regeneration arises.

### Spectrum of Worldviews & Strategies



## TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONES

### Collaborating with Communities

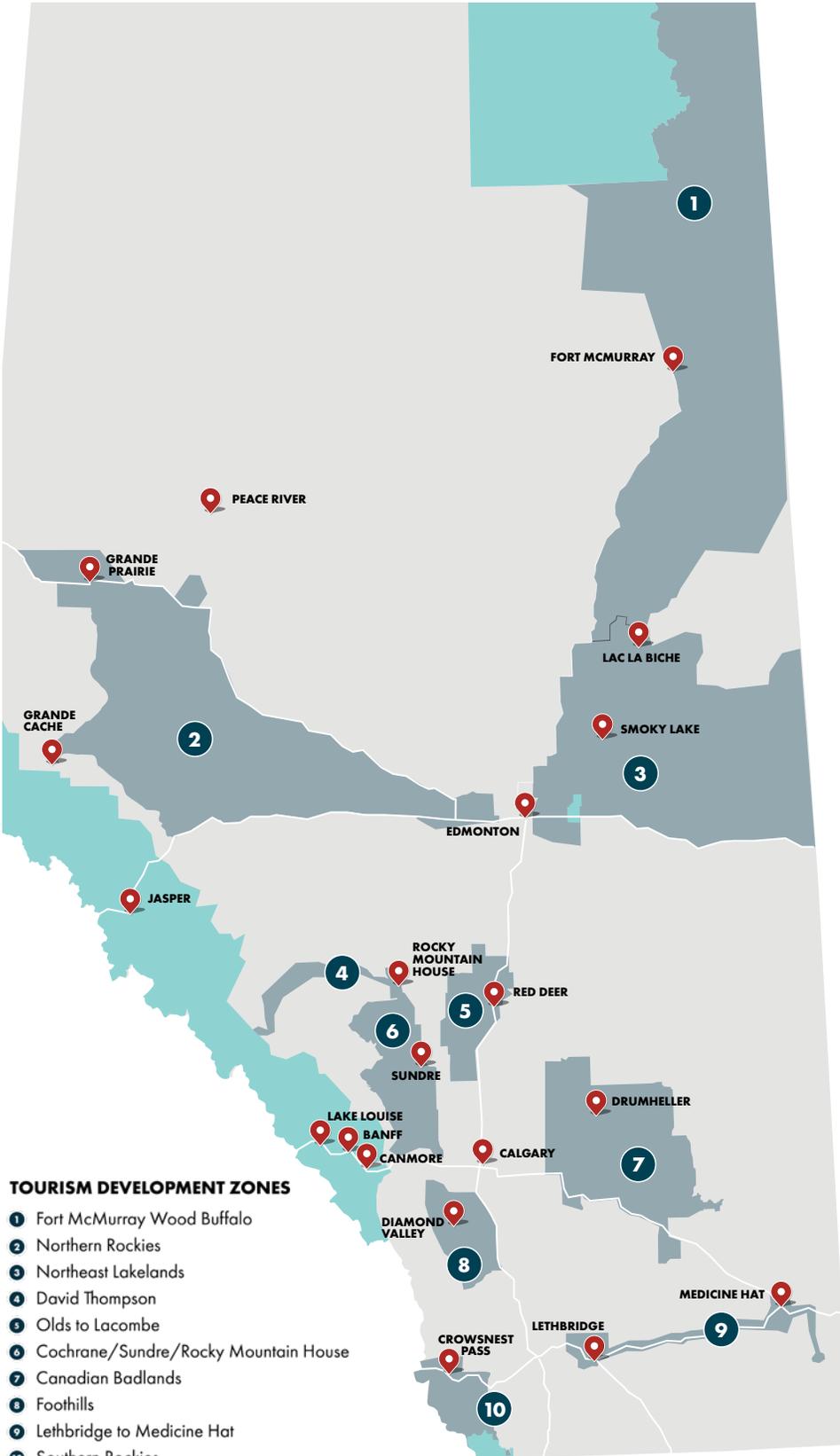
Pre-pandemic, nearly 60 per cent of visitation and 75 per cent of tourism expenditures occurred in the mature tourism destinations of Banff, Lake Louise, Canmore, Jasper, Calgary and Edmonton. By developing additional “emerging” destinations, we expand opportunities for Albertans to explore their own backyard, creating more space for international visitation in legacy destinations while reducing Alberta’s traveller deficit.

To support tourism development in these emerging destinations, Travel Alberta identified 10 Tourism Development Zones (TDZs) across the province with a high potential for tourism growth over the next 10 years. With successful and sustainable development, these destinations will have the ability to make a meaningful contribution to Alberta’s visitor economy.

In partnership with communities and stakeholders, Travel Alberta has co-developed a series of TDZ Discovery Reports. These Discovery Reports will inform and guide our future Destination Development Plans that include medium- and long-term strategies to contribute to the growth of Alberta’s visitor economy across many high-potential regions of the province.

Together with industry, Indigenous Peoples, government and residents across each TDZ, we strive to:

- Grow & diversify the economy
- Support jobs
- Preserve cultures
- Foster innovation
- Conserve the environment
- Improve resident quality of life



### TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONES

- 1 Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo
- 2 Northern Rockies
- 3 Northeast Lakelands
- 4 David Thompson
- 5 Olds to Lacombe
- 6 Cochrane/Sundre/Rocky Mountain House
- 7 Canadian Badlands
- 8 Foothills
- 9 Lethbridge to Medicine Hat
- 10 Southern Rockies

● National Parks

## DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN

A Destination Development Plan (DDP) is a 10-year strategic roadmap to optimize and future-proof the potential of a zone’s visitor economy. The realized benefits of a comprehensive DDP include: increased revenues coming into communities from visitors; support for the growth of small-to-medium size businesses; the alignment of public, private and community sectors; more opportunities for employment; and enhanced pride of place and quality of life for Albertans.

In this first phase, we took a data-driven and community-led approach to better understand the state of the local visitor economy in each TDZ and begin to identify the inter-related elements of a comprehensive DDP. We assessed resident sentiment and the commitment of stakeholders and municipal governments to determine whether or not local leadership was present and committed to diversifying their zone’s economy through tourism. In many TDZs, it was evident that multiple initiatives (and even past studies) have assessed the tourism potential across counties and communities. We speculate

that these previous assessments have not resulted in optimized local tourism sectors because — as reflected in the DDP framework — comprehensive optimization requires attention, consideration and investment of resources across more elements than most organizations have the capacity or resources to coordinate.

As this report demonstrates, we have identified both opportunities and barriers across many of these elements. Going forward, there is much work to be shared amongst stakeholders in each TDZ, using the DDP as a framework. Travel Alberta is committed to collaborating with local and provincial partners to help drive the development and execution of a DDP in those communities that are equally committed to building up Alberta’s visitor economy.

Now that this Discovery Report has been released, it is key that Travel Alberta, the Government of Alberta and the many stakeholders within the David Thompson TDZ work together to address the following relevant inter-related elements:



(Adapted from Failte Ireland)

## METHODOLOGY

Travel Alberta partnered with Legacy Consulting to collect the data and reach the conclusions summarized in this report.

