

Peninsula **NEWS** R E V I E W

Lights, camera, garden

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One day it's a Finnish newspaper journalist, the next, a bevy of bridal and business writers from Beijing. Then there's a team of gardening enthusiasts making a TV show for air in Australia. The Butchart Gardens is a hit with the foreign press -- radio, TV, newspaper, magazine -- and with the help of Tourism Victoria, Tourism BC and the Canadian Tourism Council, there's barely a day when a group of them isn't oohing and aahing over the Gardens.

"The Gardens really sell themselves," admitted Rick Graham, the Tourism BC consultant accompanying the Australian film crew. "What we (Tourism BC and the Canadian Tourism Council) do is put together an itinerary for visiting media. The purpose is to promote the destination to increase visits." Graham accompanies each media group he's assigned on their trip through BC, making sure they have what they need to produce their show or article. The itineraries he creates are meant to guide visiting press to a wide range of local hotels, restaurants, and other attractions.

For Butchart and Victoria's other destinations, which in the case of the Australian show included stops at **Spinnaker's** Brewpub, Merridale Cidery, and a number of private gardens. this type of press coverage is highly worthwhile. "It gives you credibility," said Graham. "Anybody can buy advertising. Good editorial is worth significantly more."

Graham Bell, advertising and promotions coordinator for the Gardens, said he sees the results of the press visits. "We had a guy from Finland, a very good reporter," Bell said. "After his article came out in the paper [in his Finnish city], we could see on our website, a spike in hits from his area of Finland. The next day there were hits from a larger area around that, and then it spread into Scandinavia a bit. There's an absolute correlation with the stats."

Attracting tourists from emerging markets is an important aspect of Tourism BC and the Canadian Tourism Council's work. "Tourism BC is very involved with the China market," said Graham. The visit from the Shanghai and Beijing magazine writers, the day before the Australian crew, was part of that effort. Bell was cautious, however, in assessing what effect Chinese tourism could have on the Gardens. "China is just not going to be a billion people coming to visit," he said. "It's seven times or so more expensive to go out for a meal here than it is in China." With Canada not yet on China's Approved Destination Status, it's harder for Chinese tourists to come over than it is for them to go to, say, Hungary, Chile, or the Bahamas. "It's an involved process," said Bell, explaining that while Canada is seeking the status, he feels it's a good thing that the country wasn't one of the first on the list. "Being the second person in snowshoes it is a lot easier than breaking the trail," he said.

Bell said that media visits to the gardens aren't just clustered in the warm, flowering summer months. Press come throughout the year, their schedules dictated more by

home seasons than Butchart's bloom patterns. The hundreds of press visits each require that Bell or another public relations officer from the Gardens join the group during their visit. "It's not that we're controlling what we're showing," said Bell. It's that he, like Graham, can make sure the visitors receive the access they need to properly show off the Gardens. For the crew of *The Gurus Explore*, the Australian garden and travel show, he quickly shuts down lawnmower noise while they film a segment in the Rose Garden.

It's clear Tourism BC feels these foreign press visits are an important boost to the industry: they're willing to pay for them. "That's how we fund the show," explained Neville Passmore, director of *The Gurus Explore*. Passmore came up with the idea of an overseas offshoot of the original show, *The Garden Gurus*, and applied to tourism boards around the world for financial support. Passmore explained the tangible benefits for an attraction appearing on their show: it has a million viewers in Australia, and for each episode they feature a fact sheet about the destinations on their website, www.thegardengurus.tv. Each fact sheet gets a million hits and a quarter-million downloads, while the photos Passmore takes on the trips are another hot download. He had his camera clicking at Butchart, saying that the summer flower displays didn't disappoint.

"I find it amazing when I deal with media people, how stunned they are by the beauty of it all," said Bell. "It's like working in a bakery. You don't smell the bread after a while." Despite how pleased Bell is with the work that the local tourism bodies do to bring media to the Gardens, he sometimes wishes that interest would ferment closer to home. "The Gardens get a label like 'tourist attraction,'" he said, a phrase which he thinks makes locals turn away. "Tourists don't look at things that can't be appreciated locally. You don't say 'We went to the Palais de Versailles' and have people respond, 'You went to that tourist attraction.'" Just a few moments standing by the entrance to the Sunken Garden viewpoint proves his point; the visitors coming around the corner are exclaiming 'Wow!' in almost every language except English. At least it proves the success of overseas editorial marketing.

The Australian film crew was originally scheduled to spend five hours in the Gardens. "That'll be a struggle for a plant lover," said Passmore, and he was right, as they stayed on two hours extra. They signed off their segment by telling viewers that Butchart was the best garden they'd seen and visitors would be crazy to miss it. In October, when it airs to more than a million viewers, Bell will likely see a spike in web hits from Down Under, and then, perhaps, a corresponding jump in Aussie visitors wandering the Butchart paths.