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ALLIANCE FOR CULTURAL TOURISM CALLS FOR COMMUNITY CULTURAL PLAN AS WHISTLER LOOKS TO PLACE-BASED CULTURAL TOURISM

Whistler, BC, October 21, 2011: The Canadian Tourism Commission has identified cultural and heritage tourism as a key area of development in Canada. There has been a steady hum in Whistler about cultural tourism since March 2011 with the release of Steven Thorne's Cultural Tourism Development Strategy entitled "A Tapestry of Place".

That hum is now being championed by the new Alliance for Cultural Tourism (ACT), an informal group that evolved from the Cultural Tourism Advisory Group which provided information and perspective to Steven Thorne while he prepared "A Tapestry of Place".

Thorne's 81-page report reveals that Whistler has a largely unexplored economic opportunity in place-based cultural tourism, which is defined as: "The full range of experiences visitors can undertake to learn what makes a destination distinctive — its lifestyle, its heritage, its arts, its people — and the business of providing and interpreting that culture to visitors."

The Thorne report is playing an important role in how Whistler addresses the resort-wide objective of increasing occupancy in Whistler's tourist accommodation from the current 52% to an annual average of 60% and beyond.

ACT includes representatives from Whistler's arts, cultural and heritage organizations along with resort stakeholders and event producers, all of whom are aligned in their commitment to identify and develop cultural tourism opportunities as a united front; akin to – only much larger than – the highly collaborative and successful process that resulted in Whistler being designated a 2009 Cultural Capital of Canada.

ACT maintains that the Thorne report provides the foundation from which to take the next steps; specifically, to develop a comprehensive community cultural plan to drive forward resort-wide discussions regarding place-based cultural tourism.

ACT believes that a community cultural plan will help strengthen Whistler's tourism economy by weaving Whistler's authentic arts, culture and heritage experiences into a market-ready tapestry of offerings aimed at attracting visitors and enhancing the Whistler experience.

With a strong vision articulated in *Whistler2020*, and with a strong foundation already in place, ACT believes that a roadmap for strengthening Whistler's tourism economy and developing Whistler's arts, culture and heritage sector is the next logical step.

"Culture is the calling card for some of the greatest communities in the world," says ACT spokesperson, Anne Popma. "Cultural organizations and the cultural fabric of a community are actually part of its destination, part of its soul. Culture has become a bigger part of the framework of how we position Whistler, and we want to ensure we have a comprehensive plan in place to drive it forward."

It is noteworthy that communities which enjoy a robust cultural tourism economy are the same communities in which public and private sector investment in culture tends to be high, and where residents enjoy a wide range of cultural amenities. In the words of Steven Thorne "Cultural tourism isn't just about tourism. It's a strategic opportunity through which the arts, culture, and heritage sector can leverage its own development, and serve the local community."

In his report, Thorne uses a tapestry as a metaphor for “place-based” cultural tourism, in which all the cultural elements of a community are woven together to create a whole picture, with a fore-ground (lead experiences), mid-ground (supporting experiences), and background (sustaining experiences), all surrounded by a frame which holds the tapestry together. All are equally important, and one without the other loses the total “sense of place”.

While Whistler’s “cultural tapestry” is still in its early stages, elements of all these experiences are already in place and rapidly expanding, giving shape to a full range of cultural experiences that reflect Whistler’s unique identity.

In the “foreground” are lead experiences such as the TELUS World Ski and Snowboard Festival, Cornucopia, and the Whistler Film Festival, which act as cultural flagships. The Squamish Lil’wat Cultural Centre is making rapid progress towards becoming a lead experience, having recently received recognition from both the United Nations and the Canadian Tourism Industry Association for its outstanding contribution to development of cultural tourism. It’s most recent initiative, a \$1.4 million project entitled “Cultural Journey Phase II”, aims to increase cultural tourism throughout Squamish and Lil’wat Nation territories, including communities from Vancouver to Mt. Currie.

With the opening of Whistler Olympic Plaza, and the inaugural series of Whistler Presents concerts – many of which celebrated the integration of music and sport including concerts during Crankworx, GranFondo, and the Official Opening of Whistler Olympic Plaza – the foreground of Whistler’s tapestry is beginning to take shape.

In the mid-ground, or supporting role, Whistler’s Farmer’s Market has experienced significant growth over the past year, as has Whistler’s Summer Street Entertainment and ArtWalk, both presented by the Whistler Arts Council.

In the background are Whistler’s tiny jewels, perhaps off the beaten track, but of no lesser importance:

- the Whistler Chamber of Commerce continues to organize Whistler’s Canada Day Parade
- the Whistler Museum and Archive Society celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the arrival of Alex and Myrtle Philip to the valley with a 5-day event in August called 100 years of Dreams funded by Canadian Heritage
- the Whistler Public Library introduced a new program to exhibit the work of local artists
- Whistler Art Workshops on the Lake, presented by the Whistler Arts Council, continues to offer sold-out workshops
- the Point Artist-run Centre initiated a variety of arts events at the historic Cypress Lodge on Alta Lake
- the new Jazz on the Mountain festival demonstrated that it holds significant future potential.

What holds all of this together? What frames the tapestry? Whistler’s sense of place. It’s the intangibles like risk-taking, living the dream, sense of community, and partnerships; as well as the personalities and the distinctive landscape. The things that, once experienced, make people want to return, or to stay forever.

Cultural tourism has long been part of Whistler’s economic fabric. “A Tapestry of Place” reminds us that, while Whistler offers more than 150 cultural experiences, the community itself is not recognized as a cultural destination. Not yet.

To achieve this, some cultural experiences may need to be developed, while cultural tourism products currently in place will need increased promotion.

In the coming months ACT will identify development priorities and funding sources as well as programming and promotional opportunities.

ACT currently includes community leaders and representatives from The Point Artist-Run Centre Society, Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, Resort Municipality of Whistler, Tourism Whistler, Whistler Arts Council, Whistler Chamber of Commerce, Whistler Blackcomb, Whistler Film Festival Society, Whistler Museum & Archives, and the Whistler Writers' Group.

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