A two-part methodology allowed Travel Alberta and the consulting team to become acquainted with regional stakeholders and communities, determine their vision for the future growth of the local visitor economy and identify action steps toward the design of a DDP for the David Thompson TDZ.

In the **“discovery and destination profiling”** phase, Travel Alberta worked with the consulting team to access research material, build a steering committee that included local operators and government representatives, and establish a framework for engagement.

In the **“exploring, imagining and visioning”** phase, the consulting team met with the steering committee to determine opportunities, challenges, and goals; facilitated a planning session; and conducted in-depth community assessments within the David Thompson TDZ. These assessments included visits to Nordegg and Rocky Mountain House; visits to proposed investment sites; meetings with 28 industry partners and members of local government; and interviews with business operators and community members. In total, the team engaged 137 stakeholders, including representatives from the provincial government.



Miners Cafe, Nordegg

# 04 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Wildhorse Ranch, Rocky Mountain House  
Indigenous Tourism Alberta / Room Creative

# 137

## Stakeholders

# 112

## Businesses

# 2

## Communities

### WHAT WE HEARD

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the David Thompson TDZ, Travel Alberta and the consulting team made a concerted effort to engage with the area's communities. As a result of this engagement, the team learned that:

- When considered collectively, the density and diversity of non-motorized and mixed-use trails, long-distance routes and water routes make up a large percentage of the region's visitor activities and attractions. If purposefully built out and maintained, the trails and water routes hold a unique opportunity to attract more visitors and encourage them to stay longer.
- There is a significant amount of Crown land and a number of parks in this zone that are an important part of the area's tourism ecosystem and could be developed to better meet the needs of visitors.
- The number of high quality natural, cultural and heritage attractions is limited in the TDZ; however, there is an excellent opportunity to elevate the visitor experience by integrating the area's attractions with its stories and histories.
- The limited supply of diverse accommodations is a constraint to further tourism development.
- There is a lack of staff housing in the Nordegg area. Since adequate housing is critical to attracting labour and thus supporting tourism growth, staff housing is a key challenge in this TDZ.
- Bylaws need to take into consideration the unique needs of tourism and better reflect opportunities to address challenges like staff housing and visitor accommodations.
- Parks are essential tourism assets. Protecting these sensitive ecosystems and wildlife habitats is of critical importance. Cultural and spiritual sites that hold significance to local Indigenous Peoples must also be preserved.
- Reliable cellular service is required along Highway 11 to increase tourism. Many visitors and commercial operators from outside the TDZ have indicated their concern about travelling the highway without the ability to access emergency help by cell phone.
- According to stakeholders, residents support tourism if it contributes directly to the local economy and improves residents' quality of life.

Comprehensive Indigenous community engagement is currently underway and will provide further insights and observations.

# 05 INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT



Warrior Women, Jasper National Park

Across generations, Indigenous Peoples have warmly embraced their neighbors on ancestral lands, fostering deep, mutually enriching bonds through the customs and protocols of treaty-making and visitation. This enduring approach is steeped in the ancient traditions of hospitality and attentive listening.

In active relationship with Indigenous Tourism Alberta, Travel Alberta has enlisted our teams to engage and share space with First Nations, Councils, Settlements, Coops, Confederacies, and community leaders and community members to nurture mutual understanding, trust, and respect. Our engagement protocols and approaches are deeply anchored in the wisdom of our ancestors and knowledge shared by and from the communities we work with and for. Throughout our outreach efforts, we have and will continue to invite in and convene Indigenous leaders and community members with *kisêwâtisiwin* — kindness.

## **We look forward to weaving the insight we gain into this Discovery Report upon completion.**

We hold the belief that Travel Alberta is dedicated to continuous engagement, active listening, and taking effective measures to nurture and grow these relationships, fully comprehend shared aspirations, and further strengthen trust. Together with Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta, we acknowledge and extend our gratitude to the Elders, Knowledge Carriers, Youth, and leadership of these communities and to all our participants and relatives in this transformative work.

***kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanitik* — All my relations.**

**Ali Tapaquon**  
principle and founder  
Tatâga Inc.

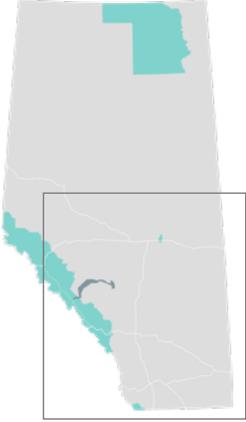
**Suzanne Denbak**  
principle and founder  
Cadence Strategies

