

Gippsland Tourism Forum 20 May 2025

Industry round tables – Interactive discussion facilitated by Jaclyn Thorne from The Tourism Collective to exchange ideas, challenges, and solutions

1. Skilled Workers / Available Staff

Industry scenario:

Attracting and retaining skilled workers in the tourism industry has been problematic. Staff shortages impact service quality, business capacity, and long-term tourism industry growth.

Round 1 probe: What innovative strategies and partnerships can build a resilient, skilled tourism workforce in Gippsland?

- Bi-annual bonus to contracted staff. Builds strong, quality local workforce
- Staff sharing between businesses/Shared/Partnership with other industry eg. Baw Baw Alpine Resort & Lardner Park
- Recruit through local channels – addresses housing issues / retention / local knowledge. Eg. word of mouth, community Facebook.
- Housing – advocacy to Government (more voices = louder voice)
 - Tiny Homes
- Strong training program focused on all aspects of business
- Collaborations between trainers eg. TAFE & businesses to train, attract & retain staff
- Micro-credentialing: E.g. TYPsy
- Tailoring training – being adaptive to individual
- Encourage joining programs. E.g. Young Tourism Network (YTN)
- Job check-ins: 3 month goal setting/plans.
- Mentoring
- Careers Expo
- Businesses & Accom working together to identify opportunities

Round 2 probe: Who is responsible for leading these initiatives? Are there any ideas/strategies that you believe should be the priority in the next 12 months to get behind?

- Industry wide pathways to support individual businesses
- Communication from business owners to staff
- Setting up partnerships & collaborations within industry
- Priority – setting up regular staff check-ins & goal setting
- Regional perspective – more collaboration between business + education sectors
- Local Development Strategy (Place Based P. Management)

- Local Government as a ‘Coordinator’
- Local Tourism Associations, Chamber of Commerce
- Education – on the Visitor Economy
- Storytelling

2. Driving Demand – Marketing ideas in the off- peak period.

Industry scenario:

Round 1 Probe & 2 Probe

As we enter the quieter time of the year, what innovative or proven strategies have you used (or are considering) to drive demand and attract more visitors during off-peak periods?”

- Embrace the negatives → turn into positives
- “Things are cooler down south” “Cooler in the south”
- Winter Festivals – month long East Gippsland Winter Festival
- Insider knowledge – unique experience
- An early adopter
- Food & Beverage – value ideas
- Slow travel
- Event acquisition – in off peak
- Inbound tourism – international visitors
- Inbound ready
- Inbound tour operator – Southern World
- Encourage accommodation
- Package deals
- Organise with local newspapers – deals, competitions, offers to encourage locals to attend/visit

How do you measure the effectiveness of these initiatives? Are the off-peak visitors different to the peak visitor? Do they need a different approach? How?

- Measuring by the normal KPIs
- Visitor numbers
- Spend map data
- Customer surveys
- Website hits/clicks
- Financial income
- Postcode data capture

- Retired is off peak / Empty nests
- Families – peak
- Different approach
 - Members / Locals / Mates rates

Visitor Segments:

- Peak – Melbourne
- Off Peak – Locals
- Off peak have higher expectations
- No difference with specific target market

3. Business Resilience and Planning Ahead

Industry scenario:

In an increasingly unpredictable world, many tourism businesses are unprepared for future disruptions—whether from economic shifts, environmental events, or global crises.

Round 1 Probe

What are you doing in your business to proactively plan for the unexpected, build resilience into your operations, and ensure long-term sustainability and adaptability?

- Tourism strategy, tourism coordinator to manage strategy
- Tourism tours/experiences
- Application for tourism funding
- Taking the community on the journey – to guide, impacts & benefits
- 5-year strategic plan – strengths, community, increase education of First Nations
- 5/10/30 yr strategy plan, workforce planning, team environment
- Environment – other options
- Farm generator to operate induction appliance during outages
- Hired in generators for outages – convenience of power / loss of produce / service levels to customers / reputation
- Food handling cert., can make coffees during outages
- Annual upkeep to maintain generator is high
- Generator not just for outages, but for disaster too – fire/flood, etc
- Starlink and NBN Satellite

Round 2 Probe

Do you have a current crisis response plan? What would be your first steps to mitigate a crisis if it happened tomorrow? What role could DG play in supporting you/ the industry in a crisis?

