



Beyond Reward & Recognition:

What Corporations Really
Want from Incentive Travel

A Joint Insights Paper
from the Society for
Incentive Travel
Excellence (SITE) and
Destination Canada

Based on qualitative research conducted aboard the Rocky Mountaineer train during the SITE / Destination Canada Immersion Workshop in British Columbia and Alberta, Canada, in April 2025.

Executive Summary

In April 2025, eight senior incentive travel buyers from global corporations participated in a destination immersion workshop, the objective of which was to understand what corporations want from their incentive travel programs.

Held in Alberta and British Columbia, Canada, the program included a two-day journey aboard the Rocky Mountaineer train and a collaborative workshop exploring the strategic evolution of incentive travel.

This paper distills key learnings from these discussions and aligns them with ongoing research by SITE Foundation, the Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) and others in the field of reward, recognition and incentive travel.

It reveals that while reward and recognition remain foundational, modern incentive programs must deliver on a growing range of strategic, cultural and operational expectations.

1. Incentive Travel as a Strategic Business Driver

Far from being a mere “perk,” incentive travel today is a vehicle for organizational alignment, brand positioning and cultural reinforcement.

According to our workshop participants, top strategic objectives include:

- Retention and engagement
- Subtle brand awareness and loyalty building
- Experiential storytelling aligned with corporate values

Corporations also deploy different measurement approaches:

- Formal metrics (e.g., net promoter score (NPS), post-event surveys)
- Qualitative evaluation (e.g., leadership debriefs, feedback forms)
- For prestige events like President’s Clubs, some participants avoid formal measurement, focusing instead on emotional resonance and reputation

The feedback provided here is strongly aligned with findings from the Incentive Travel Index¹, a joint research initiative by SITE and the IRF.

The Index underscores that the most impactful incentive travel programs go beyond surface-level rewards — they are strategically designed to drive measurable business outcomes, while simultaneously fostering deep personal transformation among participants.

In doing so, they deliver both tangible returns on investment (“**hard dollars**”) and intangible benefits such as loyalty, engagement and brand advocacy (“**soft power**”).

¹ See <https://www.incentiveindex.com/>

2. Destination Drivers: How Corporations Choose Where to Go

In choosing the destination for their incentive travel reward, today's planners weigh a complex web of strategic, logistical, emotional, and ethical considerations.

Criteria	Comments from Participants
Connectivity	Must have efficient routing and maximum one layover
Safety and Security	Especially important for global participants
Destination Appeal	Unique landscapes or new locations
Exclusivity	Experiences that feel once-in-a-lifetime
Cultural Alignment	Destination values must align with company ethos
Luxury and Service	5-star delivery is a baseline, not a bonus
Authenticity	Participants crave immersive, local experiences

Visa policies, perception of inclusivity, and even minute operational touches (e.g., proactive service, curated gifts) influence the final decision.

As one participant representing a technology company put it:

“We’d never go back to the same destination twice — we need newness, cultural immersion, and a sense of alignment with our leadership values.”

The Role of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and Destination Partners

Participants stressed the importance of:

- Early engagement (ideally pre-contract) with all stakeholders
- Cultural fluency and supplier vetting via “trusted partner” programs run by DMOs
- Storytelling support to help “sell” the destination internally

However, there are pain points:

- Lack of transparency in supply chains, especially with destination management company (DMC) sub-contracting
- Rigid agency systems that hinder destination fit
- Slow and inconsistent responsiveness or understanding of client expectations

As a workshop participant from a high-growth cybersecurity company program noted:

“Your supplier can make you look bad — so the reputational risk is real.”





3. From Memorable to Unforgettable: The Role of Authenticity

The difference between a good incentive and an unforgettable one often lies in how deeply the destination is integrated into the experience.

Corporate planners emphasized this point — and considered authenticity to be a key differentiator.