# 05 DISCOVERING THE DESTINATION



Rockies Heli, Nordegg  
Rockies Heli / ROAM Creative

## DAVID THOMPSON

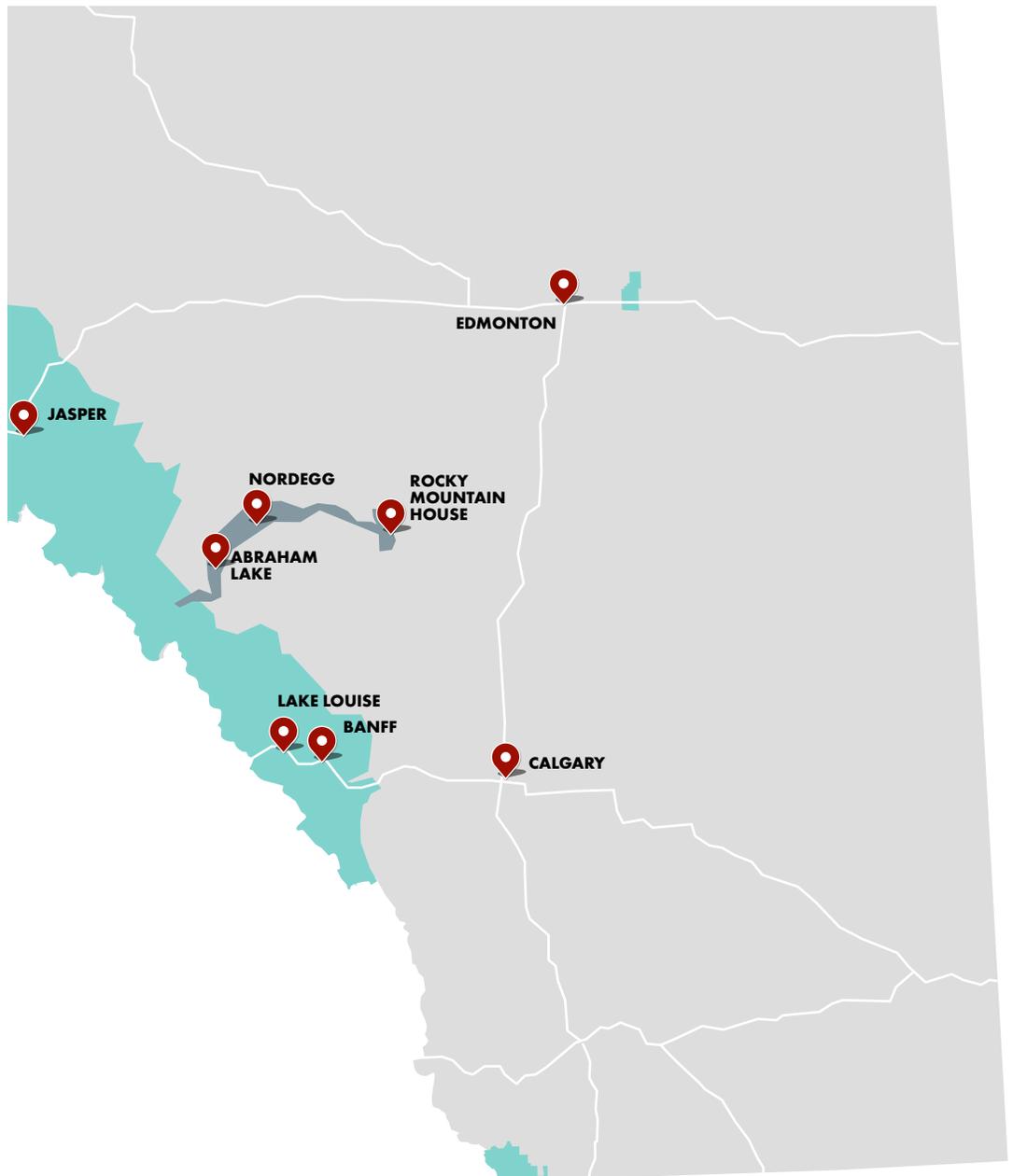


The David Thompson TDZ runs along Highway 11 from Rocky Mountain House to the Icefield Parkway (Highway 93). Over the past three years in particular, the rugged landscape has drawn adventure enthusiasts from Calgary and Edmonton looking for an alternative to other Rockies destinations.

This zone offers unique adventure activities like canyoning, via ferrata climbing, ice climbing and heli-experiences, along with popular outdoor recreation activities like hiking, fishing, golf,

snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. The zone is an exceptional place to explore and connect with nature and to discover and appreciate the people, cultures, and history of western Alberta.

There is high potential to establish this scenically diverse TDZ as a sought-after adventure tourism destination for domestic and international visitors craving a differentiated Canadian Rockies experience — authentic, rugged, lesser-known and off the beaten path.



## DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION

From Rocky Mountain House to Big Horn 144A, this area has a population of almost 7,000, with the majority (6,603) residing in the town of Rocky Mountain House. The population of the TDZ has declined over the past 10 years, making access to a tourism workforce challenging.

Clearwater County estimates that at its peak during active coal mining, the town of Nordegg was home to approximately 2,500 people.

Within Nordegg and across the zone, residents recognize that attracting more experience providers and developing more tourist accommodations will increase services and expand the local population.



(Source: Alberta Regional Dashboard, 2023)

## ECONOMIC PROFILE

The economic sectors in this zone include mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction, agriculture, forestry and, in recent years, recreation. While there is a small number of tourism-related products and experiences suitable for international visitation, there is potential for tourism to play a more significant role within the local economy.



(Sources: Alberta Regional Dashboard, 2023; Town of Rocky Mountain House, 2023).

## ACCESS

The David Thompson TDZ is located within Clearwater County and includes the town of Rocky Mountain House in west central Alberta.

The TDZ follows Highway 11 from Rocky Mountain House, through Nordegg, and all the way to Saskatchewan Crossing at the intersection of highways 11 and 93. The distance between the two primary communities is approximately 90 kilometres or an hour of highway driving. The zone benefits from proximity to both the Edmonton and Calgary International Airports and access from Highway 93 between Banff and Jasper National Parks, drawing many international visitors from Lake Louise.

## POLICY AND PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

A number of policy and planning documents were analyzed to better understand the regulatory environment of the David Thompson TDZ as it relates to tourism development. Key findings include:

- Over 90 per cent of the zone is Crown land, owned and managed by the government of Alberta for the benefit of all Albertans. Of the Crown land in the region, approximately 93 per cent is managed under the Public Lands Act, and the remaining 7 per cent is managed as parks, recreation areas or ecological reserves under the Provincial Parks Act or Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Range Lands Act.
- Tourism and recreational use and development of public lands in the zone are managed according to the David Thompson Local Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) and the Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan.
- Activities permitted to occur on crown land in this zone include oil and gas extraction, forestry and recreation.
- Tourism development nodes exist in close proximity to Nordegg; however, a large portion of the lands are not suitable for certain types of development due to unsuitable land (example: marsh/wetlands).
- Area structure planning that will be critical in moving forward on development opportunities is currently underway.
- Municipal growth and land development, including tourism, is managed in accordance with the Clearwater County Municipal Development Plan (draft), Nordegg Development Plan and area structure plans.

## DESTINATION ECOSYSTEM

### Destination Marketing/Management Organizations (DMOs)

Explore Nordegg & Abraham Lake is the primary organization in the TDZ that provides DMO-like services. The federally registered not-for-profit corporation was set up by Nordegg Adventures in 2021. The organization facilitates partnerships with like-minded operators working toward the responsible promotion and development of the region as a Rockies adventure destination where tourism contributes positively to the local communities.

With Explore Nordegg & Abraham Lake primarily focused around Nordegg and Abraham Lake, Discover Rocky, currently a group of local businesses, is looking to establish itself as an organization with a mandate to promote the area in and around Rocky Mountain House through itinerary building and collaboration with Explore Nordegg & Abraham Lake.

All groups and sites promoting tourism in the David Thompson area — including Explore Nordegg & Abraham Lake, David Thompson Country, Explore Rocky Mountain House and the newly formed Discover Rocky group — should consider consolidating efforts to ensure a streamlined approach for this zone moving forward.

The Central Alberta Tourism Alliance (CATA) is a destination development organization representing Innisfail, Red Deer, Sylvan Lake, Blackfalds, Red Deer County and Lacombe County. The group was formed by several communities in central Alberta with a goal to develop a Destination Development Management Plan. While this plan was completed in 2016, CATA continues to work on action items identified in the plan, such as creating an accommodation study, a trails study and — as of 2023 — an agritourism development strategy. These studies have increased understanding of trail development needs along with accommodation gaps and growth opportunities for the tourism sector in the area around Rocky Mountain House. CATA does not have a mandate for marketing. The group meets monthly to share updates from constituent communities and discuss ongoing and future projects — toward which members contribute an agreed amount each year.

### Economic Development Organizations

The Town of Rocky Mountain House has an economic development officer with a mandate to support multiple sectors including tourism. One individual working for Clearwater County oversees economic development within the county, taking responsibility for multiple sectors. They work with businesses on growth initiatives, attracting investment to the county and running some social media marketing to support tourism businesses. The County, municipalities and businesses in the area all understand the value of tourism and are working together to develop the region as a tourist destination. The area's continual growth in visitation demonstrates that their efforts have already been effective.

Both Clearwater County and Rocky Mountain House are members of the Central Alberta Economic Partnership (CAEP). The mandate of this group is to stimulate economic growth through strategic regional partnerships by connecting members to tools, resources, training and people. Representing over 45 municipalities and organizations, CAEP uses a collaborative approach to accelerate a sustainable and innovative economy in central Alberta. While CAEP has expressed interest in engaging in the tourism space, they have left leadership for the sector up to CATA and the zone's DMOs and communities.

