

Business

HOSPITALITY



Tourists set to flock to Halifax

Peggys Cove is a perennial favourite destination for visitors to Nova Scotia.

International tour company says city top place to visit in Canada

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Judging by numbers put together by the travel platform ToursByLocals, it's about to get busy around here.

The Vancouver company, which operates in 190 countries, reports that it is booking more tours in Halifax than any other city in the country.

"Normally for Canada the top places are the usual suspects: Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto, Quebec City," said Paul Melhus, CEO of ToursByLocals.

"So, to see Halifax as number 1 is kind of surprising. It goes Halifax, St. John's, Quebec City in terms of booking popularity right now. People want to go to Atlantic Canada."

Melhus said that out of the 2,000 worldwide destinations where travellers can book tours through his company, Halifax is seventh overall.

"These are bookings, they aren't necessarily people travelling yet; they'll be delivered over the course of the summer," he said.



Paul Melhus, CEO of Vancouver company ToursByLocals.

"So maybe you wouldn't be seeing more travellers today, but this is for June, July, August, September delivery."

The company set a sales record in May, with business up 23 per cent overall, and 300 per cent if you just consider Canadian travellers.

"It's kind of startling, actually. We're now comparing ourselves to 2019 levels because everything basically went to zero for the last two years. We started to see resurgence in January, February," Melhus said.

"It was amazing to go from zero back to 2019 levels in such a short time, it actually

put a bit of stress on our organization. Historically, our business is Americans travelling to Europe, and that's still good, but I was really surprised to see this number from Halifax. It's primarily driven by Canadians."

ToursByLocals was established in 2008, at first focusing mostly on European destinations, and has been doing business in Halifax since 2012. Its platform connects to a network of 4,500 tour guides working as independent contractors and supported by about 100 people working in operations, R&D and marketing.

TOP 5 OFFERINGS AMBASSATOURS

- Harbour Hopper
- George Island
- Dinner cruise
- Wines on the Water
- Peggys Cove

"We're half the staff that we had before, and all of a sudden we're back to the sales that we had two years ago," said Melhus.

"Our strategy with respect to guides is that we want to provide a meaningful amount of work for them. We actually have only six guides in Halifax, but they're all offering private tours, that's our speciality. We don't do group tours, we just do private, so you and your family, that sort of thing."

The summer is also looking bright at Ambassatours, which offers more than 20 different tours in the province.

"It's early days yet, but all indications are that we're pacing ahead of 2019 sales, year to date," said Sean Buckland, vice-president of business development for Ambassatours.

"In other words, when we

TOP 3 OFFERINGS TOURSBYLOCALS

- Peggys Cove, with a "hidden spots" drive
- Walking tour of Halifax
- Day trip to Annapolis Valley and Bay of Fundy

look at our sales as of June 3 for 2019, we'd be 15 per cent ahead of that for this year. I really do qualify that by saying it's early days... but it looks like a very good year."

Ambassatours employs 75 tour guides right now and expects to grow to 100 by later in the summer.

"We see a lot of guests from Ontario and Quebec; Atlantic Canada is there for us as well," said Buckland, who's seeing a lot of pent-up demand.

"We're starting to see more from the New England area, and this is retail sightseeing, not cruise ship passengers.

"We're seeing a good amount from out west. It's a lot of Canadian business, but as we progress closer to summer we're starting to see more and more European and American visitors, as well."