



THE ADVOCATE

Keith Henry

THE FOUNDER OF ATAC IS HELPING TO RESHAPE HOW TRAVELERS CONNECT WITH CANADA'S INDIGENOUS CULTURES.



If the phrase "aboriginal tourism" conjures up images of kitschy performances and uncomfortable cultural appropriation, Keith Henry is intent on painting a different picture.

Imagine instead a dinner of fresh fish at Salmon n' Bannock, a restaurant in Vancouver owned by a Nuxalk community member. Or a snowshoe trek to view the northern lights with members of the Métis and Dene cultures at their Aurora Village resort in the Northwest Territories. Or a wild medicine camp in the Yukon led by members of the Champagne and Aishihik community.

"There's been a misunderstanding in the tourism industry about how to develop visits with aboriginal people," he says. "These indigenous owners incorporate their

culture into a whole range of things."

In 2015, Henry started the Aboriginal Tourism Association of Canada, a consortium of 1,500 businesses owned by members of indigenous communities, to make it easier for travelers to find them and to make the experiences more rewarding for both visitors and hosts. The group has invested in training workers, improving facilities, and working with Destination Canada, which promotes travel to the country overall.

Today, aboriginal tourism represents a small but growing slice of Canada's tourism industry. In destinations such as British Columbia, 1 in 4 visitors say they want to engage with aboriginal communities during their trips.

As Canada celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2017, it's fitting that cultures dating back thousands of years should take center stage. "Canada is famous for our landscapes, and we have great cities, but aboriginal people are thriving here, too," says Henry, a member of the Métis culture. "It's what sets Canada apart."

In 2015, Weprin restored and reopened the historic Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, where Cindy's bar and restaurant looks out on Lake Michigan from the rooftop.

THE NARRATOR

Ben Weprin

YOU CAN STAY IN SOULFUL SPACES THAT TELL A STORY THANKS TO THE HEAD OF AJ CAPITAL PARTNERS



The scientific formula for sweet tea is scrawled on chalkboards that line the walls at the Graduate Athens hotel in Georgia. It's a tribute to a beloved professor at the University of Georgia. Meanwhile, at the Graduate Charlottesville hotel, a wahoo, a fish that can supposedly drink twice its weight in water, is mounted over each bed. Why? Because the wahoo is the unofficial mascot of the University of Virginia, where the students' drinking capacity purportedly rivals that of the fish.

These quirky details, which make sense only in their settings,

capture the spirit of Graduate Hotels, a college-town chain dreamed up by Ben Weprin, the 38-year-old founder of real estate and hospitality development company AJ Capital Partners.

"That storytelling aspect differentiates us," Weprin says. "We don't just throw a pennant on a wall in a college town. We look for the people and stories that made each place what it is, and then we put together a narrative within the hotel."

When Weprin founded his company in 2008, the entrepreneur made a name for himself by restoring historic buildings and making them cool

spaces favored by travelers and locals alike. In addition to the Graduate brand, Weprin is behind the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel in Chicago and the recently reopened Pontchartrain Hotel in the Garden District of New Orleans.

Graduate is the finest example yet of that community-led, history-inspired atmosphere that AJ Capital Partners is trying to achieve.

"Our properties have to feel lived in, comfortable, and relaxed," Weprin says. "They should feel layered and textured and evolved over time. Ultimately, we're trying to catch the rhythm, spirit, and soul of each community."

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