## VISITATION

According to Travel Alberta's anonymized mobile data, in 2019, 98.3 per cent of visitors to the David Thompson TDZ were Canadians, while only 1.2 per cent of visitors hailed from the US. At the provincial level, Albertans made up approximately 94 per cent of visitors, followed by BC residents at just over two per cent and Saskatchewan at one per cent. There is an opportunity in this TDZ to increase visitation from both rest of Canada and the rest of the world.

### AB

#### VISITOR ORIGIN

Visitation to the David Thompson TDZ, like visitation to the whole of Alberta, is highly domestic, with the majority of visitors coming from within Rocky Mountain House (37.3 per cent), Clearwater County (21.6 per cent), Edmonton (5.4 per cent), Red Deer (4.5 per cent), Calgary (3.9 per cent), and Sylvan Lake (2.5 per cent).

### 37%

#### REPEAT VISITORS

Just over 35 per cent of visitors to the David Thompson TDZ visit two or more times per year.

### 50 hours

#### AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY

Albertans spend the longest time in the zone, with an average of 51.6 hours, which is double the length of time other Canadians and International visitors spend (25.6 hours and 13.5 hours, respectively).

Note: Percentages represent the devices detected in the destination for the identified period. They do not represent total visitation and may be impacted by differing traveller technology or a lack of cell coverage.

(Source: Near Mobile Data, 2019)

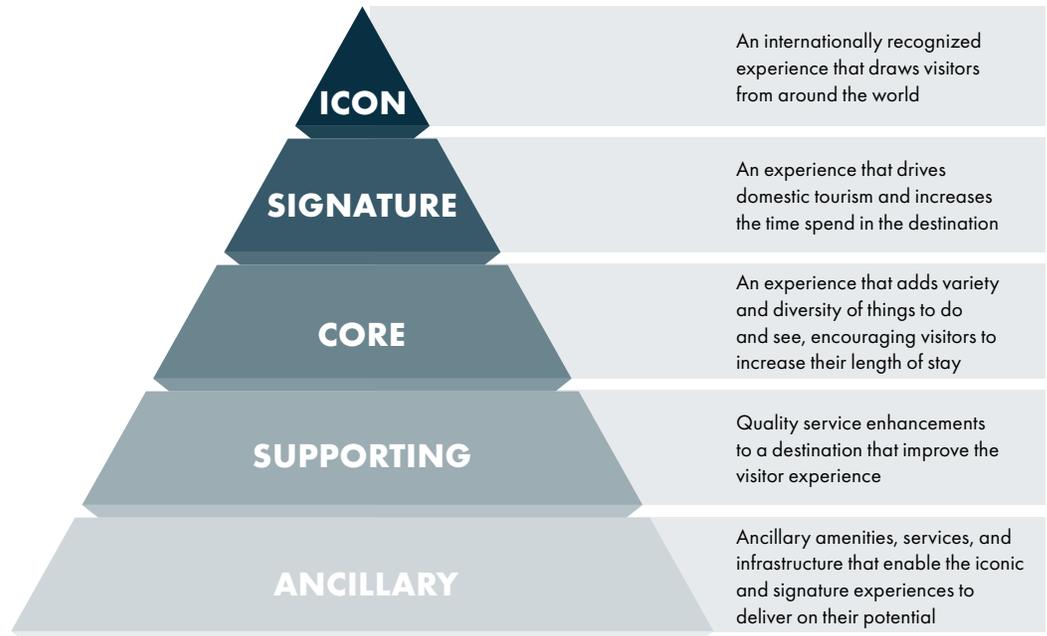
# 05 DESTINATION ANALYSIS



Nordegg

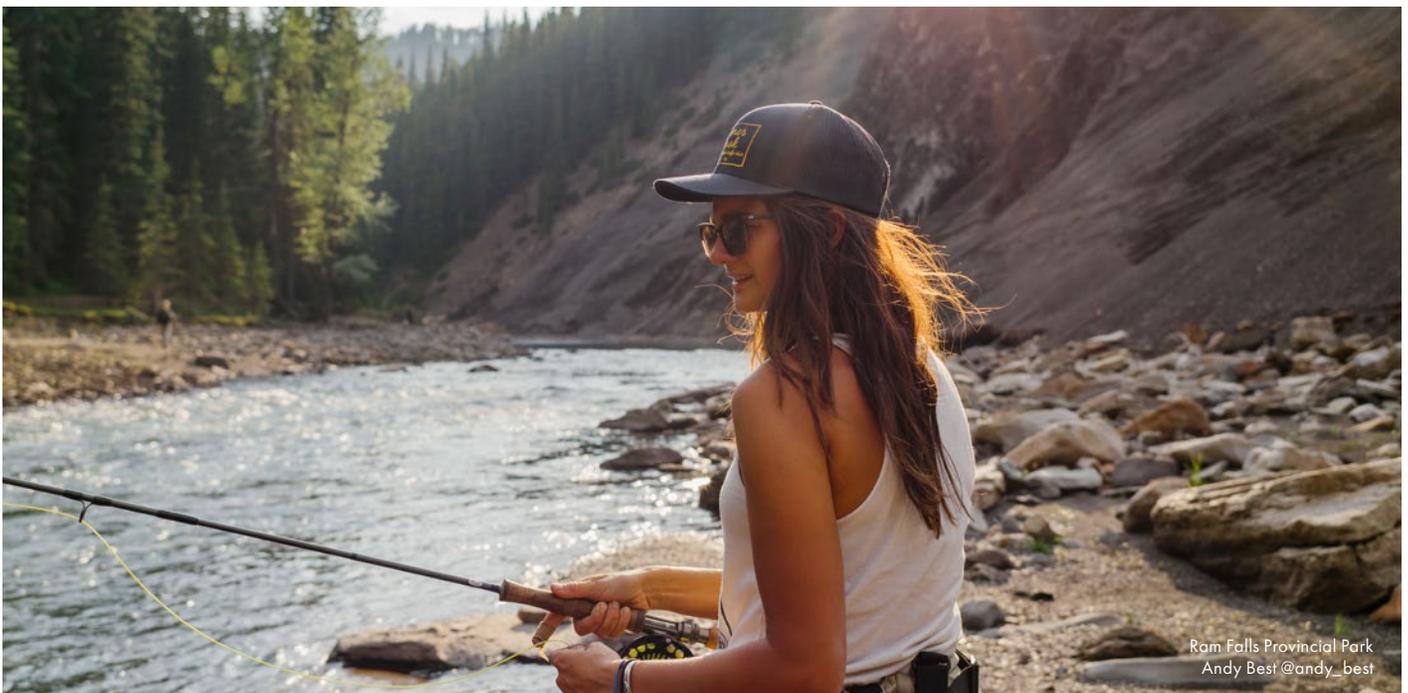
## SUPPLY AND DEMAND ANALYSIS

In order to fulfill the tourism potential of this area, it is imperative to understand its tourism products and experience and accommodation mix, and the role both play within the development zone. Moving forward, this understanding will guide targeted investment toward the right products and places.



