



Laurier Park, City of Montreal, QC

SECTION: 3

A GUIDE TO DEFINING TRAIL EXPERIENCES

Purpose:

- Enable the communication and marketing of the trail to appropriate visitors.
- Enable visitors to better select sections of the trail that align with their desires and abilities.
- Understand the general supply of trail experiences.

Target audience:



Trail operators



Visitors



**Trail tourism
ecosystem**

The first step in ensuring visitors have a positive trail experience is enabling visitors to easily and accurately find trails that are well suited to their desired experience. All too often visitors find themselves on trails that may not be suitable for their desired experience, or appropriate for their abilities or level of preparation. When this happens, it can lead to a poor visitor experience, pose a risk to the trail brand and create potential visitor safety concerns.

It is essential that the marketing of a trail and all trip planning tools and information accurately depict and communicate the nature of a trail experience. Trail operators and destination marketing/management organizations should work collaboratively to help visitors identify trails that are best suited to their desired experience, their abilities and their level of preparation. We understand that our national network is quite diverse, and that, in turn, it is challenging to create a single approach to describing the experiences that it offers. However, we also know that there are some fundamental characteristics that are at the root of all trail experiences, regardless of the activity undertaken. These characteristics can be used to help define the general trail experience.

With this understanding, we have developed a simple typology of trail experiences to communicate the general nature of the trail experience. This typology can be utilized by any trail organization across the country.

By defining the trail experience through this typology, we are working to more consistently communicate the:

- visitor objectives that the trail may satisfy
- physical characteristics of the trail
- level of expertise, degree of difficulty and degree of preparedness required to safely travel the trail
- specialized skills and equipment required to enjoy the trail
- level of development, as well as comfort and convenience amenities and services along the trail

3.1 TRAIL EXPERIENCE TYPOLOGY

Regardless of the trail activity undertaken, it can be generally categorized into one of three distinct trail experience types:

1. strolls
2. excursions
3. epics



Strolls are...

Easy and short to moderate distance trails that are well-marked and easy to navigate. These trails can support single to multi-day trips, have modest or no elevation gain, require little pre-planning and do not require any special skills or equipment for a safe experience. These trails are typically within, close to, or easy to access from urban centres or small towns through a variety of transportation modes. They provide a full range of comfort and convenience amenities, as well as easy access to accommodations on or near the trail, such as resorts, hotels and B&Bs. Visitors to these trails are typically less interested in the physical challenge, and more focused on experiencing and learning about the local cultures and heritage, and sampling local flavours and attractions in a relaxed way.



Excursions are...

Moderate to longer distance trails that are well-marked and suitable for visitors who are at the beginner and intermediate levels of proficiency in their chosen activity. These trails typically support full- to multi-day trips, and may also provide for part-day outings. With a diversity of terrain, these trails are more physically demanding and are of a moderate or greater technical difficulty. Trip pre-planning is typically required, and the trail may require visitors to obtain specialized equipment and some level of training in order to experience the trail safely. These trails are typically located outside of settled areas but are still readily accessible without requiring any specialized modes of transportation. Visitor comfort and convenience amenities are available, though they may be more rudimentary in nature. On and near-trail accommodations are usually available and typically include comfort camping, organized camping or B&Bs.





What's your desired trail experience type?

Similar to how Destination Canada encourages travellers to identify their “Explorer Quotient Travel Type” (<https://quiz.canada.travel/caen/all-traveller-types>), these trail experience categories can be used to create a national “What’s Your Trail Type” tool that allows visitors to determine their desired trail experience type. A simple online tool can be developed that poses key questions to visitors to help determine their desired experience, then based on that information, offers trail suggestions that best match their needs and desires.



Epics are...

Moderate to long-distance trails that may or may not be well-marked, and are most suitable for visitors who are at the intermediate to expert levels of proficiency for their chosen activity. These trails typically support multi-day to extended trips, and can be very physically and mentally demanding, as well as technically challenging. Containing technical terrain and features, these trails require considerable trip planning, specialized equipment and/or training in order to experience the trail safely. They are most often located outside of settled areas and can be challenging to access or may require specialized modes of transportation. Visitor comfort and convenience amenities may or may not be available. When offered, they are typically rudimentary. On or near-trail accommodations may be available, and would typically include random/backcountry camping, wilderness lodges, comfort camping or organized camping. In some cases, long-distance trails may be comprised of short local trail sections that have varying levels of technical challenge or trail experience type, but when integrated into a longer trail, the sections collectively result in an epic trail experience rating.

These typologies, though general, allow trail operators and marketers to clearly communicate the nature of the trail experience. As a result, visitors will be able to easily research and understand the general experience a particular trail may provide, and make an informed decision as to whether it aligns with their needs/expectations.

This typology will also help the trail tourism ecosystem understand their trail, select the most appropriate market segments, and tailor their offerings and marketing to relevant target markets. In both cases, this typology increases the likelihood that visitors will find their way to the trails that best meet their needs.

