

Visit Caledon encourages buy local, stay local

By Rob Paul

Caledon has launched a new tourism website (visitcaledon.ca) optimized for mobile devices, highlighting local businesses, destinations and unique experiences.

"We have so many great tourism businesses here: a wide variety of outdoor recreation opportunities, scenic landscapes and parks, as well as a diverse collection of villages with unique places to eat, stay and shop," said Mayor Allan Thompson. "Our new website is a stunning visual representation of Caledon's best. I invite everyone to check out the activities and trip ideas for the holiday season and beyond."

The site emphasizes Caledon's renowned outdoor destinations and activities with newly-commissioned video and photography.

It features several experiences by themes, from dining, agri-tourism and outdoor adventure to arts, heritage, cycling, golf, and more. Local businesses are featured prominently on the site, with direct links to owner websites.

The tourism website had been a long time in the making after nearly two years of developing it. The goal is to keep people local while attracting people from other communities to Caledon.

"In early 2020, the Town applied for (and received) partial funding from the Province's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to take our existing tourism website and create a new, more visual and more mobile-friendly tool for visitors to and residents of Caledon," said Emily Quinton, Caledon's Officer of Tourism and Culture. "So much has changed in the last few years here—new businesses, greater growth, a greater interest in rural escapes—it was time for a change."

"The project kicked off in early summer 2021 with an ambitious timeline of six months to completion. Launching a new tourism website in the middle of a pandemic required a unique and flexible web platform that would allow us to make changes fairly easily internally so that our visitors can rely on accurate, engaging and seasonally relevant content. One of the reasons we promote vacationing is to help support local businesses. We also strive to promote vacationing in a way that manages volume at peak times, improving the experience for the visitor, residents and businesses."

The reason the website has become an important priority for the Town is to showcase the different opportunities offered in Caledon and spotlight why people don't need to travel far to enjoy themselves.

"The desire was to create a website that served the purpose of true destination marketing—compelling visuals and a showcase of Caledon's businesses in a way that site users could truly picture themselves experiencing, enjoying—and revisiting," said Quinton. "Using our collection of Caledon's experiences, places, businesses and attractions, we will continue to develop seasonal and themed articles or 'trip ideas' to give visitors vivid ideas of how they could spend their downtime here. We hope it will encourage visitors to stay longer than a day and/or come back more often. The diversity of our visitors is incredible, and our offerings reflect that: it's an exciting opportunity to work with our businesses and stakeholders to encourage collaboration on itinerary and tour ideas; to wear the different 'hats' of our visitors (dog-owners, foodies, art lovers, cyclists, hikers, families); and to help connect them with what we (as residents) already know and love about our town."

The Town felt this was an idea worth pursuing due to the emphasis on shopping local as well as the recent increase in popularity of Caledon as a place to go both due to the options and the natural beauty.

"Our approach is to be more strategic and mindful of what Caledon gems we are promoting, and when," Quinton said. This new website is a great opportunity to showcase the incredible breadth of experiences we have here, but to also help divert some of this increase in visitors we've seen in the west side villages and hamlets of the Town to some of the more undiscovered parts of Caledon

that are equally exquisite and exciting. Having a website that is easy to navigate, can be accessed and explored from the road, and that offers cool ideas about what to do in Caledon was critical in beginning to achieve that.

Our Town is unique in that we are a collection of incredible rural and urban villages bound by a massive geographic space at the top of the GTA. Communicating that (and providing visitors with ideas about how to navigate Caledon in all of its breadth) is the name of the game with our new website. The interesting and added benefit of creating a site like this is that it isn't just a resource for outside visitors. It's a tool we hope locals will use to discover (or rediscover) a little more of their own backyard. Residents of Terra Cotta, for example, discovering Bolton and vice-versa. We want residents to be amazed at what lies just a little beyond their favourite spots! It's also a way to help drive people from outside communities who may not know what Caledon has and that will in turn help support businesses and get them back on their feet.

Now, more than ever, it is critical to show residents and visitors to Caledon what our businesses offer, said Quinton. The Town's 2019-2020 Love Local Caledon campaign proved just how supportive our residents are of their local favourites. We know, though, these same businesses also rely heavily on visitor traffic to augment their year-round revenues. In the last several years, we've seen far more small businesses open than close in Caledon. A great indicator that there is a demand for incredible things to eat, drink, do and see here. Sharing the stories of those unique (and nearby) experiences with new people to Caledon will help to sustain that diversity of things to do for years to come.

COVID-19 was, of course, also a factor in the Town wanting to get the website up and running as soon as possible, with an increased need in helping bring economic prosperity to local businesses.

Caledon has been the backyard playground for the GTA and GTHA for years, and the pandemic (and its subsequent accompanying travel restrictions) resulted in people with the itch to explore to turn to nearby hidden gems to fulfill that need, Quinton said. This presented some unique opportunities and challenges for the villages and hamlets of Caledon. It's a tricky balance between sharing our incredible breweries, cideries, shops, restaurants, trails, historic villages and galleries with a wider audience, and maintaining sustainable visitation for the future of our town. Lucky for us, we can tap into Destination Ontario, TIAO (Tourism Industry Association of Ontario) and Central Counties Tourism (RTO6) to promote our accommodators and experience-based businesses to the right audiences, whether in-region, or across the province.

With the winter here, the website is currently showcasing the options for those in Caledon and surrounding areas.

We already know how popular Caledon is as a summer and fall destination, but the exciting thing is that Caledon is just as much a winter paradise as it is the rest of the year, said Quinton. Cross-country skiing, spa-visits, snowshoeing, fat-biking, gallery-touring, restaurant and brewery-hopping, skating, walking, shopping. It's all here for visitors and locals to discover. Winter doesn't need to be a season we endure. There are a million-and-one reasons to head to our website, make a plan, and jump in the car. We can't wait to welcome you to our snowy trails, and cozy local spots.