

# Be the master of your own vacation destiny

DAN McROBERTS – SPECIAL TO THE OUTLOOK

GPS tours may only have been part of the landscape in the Canadian Rockies for the past few months, but it seems the sky is the limit.

When a Banff-based company introduced self-guided GPS touring earlier this summer, it hoped it would be the answer for a question they had long been asking.

“Discover Banff Tours is a big stakeholder in the project, and for a long time they’d been asking what they could do to attract the self-driving travellers,” said Rick Bulich, the principal operator of GPS Tour Guide. “An overwhelming majority of people are driving themselves and they aren’t always inclined to join a guided group.”

At first, the group considered creating an audio tour that described the sights of the Canadian Rockies for drivers, but decided that it had been attempted before, and had not met with the greatest success. Then, they noted a new use for GPS technology elsewhere in North America, and GPS Tour Guide was born.

“There were a couple of places where it was being used for more than just navigation, but also to do triggered commentary,” said Bulich.

The units, which can be set up in any vehicle equipped with a radio, are made up of a GPS device and a transmitter. As certain coordinates are reached, commentary is triggered and transmitted from the rental unit on a pre-set radio frequency.

Bulich knows of only a handful of other GPS tours offered in North America, including walking excursions in New York City and specially equipped mopeds in San Francisco. The Canadian tours meanwhile, cover hours worth of driving, and include dozens of interpretive commentaries.

“We’re really leading the world



Rick Bulich, director of business development for GyPSy Guide, shows off one of the Banff company’s electronic tour guides. CRAIG DOUCE – PHOTO

in this sort of thing,” said Bulich. “And all the people involved are here in the Bow Valley.”

Areas covered by the company’s devices, dubbed the GyPSy Guide, include the Trans-Canada Highway from Calgary all the way through the mountain parks and British Columbia to Vancouver, the Icefields Parkway north to Jasper, and Highway 16 and 5 from Jasper to Kamloops. There are also extensive tours of Banff, Lake Louise and Jasper, lasting as long as three hours in the case of the Banff town tour.

A team of interpretive guides writes the material and decides what features to focus on and which tales to tell.

“We try to balance between stories of interest and describing what people are going to find visually stimulating while they’re driving,” said Bulich. “The content

really varies depending on the location. In the national parks, there’s quite intensive information on the environment and wildlife.”

There is also information on wildlife management. Between Banff and Lake Louise, the GPS tour goes into detail about animal overpasses, underpasses and fencing. Parks Canada activities like prescribed burns are also a regular topic on the route.

The touring units have been available throughout the summer and Bulich said that demand is growing bit by bit.

“Because it’s so new, we have to do a lot of explaining to people about how it works and what it’s about. People don’t get into town and say, alright, where do I get a GPS tour around here — yet.”

On the strength of just one season, Bulich and his colleagues

are already planning to expand the company’s offering in time for next summer. New routes are planned linking Calgary, Edmonton and Jasper and working south from Banff through Radium and into the Kootenays and Highway 3 along the Canada/US border.

“That’s our first priority,” said Bulich. “We’re going to grow and that’s going to give us the opportunity to really increase the amount of content we have available.”

Because of the flexible, self-directed nature of GPS touring, a customer can pick up a unit in Banff and drop it off in Vancouver, for example, so the more routes with commentary the better. Bulich said next year, all information will be in English, German and French.

Once those expansions and improvements are complete, Bulich

feels there’s a chance for the GPS guides to specialize in themed tours.

“Should we be offering heritage tours, walking tours of the Banff townsite? I think so,” he said. “This type of touring is the future. It’s not going to go away and now that the technology has been worked out, why wouldn’t you use it?”

Laurie Schwartz an interpreter and actor who has guided excursions for Discover Banff Tours and performed with Mountain World Heritage Interpretive Theatre for several years, agrees.

Schwartz is the voice of the Icefields Parkway tour, and wrote the Jasper town tour and the commentary for the road between Mount Robson and Kamloops.

“I think it’s great, it’s entertaining and enlightens you about the area you’re in,” she said. “For someone who’s brand new to the area, it’s a fantastic way to know a bit more about the history and ecology.”

While the GyPSy Guides provide a great deal of information for independent travellers, Schwartz doesn’t think they’ll keep people shut in their cars as they drive through the Rockies.

“The great thing about the tours is that you can encourage people to get out of their vehicles and check things out,” she said. Nearly every significant lookout is discussed as the driver approaches, and the commentary also offers suggestions for short hikes that leave from roadside trailheads. Once people get out and about, there’s a good chance they’ll be able to find someone to perform a task the GPS can’t manage.

“People want to get those questions answered,” Schwartz said. “And by getting them out of their cars, they might be able to access a live interpreter and do that.”

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