(Adapted from Failte Ireland)

The majority of the products in this zone are core products, which add variety and diversity and encourage visitors to spend a bit longer than they otherwise would. There are very few signature products and even fewer iconic products. Given this TDZ's proximity to two of Alberta's most popular national parks, there is a significant opportunity to develop signature and iconic experiences, which must be supported by amenities, services and infrastructure (such as accommodations and food and beverage establishments).



Ram Falls Provincial Park  
Andy Best @andy\_best

**Supply: Accommodation Mix**

Visitors to this zone are diverse and demand a variety and selection of accommodations. Currently, the TDZ's 43 accommodation options are clustered in and around Rocky Mountain House and Nordegg. They include:

- Nine hotels/motels (including 75 rooms between the Nordegg Lodge Hotel and the David Thompson Resort)
- One hostel (44 beds in Shunda Creek Hostel)
- Three lodges
- Sixteen cabins/cottages/bed & breakfasts
- Three guest ranches
- Twenty-four auto accessible campgrounds with approximately 1,400 serviced and unserviced campsites

- One comfort camping campground
- Designated backcountry campgrounds
- Many other campsites — primarily along the shores of Abraham Lake and the North Saskatchewan River

Based on the current mix of accommodations in and around Nordegg, the western portion of the zone can accommodate approximately 4,292 visitors per night. Accommodation supply in the Nordegg area is diverse but limited and operates at or near capacity during peak periods. Most campgrounds in the TDZ are open for peak summer and fall seasons and closed in the spring and winter seasons. Other accommodation providers in the TDZ deliberately target specific markets (for instance, summer camps) and are not typically available for bookings by the general public.

Much of Rocky Mountain House's hotel capacity is concentrated in the eastern portion of the area in and around the town, which contains seven of the zone's nine hotels/motels or 87 per cent of the available supply of rooms. Forty-four per cent of the TDZ's nightly capacity is in fixed-roof accommodation, with the remaining 66 per cent made up of campgrounds (comfort, serviced and unserviced).

The limited supply and diversity of accommodations is a recognized constraint to further tourism development. Over the last two summers, the zone's accommodations, including cabins and campgrounds, have been sold out. At times, these accommodations are primarily occupied by workers in the oil and gas and resource development sectors, leaving little capacity to support tourism.

**Supply: Products and Experiences**

The David Thompson TDZ is an exceptional place for visitors to explore and connect with nature during all seasons; however, while an asset inventory of the region conducted by the consulting team identified a wide variety of natural and developed tourism products and experiences, there is a limited number of tourism-related assets in the zone.

**Local operators and tourism businesses include:**

- Nordegg Adventures
- Girth Hitch Guiding
- Rival Trade Brewing
- HeLa Ventures
- Rockies Heli
- Canada Outdoor Adventures
- Miners Café
- Beehive Artisan Market
- Nature's Getaway Nordegg
- Expanse Cottages
- Prairie Creek Inn
- Cow Lake Store & Resort
- David Thompson Resort
- Wildhorse Ranch
- McKenzie's Trails West
- Western Canyoning Adventures

**According to Travel Alberta's anonymized mobile data, the most-visited tourism products or experiences in the David Thompson TDZ include:**

- **Crimson Lake Provincial Park**
- **Fish Lake Provincial Recreation Area**
- **David Thompson Resort**

**Nature-based adventure and ecotourism assets:**

- One national park (Banff National Park is in the very west part of the zone)
- 21 provincial parks and protected areas
- 1,200+ kilometres of trails
- 185+ kilometres of water trails
- Two via ferrata routes
- Lakes and reservoirs
- Alpine and sub-alpine terrain
- Spectacular mountain views
- Waterfalls, ice climbs and canyons
- One of Alberta's oldest trees (Limber Pine, located at Whirlpool Point)
- Abraham Lake ice bubbles
- Whitewater rapids
- Diverse fish and wildlife

**Culture and heritage tourism assets:**

- Two National Historic Sites
- One Canadian Heritage River (the North Saskatchewan River)
- Two museums
- One rodeo ground
- History of fur trading along North Saskatchewan River
- History of early coal development

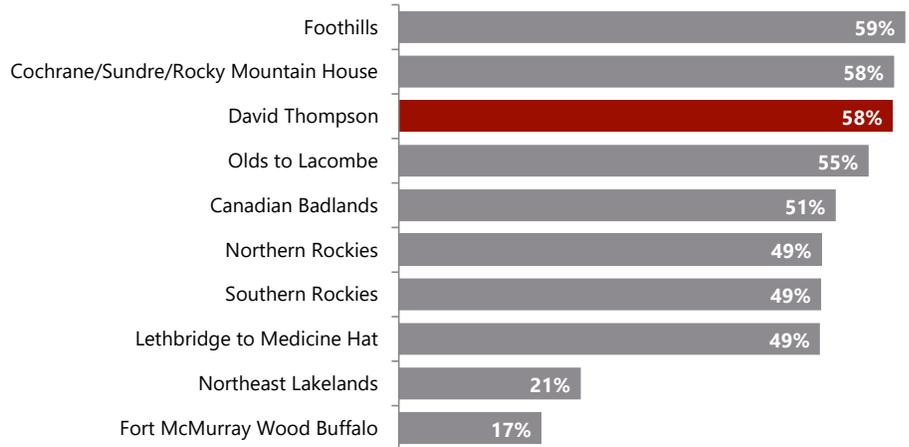
**Demand: Amongst Albertans**

As part of the perception research conducted by Travel Alberta in November 2022 over 1,000 Albertans were surveyed in order to better understand traveler perception of each of the 10 TDZs. This research indicated that:

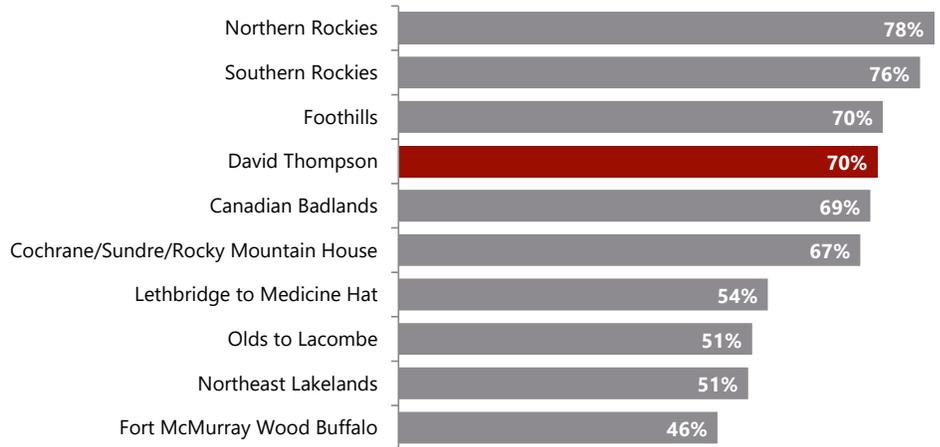
- Albertans are moderately familiar with the David Thompson TDZ, with 58 per cent of respondents stating they are familiar or very familiar with the zone
- Sixty per cent are likely or very likely to visit the zone within the next 12 months
- Seventy per cent of respondents have a strong overall impression of the area

