

## Authenticity from the Perspective of Locals: What Prince Edward Islanders Had to Say about Authentic Tourism Experiences

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**Abstract :** Authenticity has grown to be ubiquitous within the tourism vernacular. Yet, agreement regarding what authenticity means in relation to tourism remains nebulous. In its simplest form, authenticity in tourism refers to products and experiences that provide insights into the social, cultural, economic, natural, historical, and political life of a place. But this definition is unwieldy in its scope and may not help industry leaders nor tourist in identifying that which is authentic. Much of what is projected as authentic is a carefully curated and crafted message developed by marketers to appeal to visitors and bears little resemblance to the everyday lives of locals. So perhaps one way to identify authentic tourism experiences is to ask locals themselves. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of locals with respect to what constituted an authentic tourism experience in Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. Over 600 volunteers in a tourism research panel were sent a survey asking them to describe authentic PEI experiences within ten sub-categories relevant to the local tourism industry. To make participation more manageable, each respondent was asked their perspectives on any three of the tourism sub-categories. Over 400 individuals responded, providing 1391 unique responses. The responses were grouped thematically using interpretive phenomenological analysis whereby the participants' responses were clustered into higher order groups to extract meaning. Two interesting thematic observations emerged: first, that respondents tended to clearly articulate and differentiate between intra- versus interpersonal experiences as a means of authentically experiencing PEI; and second, while respondents explicitly valued unstaged experiences over staged, several exceptions to this general rule were expressed. Responses could clearly be grouped into those that emphasized "going off the beaten path," "exploring pristine and untouched corners," "lesser known," "hidden", "going solo," and taking the opportunity to "slow down." Each of these responses was "self" centered, and focused on the visitor discovering and exploring in search of greater self-awareness and inner peace. In contrast, other responses encouraged the interaction of visitors with locals as a means of experiencing the authentic place. Respondents cited "going deep-sea fishing" to learn about local fishers and their communities, stopping by "local farm stands" and speaking with farmers who worked the land for generations," patronizing "local restaurants, pubs, and b&b's", and partaking in performances or exhibits by local artists. These kinds of experiences, the respondents claimed, provide an authentic glimpse into a place's character. The second set of observations focused on the distinction between staged and unstaged experiences, with respondents overwhelmingly advocating for unstaged. Responses were clear in shunning "touristy," "packaged," and "fake" offerings for being inauthentic and misrepresenting the place as locals view it. Yet many respondents made exceptions for certain "staged" experiences, including (quite literally) the stage production of Anne of Green Gables based on the novel of the same name, the theatrical re-enactment of the founding of Canada, and visits to PEI's many provincial and national parks, all of which respondents considered both staged and authentic at the same time.

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