3.2 TRAIL EXPERIENCE TYPE CRITERIA & ASSESSMENT TOOL

In alignment with the trail experience type definitions above, there are a number of fundamental factors and characteristics that will determine the experience a particular trail provides, regardless of what activities are permitted. These factors (with examples) include:

- The visitor objectives the trail satisfies.
 - » Will the trail satisfy the desires of those seeking a leisurely outing, or is it more tailored to the most ardent adventurer, seeking risk, personal challenges and physical demands?
- The length of the trail.
 - » Can the trail be enjoyed as a short outing or does it require a multi-day expedition?
- The trail surfacing.
 - » Is the trail tread relatively compacted, hard and smooth or is it loose, rough and technical?
- The width of the trail tread.
 - » Is the trail tread width considerable, giving visitors a sense of space and ease, or is it tight and narrow, making visitors feel more constrained?
- The grade of the trail.
 - » Is the trail generally flat, not requiring an extensive expenditure of energy, or is it steep and long, requiring visitors to exert considerable energy for extended periods of time?
- The technical challenge of the trail.
 - » Is the trail technically easier and accessible to all, or is it challenging, testing the skill of the most experienced visitors?
- The level of preparation required to enjoy the trail safely.
 - » Can the trail be safely enjoyed with basic preparation or do visitors need to spend considerable time planning and preparing (including a need for specialized equipment and training)?
- The level of development, comfort and convenience amenities on the trail.
 - » Can visitors access all of the comforts and conveniences of home, or do visitors need to “rough it”?

The answers to these types of questions come together in different combinations that can be used to categorize trail experiences into the three general trail experience types described above (strolls, excursions, epics).



However, determining the trail experience type should not be viewed as an exact science. It is not a simple equation, based on scored variables with one conclusive result. No single criterion or indicator determines the overall trail experience type rating.

Instead, categorizing the trail experience types should be viewed as a qualitative, yet structured, evaluation of a trail's most fundamental characteristics with the purpose of determining which experience type definition the trail best reflects. The trail experience types should be viewed as a spectrum. Some trails will fit clearly into one trail experience type while others may have elements from multiple experience types.

Recognizing this, TCT has developed the Trail Experience Type Assessment Tool ([Appendix D](#)). The tool provides a structured process by which trail operators can determine the trail experience type that best aligns with their trail.



City of Greater Sudbury - Junction Creek Waterway Park, ON

Applying the Trail Experience Type Assessment Tool

The Trail Experience Type Assessment Tool utilizes clear criteria and indicators to help define the trail experience type. To complete the assessment, trail operators should undertake the following steps:

1

Review the Trail Experience Type definitions presented in section 3.1.

2

Review the criteria, indicators and value ranges outlined in the assessment tool.

3

Review the TMO form (if one has been developed) and consider the characteristics of the trail that is being assessed.

4

Work through each criterion and indicator in the assessment tool to identify the response option that most closely reflects the trail being assessed. The assessment tool can be printed from Appendix D.

5

Once all criteria and indicators have been assessed and the appropriate responses made, review the results to determine which trail experience category was selected most often. This will indicate which trail experience type is the best match for the trail.





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3.3 ALIGNING TRAIL EXPERIENCE TYPES WITH MARKET SEGMENTATION

As previously indicated, it is imperative that we help visitors find trails that are aligned with their expectations and abilities. This is known as a “product market match”. Doing so begins with identifying and understanding the general expectations of trail visitors. With this understanding, trail operators and destination managers can use their trail experience type rating(s) to identify which market(s) is most likely to be attracted to their trail(s).

To support trail operators and destination managers, TCT has developed a product market match tool (see table below). Applying the Adventure Travel Trade Association’s Adventure Traveller Type market segmentation categories and Destination Canada’s Explorer Quotients, this tool illustrates which market segments are more or less likely to be aligned with each trail experience type. This tool can be used by trail groups to help direct marketing efforts to the right market segments.

For more information on the Adventure Travel Trade Association’s Adventure Traveller Type market segmentation tool visit:

<https://www.adventuretravel.biz/research/what-kind-of-adventure-traveler-are-you/>

For more information on Destination Canada’s Explorer Quotient market segmentation tool visit:

<https://www.destinationcanada.com/en/tools>

Trail Experience and Market Segmentation Tool

Travel Market Segment		Trail Experience Type		
		Strolls	Excursions	Epics
Adventure Travel Trade Association’s Adventure Traveller Types	Adventure Grazers	Strong Alignment	Potential Alignment	Poor Alignment
	Adventurers	Potential Alignment	Strong Alignment	Potential Alignment
	Adventure Enthusiasts	Poor Alignment	Potential Alignment	Strong Alignment
Destination Canada’s Explorer Quotient	Free Spirits	Strong Alignment	Potential Alignment	Poor Alignment
	Cultural Explorers	Potential Alignment	Strong Alignment	Potential Alignment
	Authentic Experiences	Potential Alignment	Potential Alignment	Strong Alignment