**Albertans identified David Thompson Country as the TDZ they were most likely to travel to of all TDZs.**

**Familiarity with Destination (Per cent familiar with each TDZ)**



**Overall Impression of Destination (Per cent with positive overall impression of each TDZ)**



Nordegg Adventures  
Nordegg Adventures / ROAM Creative

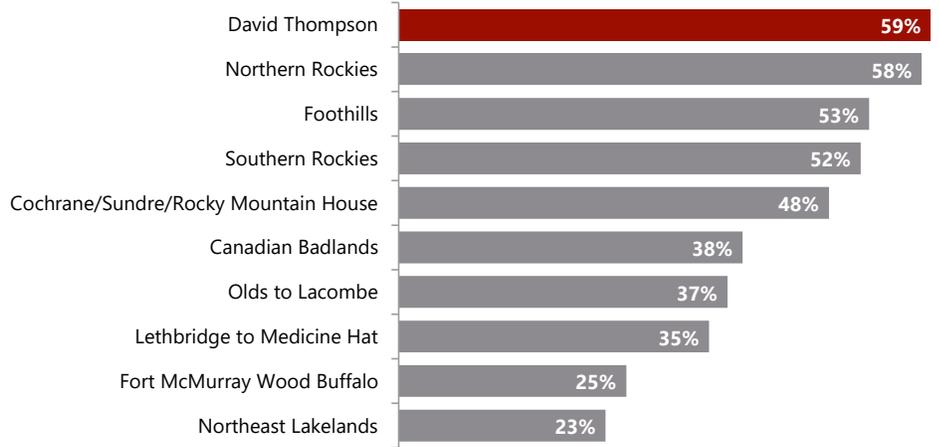
**Likelihood to Visit Destination (Per cent likely to travel to each TDZ)**

**60%**

MOST LIKELY TO VISIT BETWEEN JUNE AND AUGUST

**50%**

LIKELY TO STAY MORE THAN TWO NIGHTS ON A POTENTIAL VISIT



**Activities Albertans are most likely to enjoy in the David Thompson TDZ**

Wildlife viewing is among the most likely activities for visitors to seek out in this TDZ.



(Source: Assessing Perceptions of Alberta's Tourism Development Zones, Twenty31, 2023)

**Demand: International Travellers**

Top “trip anchors” (those activities a visitor would centre their trips around) and supporting activities identified by Global Tourism Watch research align well with both existing and potential products and experiences in the David Thompson TDZ.

The following trip anchors that domestic and US visitors seek in their travels align particularly well with the zone’s real and potential products and experiences:

- Natural attractions like mountains and waterfalls
- Hiking
- Historical/archaeological/world heritage sites
- Nature parks
- Wildlife viewing

Travellers from the UK, Denmark, Japan, Korea, China, Australia and Mexico have similarly identified these among their top trip anchors.

(Global Tourism Watch, 2021)

**Demand: Alberta’s Target Travellers**

Travel Alberta has identified “Curious Adventurers” and “Hotspot Hunters” as the high-value travellers likely to spend more per visit, yield the highest return on investment, and contribute the most to the province’s economic growth. Tourism businesses, communities and associations can attract these valuable visitors by tailoring products and experiences to their unique travel styles.



Girth Hitch Guiding, Nordegg  
Tanya Vanthuyne @vanthuynee

The primary target for this TDZ is Curious Adventurers, for whom travel is about getting a different perspective on the world. Travellers to this zone are largely fuelled by a sense of adventure and discovery, seeking authentic connection to people and place. Opportunities for Curious Adventures to experience adventure, discovery and connection include:

- Seeing the ice bubbles at Abraham Lake
- Ice climbing, canyoning, via ferrata climbing, hiking, off-roading and whitewater rafting (west of Rocky Mountain House)
- Investigating the rich history of the fur trade at the Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site
- Listening to the story of coal mining at the Brazeau Collieries Mine National Heritage Site
- Soil painting with a local artist, learning to make willow charcoal drawing sticks and sketching the beautiful landscape.



Rockies Heli, Nordegg  
Rockies Heli / ROAM Creative

The secondary target for the TDZ is the Hotspot Hunter, for whom travel is about achievement and accomplishments. Examples of a Hotspot Hunter’s preferred experiences in the David Thompson TDZ include:

- Seeing the iconic ice bubbles at Abraham Lake
- Tackling the via ferratas (west of Nordegg)
- Ice climbing (west of Nordegg)
- Taking a once-in-a-lifetime heli tour (west of Nordegg)
- Due to a lack of higher-end accommodations and amenities, most Hotspot Hunters will choose to come in for the day from Lake Louise rather than spending the night and exploring more of the David Thompson zone. Some operators who cater mainly to Curious Adventurers will be able to attract Hot Spot Hunters by shortening the length of their tours and experiences.

### Trends impacting tourism

As destination organizations at all levels and businesses look to adapt and thrive, it will be important they stay attuned to emerging trends that are driving the tourism industry forward. These trends, identified by Twenty31 in their 2022 Tourism Trends report, will impact supply and demand and shape the future of tourism over the short- and long-term.

#### TREND:

**Experiences are the new luxury goods**

#### DESCRIPTION:

Because most people were unable to travel in 2020 and 2021, tourism has become a scarce, luxury good. The value of travel and tourism will increase even more as the 2020s continue, boosting consumer spending on unique experiences away from home.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY FOR TDZ

This TDZ has high potential for becoming a sought-after destination for nature-based and adventure tourism. The zone provides visitors with opportunities to participate in unique adventure and recreational activities. Further development of products, experiences and accommodations will make it an appealing destination for international visitors seeking truly “Canadian” experiences.

**Regenerative travel going local**

Regenerative travel will help make tourism a pillar for sustainable economic development for destinations. 83 per cent of global travellers will make sustainable travel a priority in the future, while 66 per cent want their travel spending to directly benefit local communities.

This zone has the potential to become one of Alberta’s leading regenerative tourism destinations, where tourism is a vehicle for advancing conservation of the environment, culture, economic development, social equity and quality of life for residents. Respecting the land and protecting the natural environment of this TDZ will provide long-term benefits to residents and visitors alike.

**Exotic destinations attract young travellers**

Younger travellers are not looking exclusively for sun and beach destinations; they also want immersive adventure, often involving high doses of adrenaline and off-the-beaten-path destinations.

The David Thompson TDZ is a hidden gem offering exotic Canadian experiences and an untouched, rugged landscape with far smaller crowds than other areas in the Rockies and many high-adrenaline nature-based experiences such as ice climbing, via ferrata climbing, and canyoning.

**Single destination, longer stays**

The complexity of arranging a trip will result in travellers booking fewer trips but increasing the length of their stay and in a single country. “Travel less, travel better” will determine booking behaviour over the next few years.

This zone is home to some of Alberta’s most beautiful and diverse landscapes and provides authentic historical and cultural experiences through historic sites, museums and tours. Its location between two of Alberta’s most popular national parks creates immense opportunity to capture international visitors looking to spend a few extra days in the Rockies.

(Source: Twenty31, 2022)

## RESIDENT SENTIMENT

The success of developing tourism across Alberta's TDZs hinges on tourism's impact on the quality of life for local residents. Quite simply, if it's not good for residents, it's not good for visitors. Travel Alberta has been tracking resident sentiment across the province for the past year, and as part of this initiative, we assessed resident sentiment at a TDZ level, as highlighted below.