- Leadership + staff to respond in a crisis
- 90 pages Emergency management plan – available to everyone, who to speak to
- DoT plan + resources on website
- Review yearly manual – need quick view checklist
- Use AI to help in crisis
- WhatsApp use in emergency → communication tool
- Plan for survival
- Backup systems in place – staff, patrons
- Compiled up-to-date list of emergency contacts
- Do you operate on a catastrophic fire day?
- Comms and messaging clearer and specific to area of crisis – localised
- Mental health disruptions in community
- Approach to protect
- Mental health first aid program

4. Digital Capability

Industry scenario:

Digital tools and systems can significantly improve how tourism businesses operate, market themselves, and connect with visitors.

Round 1 probe:

What digital tools or platforms are you currently using in your business to improve efficiency, customer engagement, and marketing reach? Explain how they are improving your business.

- AirTasker – for short-term jobs
- Xero – for \$
- WhatsApp via QR code + Google Review link
- Social media (Instagram)
- Meta (schedule post)
- Canva (e.g. brochures, videos)
- Teams sharing

Round 2 probe:

Where do you see opportunities to do more? Do you need any support to learn more about these tools?

- Deakin
- AI – ChatGPT
- GoPro – video footage
- Reels, moving picture
- TikTok
- Internships – roofing
- Collaborate with influencers

5. Future Visitor – Understanding Today’s Traveller

Industry scenario:

Today’s travellers are seeking more than just a getaway—they’re looking for connection, authenticity, sustainability, and unique experiences that align with their values.

Round 1 Probe:

How can we in the tourism industry respond to these evolving expectations to stay relevant and appealing in a fast-changing market?

- UNDERSTAND CUSTOMERS & DEMOGRAPHICS ETC.
- BUILD & INVEST IN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT
- BEING VISIBLE – DIGITAL & PRINT
- PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATIONS & COMMUNITY
- There’s good stuff happening (particularly around sustainability)
BUT are they getting the message out?
- Unify / unwind
- Learn – workshops, what’s on
- Showcase / collaborate / share
- More time on the business, **not** in the business

Round 2 probe:

What is the number 1 thing you are going to do after this forum regarding meeting the expectations of visitors today?

- START A ROADMAP
- LISTENING TO TODAY'S CUSTOMER
- VISIT THE REGIONS (FOR RESEARCH)
- CONTRIBUTING BACK TO COMMUNITY
- communicate better
- communicate more frequently
- communicate more consistently
- sharing testimonials

Tourism Industry Forum Summary Report

Themes: Business Resilience, Digital Capability, Future Visitor Understanding, Skilled Workforce, Driving Demand

1. Business Resilience and Planning Ahead

Key Insights:

- **Power Backup Systems:** Utilisation of farm and wired-in generators to maintain operations during power outages.
- **Operational Continuity:** Staff with food handling certifications enable limited service (e.g., coffee making) during disruptions.
- **Connectivity Solutions:** Adoption of satellite internet services (Starlink and NBN) for alternative connectivity.
- **Disaster Preparedness:** Generators serve not only for outages but also as part of disaster readiness plans (e.g., fire, flood).

Crisis Response Planning:

- **Emergency Protocols:** Backup systems established for staff and patrons, with up-to-date emergency contact lists.
- **Operational Considerations:** Evaluations on whether to operate on catastrophic fire days.
- **Communication Strategies:** Emphasis on clear, localized crisis messaging.
- **Mental Health Support:** Addressing community mental health disruptions through training and first aid programs.

- **Suggestions:**
 - *Explore battery storage as a lower-maintenance backup to generators.*
 - *Establish regional business continuity plans with shared resources.*
 - *Regularly update and simulate crisis response drills.*
 - *Engage in proactive community-wide resilience building, including mental health initiatives.*
 - *Formalize cross-business mutual aid agreements for times of crisis.*
 - *Develop region-wide emergency communication templates.*

2. Digital Capability

Current Digital Tools in Use:

- **Operational Tools:** *AirTasker* for short-term staffing needs; *Xero* for financial management.
- **Customer Engagement:** *WhatsApp* (QR code-based) for visitor communication and Google Reviews.
- **Marketing Platforms:** *Instagram* and Meta tools for marketing and scheduled posts.
- **Content Creation:** *Canva* for brochures, videos, and team collaboration.
- **Internal Coordination:** Team sharing platforms for internal communication.