Residents of the David Thompson TDZ, like residents of other rural destinations across the province, are interested in seeing more visitors in their community. While they are open to growth in the tourism sector and they recognize that attractions and events create more vibrancy in their communities, residents still need to be convinced that there is a strong connection between tourism and their quality of life.

**Residents want to see more development of attractions and events that would entice visitors to the community.**

### Highlights: Resident Sentiment

QUESTIONS	TOTAL ALBERTA RESIDENTS	DAVID THOMPSON RESIDENTS
Tourism is important to my community	70%	75%
I would welcome more visitors to my community	62%	66%
A strong tourism industry improved my quality of life	61%	53%
The attractions, events, and things to do here are an important part of making my community a vibrant place	83%	78%
This is a vibrant community and area – there is lots to do	70%	72%
My community and area offers experiences I want to tell others about	65%	71%
Community leaders should look at developing more attractions and events to attract tourists	72%	88%

(Source: Stone Olafson, 2023)

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES ANALYSIS

Using findings from primary and secondary research and extensive stakeholder engagement, a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted to evaluate the TDZ. The analysis takes into consideration both the current and potential future drivers that will influence tourism within the zone.

### Strengths

- Proximity to national parks
- Incredible views and diversity of nature-based and adventure tourism resources
- Number, length and diversity of trails for motorized and non-motorized recreation (including the rail trail)
- Position as alternate destination to congested Rocky Mountain national parks and Kananaskis
- Nordegg is quirky and unscripted
- Rich Indigenous culture and heritage
- Historical features and narratives
- Abraham Lake
- Dark skies
- Clearwater County's investment in tourism (including \$2M for natural gas and fibre-optic cable for Nordegg)
- Investors are already expressing interest in the area
- Equal distance from Calgary and Edmonton
- Dedicated tourism operators and business owners who collaborate well
- High-quality, accessible river route
- The Kootenay Plains' mild, dry local climate year-round
- Year-round activities
- Permissive regulatory environment for motorized/mechanically assisted recreation, compared to nearby national parks or Kananaskis

### Weaknesses

- Shortage of residents who wish to work in tourism
- Challenges to attracting workers to support year-round tourism businesses
- Limited staff housing and accommodation (land use regulations restricting the construction of staff housing)
- Limited market awareness with long-haul domestic and international markets
- Limited services and infrastructure in Nordegg
- Limited capacity and diversity of fixed-roof accommodations
- Campgrounds are at capacity during peak season and closed during the winter
- Locations of tourism development nodes not aligned with areas of highest tourism potential with no tourism development nodes in the backcountry
- Restrictive and unclear policy direction regarding permitted activities within lands zoned for prime protection
- Lack of public transportation services
- Inconsistent and restrictive permitting/regulatory environment
- Very limited market- and export-ready experiences
- Lack of suitable signage and wayfinding
- Limited purpose-built, managed and experientially focused trails
- Limited access to appropriate, well-situated and easily developable lands

## Opportunities

- Establish the zone as one of Alberta's leading destinations for regenerative, nature-based adventure and ecotourism
- Develop additional and more diverse guided experiences
- Construct boutique resorts (for example, comfort camping sites and guest ranches)
- Construct all-season wellness resort and spa with medium-sized convention facilities
- Limited existing development allows for new, well-planned development
- Develop and market Indigenous experiences to visitors
- Increase traffic from Banff National Park (for example, by running coach tours through Saskatchewan River Crossing)
- Develop itineraries for international visitors
- Nordegg and Rocky Mountain House are both remarkable towns with opportunities for enhancement/expansion
- Acquire, enhance and/or repurpose existing, sunsetting operations
- Promote and increase infrastructure and amenities for off-highway vehicle activities between Rocky Mountain House and Bighorn Backcountry
- Promote and develop infrastructure and amenities for hut-to-hut backcountry hiking along the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail
- Promote and develop infrastructure and amenities for porch-to-summit mountain biking from Nordegg
- Collaboration between Rocky Mountain House and Nordegg
- Expand winter tourism
- Develop and promote Rocky Mountain National Historic Site
- Improve visitor management through cross collaboration and communication

## Threats

- Lack of support from some local residents and tenure holders to further pursue tourism and increase tourism investment may pose a barrier to development
- Multiple destination organizations, either established or currently forming in the zone, may create the potential for misalignment, overlap and inefficient use of resources
- Lack of available/accessible ground water to support new developments
- Fire risk due to surrounding old forests and climate change
- Coal and other resource development that is not compatible with tourism
- Confining tenure conditions and unclear permitting processes deter investment in tourism
- Random camping may increase the risk of reactive/restrictive government policies that affect tourism operators
- Potential land use conflicts between user communities
- Continued increases to supply chain costs/issues due to proximity to major communities
- Competition from other jurisdictions with close proximity to national parks

With a vast area of provincial Crown land and proximity to two major cities and Alberta's most popular national parks, this zone offers significant potential for the sustainable development of tourism-related products and experiences that meet international consumer demand. However, access to land remains a significant challenge.

The most significant land use and land access constraints that will continue to challenge tourism investment and the maturing of the tourism sector in the David Thompson TDZ include:

- The land use zoning in the David Thompson Integrated Resource Plan limits tourism development opportunities because it does not clearly define what type of tourism use is permitted leaving room for interpretation. The plan was written in 1992 and has not evolved at the same pace as the tourism industry. The nodes identified in this plan are not ideal for tourism development with challenges including topography and availability of utilities.
- The Eastern Slopes Policy also limits tourism development opportunity because it does not take into consideration that tourism development can be delivered in an environmentally responsible manner.
- Lack of opportunity for private sector investment and limited public investment to support infrastructure in provincial recreation areas and on public lands.
- Limited integration and proactive prioritization of tourism in the Bighorn Management Plan and Standing Committee to ensure tourism, one of the primary land-uses in the region, is properly represented.
- Municipal land use zoning and prioritizing work need to move forward, including the development and implementation of county area structure plans. This will require collaboration between county, government and industry.
- Process for accessing Crown lands, with multiple orders of government involved, is unclear and there is complexity between the county and the province with regard to permitting and processing.



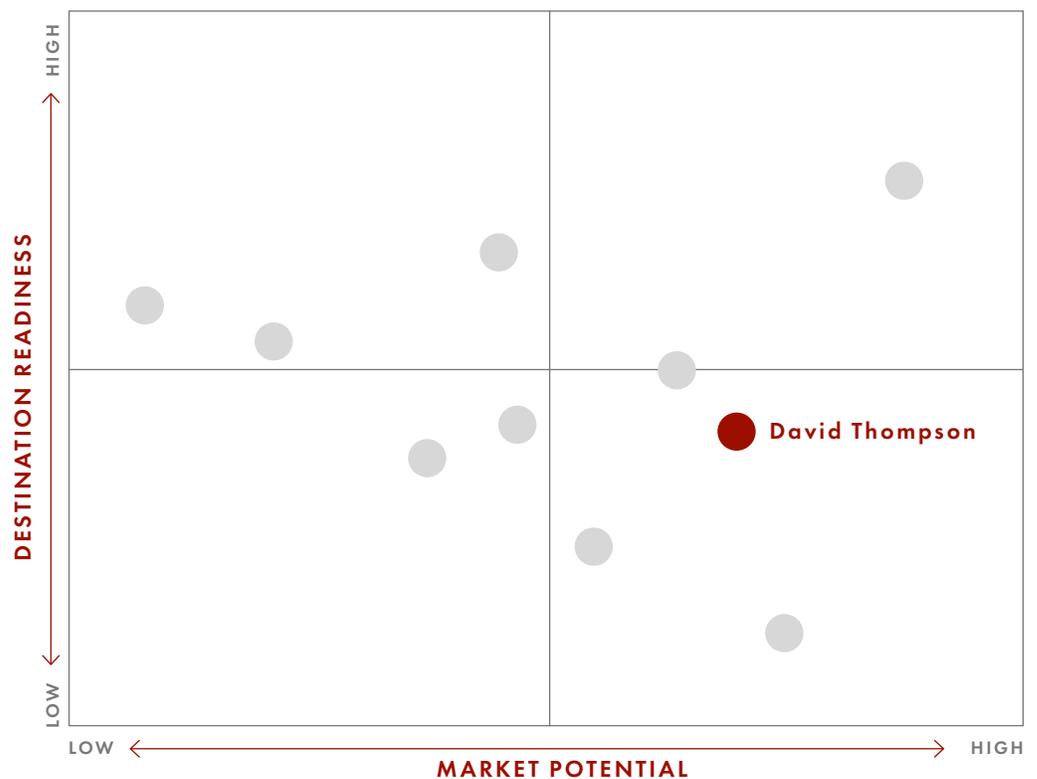
Nordegg Adventures  
Nordegg Adventures / ROAM Creative

## DESTINATION MATURITY AND READINESS

The David Thompson TDZ has significant potential (as shown in pink on the matrix) to become an enabling environment for tourism with an improved mix of tourism products and experiences. Based upon all that was observed in this discovery phase, Travel Alberta assessed each TDZ on two primary criteria, i) market potential and ii) destination readiness to help inform the stages of future resource allocation for TDZs. To broaden our internal assessment, Travel Alberta will garner further input from stakeholders involved in the project to weigh into our initial assessment as indicated in table.

Key considerations pertaining to this zone include:

- Lack of staff housing, especially in winter months, in the Nordegg/Abraham Lake area
- Limited existing accommodation offerings that appeal to international visitors
- Restrictive policies limiting product development that align with market potential



The grey dots represent the position of the David Thompson TDZ relative to the ten other TDZs across the province.

# 05 VISION FOR THE FUTURE



Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site

**“The David Thompson Zone is an untamed but welcoming destination that prides itself in offering visitors the freedom to connect with an accessible and pristine natural environment. With a rich appreciation and respect for the land and our heritage, we will sustainably grow the visitor economy in a way that protects the environment and provides long-term benefits to residents and visitors alike.”**

— David Thompson Steering Committee

## DESTINATION 2035

An effective approach to elevating the visitor experience in this zone will focus on the development of new products and experiences related to nature-based adventure, ecotourism, culture and heritage.

### **Nature-based adventure:**

The David Thompson TDZ offers endless venues for nature-based adventure, from canyoning, via ferrata climbing, ice climbing and heli-experiences to hiking, fishing, golf, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

### **Indigenous, culture and heritage tourism:**

Visitors to this zone have rich opportunities to appreciate local Indigenous cultures and listen to stories of the fur trade at the Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site, as well as learn about western Alberta’s mining history at the Brazeau Collieries Mine National Heritage Site in Nordegg.

By 2035, tourism businesses in this zone will have a clear path forward, with area structure plans in place and a streamlined process for accessing land. Export-ready products and experiences and visitor-appropriate accommodations will attract high-value travellers. A strong, well-trained and housed labour force will provide visitors with world-class experiences. This zone will exemplify all that Alberta is known for and will balance itself as an epicentre for outdoor adventures and a destination ready to share its culture and history.

## STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

In support of tourism development within the David Thompson TDZ, multiple strategic initiatives were identified by local stakeholders and communities. This included:

01. Collaborating with stakeholders to address staff housing shortage
02. Increasing accommodations, with a focus on accommodations attractive to international visitors, including upper-scale (4-star) accommodations and glamping
03. Increasing collaboration among tourism organizations within the TDZ
04. Increasing overall product offerings with a focus on anchor attractions
05. Supporting the creation of an enabling economic and policy environment for tourism entrepreneurs and small businesses
06. Creating packages and itineraries that appeal to high-value US and international travellers
07. Supporting initiatives to advance land use related to tourism development

## OUTCOMES

Successful implementation of these strategic initiatives will enable the development of products, accommodations, and robust multi-day itineraries that increase the length of time visitors stay and how much they spend throughout the David Thompson TDZ. Specifically, the desired outcomes of these initiatives include:

### **Improved seasonality of visitation**

Businesses will operate predictably, visitors will have positive experiences, and community members will appreciate the value visitors bring to their communities.

### **Public and private sector investment**

The identification of specific gaps in products, experiences and infrastructure will have created awareness of community needs and market demand, spurring private and public sector investment.

### **Capacity and capability**

Tourism companies, entrepreneurs and destination organizations across the province will be well-equipped to expand, establish and support their businesses, creating jobs and more vibrant communities.

### **Awareness and understanding of benefits**

Tourism growth will result in a more diversified economy, reduce dependency on other sectors, improve quality of life for residents, and legitimize the benefits of tourism in this TDZ.

### **Reconciliation and cultural awareness**

If the results of the ongoing Indigenous engagement in the zone show that local Indigenous communities are in favour of tourism development, Travel Alberta will collaborate with Indigenous Tourism Alberta and Indigenous tourism operators to foster growth in the sector. Community-led tourism will offer opportunities for economic development, the sharing of cultures and the development of infrastructure that will benefit residents.

### **Cooperation among communities**

Communities will bring their unique perspectives and assets to the table to develop strong tourism products and experiences that attract visitors to the zone and encourage them to stay longer.



The Prairie Creek Inn  
Rocky Mountain House

## 06 CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

As highlighted in this report, a significant percentage of Albertans are already aware of the David Thompson TDZ, think of it favourably, and are more likely to travel there than to any other TDZ in the province. Communities within this zone are open to the development of their tourism assets, provided this development is done in a community-centric and sustainable way, though residents still need to be convinced that tourism will increase their quality of life.

To achieve its 2035 tourism goals and become an internationally recognized natural playground, the David Thompson TDZ must develop new tourism products and supporting amenities and infrastructure to support a higher volume of higher-maintenance visitors. While local tourism entities and municipal governments are already collaborating successfully, this pattern needs to extend to collaboration with organizations and entities at the provincial level. The zone's vast amount of Crown land — a major potential tourism asset — must be made more available for sustainable development and accessible to visitors. Whenever possible, growth in the tourism sector needs to support the zone's efforts to foster a greener, sustainable economy.

Successful implementation of the strategic initiatives found in this report will both realize the zone's existing potential and create new opportunities for regional growth and prosperity. As we move into the next phase of this project, we will build on these findings to ensure the foundations for a popular and profitable destination are in place.



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