Opportunities for Growth:

- **Academic Partnerships:** Collaborations with institutions like Deakin University.
- **Enhanced Content:** Creation of more video content using GoPro, reels, and TikTok.
- **Influencer Engagement:** Collaborations with influencers and tourism ambassadors.
- **Internship Programs:** Utilization of internships and work experience placements.
- **Suggestions:**
 - *Conduct digital skills audits and training workshops for small tourism operators.*
 - *Implement Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools to track engagement.*
 - *Use data analytics tools to refine marketing strategies and reach.*
 - *Develop a regional digital toolkit and knowledge-sharing platform.*
 - *Introduce mentorship programs pairing digital-savvy businesses with those in need.*

-Invest in social media strategy development sessions for local operators

3. Future Visitor – Understanding Today’s Traveller

Visitor Expectations:

- **Desire for Authenticity:** Travellers seek authentic experiences that align with their personal values.
- **Sustainability Focus:** Increasing demand for sustainable tourism options.
- **Unique Experiences:** Preference for unique and personalized travel experiences.

Industry Responses:

- **Customer Insights:** Emphasis on understanding customer demographics.
- **Visibility Enhancement:** Efforts to increase visibility across digital and print media.
- **Product Development:** Investments in developing products based on evolving needs.
- **Community Collaboration:** Partnerships and collaborations with local communities.

Planned Actions Post-Forum:

- **Strategic Planning:** Initiation of roadmaps for change.
- **Customer Engagement:** Active listening to current visitor preferences.
- **Regional Research:** Conducting research to adapt offerings.
- **Community Contribution:** Increasing contributions to local communities.
- **Suggestions:**
 - *Utilize tourism data dashboards to profile evolving traveller personas.*
 - *Engage directly with visitors through post-visit feedback and focus groups.*
 - *Co-create experiences with local artisans, sustainability groups, and cultural leaders.*
 - *Pilot “test and learn” product offerings before full-scale rollout.*
 - *Develop visitor personas based on qualitative and quantitative data.*
 - *Partner with sustainability organizations for certification and marketing*

4. Skilled Workforce and Staffing

Challenges Identified:

- **Staff Shortages:** Persistent shortages in skilled and unskilled positions, particularly in regional areas.
- **Recruitment Difficulties:** Challenges in attracting and retaining qualified staff.
- **Training Gaps:** Need for targeted training pathways and workforce development incentives.

Current Strategies:

- **Inbound Tourism:** Encouraging international visitors to fill staffing gaps.
- **Package Deals:** Organizing deals and competitions to attract locals to participate in the tourism workforce.
- **Community Engagement:** Taking the community on the journey to understand the impacts and benefits of tourism.

Suggestions:

- Implement targeted training programs to upskill local workers.*
- Offer incentives for staff retention, such as housing assistance or flexible work arrangements.*
- Develop partnerships with educational institutions to create clear career pathways.*
- Utilize technology to streamline recruitment and onboarding processes*
- Launch a regional campaign to promote tourism as a career.*
- Create micro-credential programs linked to immediate job opportunities.*

5. Driving Demand – Marketing Strategies

Strategies Employed:

- **Seasonal Campaigns:** Embracing off-peak periods with creative marketing (e.g., "Cooler in the South").
- **Festivals and Events:** Hosting winter festivals like the East Gippsland Winter Festival to attract visitors.
- **Insider Experiences:** Offering unique experiences and insider knowledge to entice travelers.
- **Value-Added Offers:** Providing food and beverage deals to add value for visitors.

Measurement of Effectiveness:

- **Key Performance Indicators:** Monitoring visitor numbers and spending patterns.

- **Data Analysis:** Utilizing postcode data and customer surveys to understand visitor demographics.
- **Customer Feedback:** Gathering insights through website analytics and direct feedback.
- **Suggestions:**
 - *Develop targeted marketing campaigns for different visitor segments.*
 - *Collaborate with local businesses to create bundled offers.*
 - *Leverage social media influencers to reach broader audiences.*
 - *Invest in data analytics to refine marketing strategies and measure ROI.*
 - *Invest in branding workshops to create cohesive regional messaging.*
 - *Offer co-op marketing grants for cross-business collaboration.*

Overall Recommendations:

- *Integrate efforts across categories to create a holistic tourism strategy.*
- *Establish cross-theme working groups (e.g., Resilience x Digital).*
- *Ensure continuous learning and collaboration through annual forums and shared platforms.*