Examples of authentic design:

- A multinational technology company emphasized locally sourced gifts and immersive experiences (e.g., Hawaiian artisans)
- A multinational tire manufacturing company delivered hands-on chocolate making in Switzerland
- A global provider of high-quality recyclable metal packaging paired wildlife experiences with philanthropy
- A high-growth cybersecurity company celebrated bold bonding adventures like dog sledding and private concerts

The assertion that authenticity transforms a trip from merely memorable to truly unforgettable is robustly supported by recent research from SITE Foundation, the IRF and other industry leaders.²

² See, for example, https://siteglobal.com/system/files/2021-11/2794_SN_SITE_WhitePaper_v10.pdf and https://theirf.org/research_post/maximizing-the-value-of-your-incentive-destination/

Increased return on investment (ROI) and engagement: IRF research³ demonstrates that emotionally rich and exclusive local experiences increase program ROI by fostering transformation, not just satisfaction. As well, companies using non-cash rewards, including incentive travel, experience three times higher revenue⁴ increases compared to those that do not.

Demand for authentic, new destinations: More than 70 percent of planners surveyed in the 2024 Incentive Travel Index⁵ were seeking new destinations and experiences that participants had not encountered before, with a strong preference for cultural immersion and authenticity.

Research from SITE Foundation and the IRF, corroborated by the SITE/Destination Canada Immersion Workshop, confirms that integrating authentic, local experiences into incentive travel programs results in higher emotional impact, improved ROI and deeper participant engagement. These findings are echoed across multiple industry studies and are shaping the future design of incentive travel worldwide.



³ See https://theirf.org/research_post/anatomy-of-a-successful-incentive-travel-program/

⁴ See <https://www.anaplan.com/content/dam/anaplan/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Aberdeen-Group-Motivate-Incent-Compensate-Enable.pdf>

⁵ See <https://www.incentiveindex.com/>

4.

Designing for Multiple Audiences: Personalization a Priority

The SITE / Destination Canada Immersion Workshop re-affirmed a critical insight: one size no longer fits all. Whether you're designing an executive retreat or a large-scale sales incentive, personalization is no longer a “nice-to-have” — it's a non-negotiable.

This shift reflects two key dynamics: the rise of multi-generational workplaces, where Gen Z and Baby Boomers collaborate daily, and the growing influence of a highly personalized culture that focuses on relevance, individuality and meaning.

What today's participants value:

- **C-Suite:** Privacy, seamless connectivity, time efficiency and curated luxury (e.g., spa treatments onboard, bespoke welcome gifts)
- **Top performers:** Exclusive, “Instagram-worthy” moments that signal status and achievement (e.g., meet-and-greets with celebrity chefs, immersive adventure, wellness lounges)
- **Plus ones:** Thoughtful integration with the program through personalized gifts, cultural immersion and opportunities to connect meaningfully with the destination
- Wellness, nature and personal transformation are dominant recurring themes across all audiences.

Programs are evolving to embrace “slow travel” and emotionally resonant experiences — insights strongly echoed in SITE's recent eBook, *The Extra Mile in Incentive Travel: Wellness & Adventure*.

5. The Opportunity for Canada

The SITE / Destination Canada Immersion workshop was a case study in how Western Canada exemplifies the future of incentive travel: **purposeful, transformative and deeply immersive.**

Stretching from the serene majesty of Lake Louise to the urban sophistication of Vancouver, the journey was an unfolding narrative of “slow incentive travel” — a concept that replaces checklist tourism with presence, meaning and connection.

Here, attendees weren’t just observers of landscapes, but participants in stories, cultures, and nature.

Top takeaways:

- **Lake Louise evoked a collective moment of awe:** more spiritual than scenic – and a reminder that transformational travel begins with emotional impact.
- **The Rocky Mountaineer train redefined exclusivity:** luxury without pretence, movement without rush. It offered a rare blend of comfort, nature and introspection that created space for deeper relationships and mindset shifts
- **Vancouver embodied balance:** cosmopolitan yet accessible, energetic yet relaxed. This city exudes wellness, innovation and West Coast lifestyle appeal.

Crucially, planners cautioned against generic positioning. The power of Canada lies not in its size, but in its specificity.

As one participant noted:

“*Don’t just say Canada — say what part, what story, what experience.*”

Destinations must be narrated, not named.

Writing about his experience attending the workshop, former SITE Chief Marketing Officer Pádraic Gilligan observed that slow travel in Western Canada taps into something deeper: a yearning for connection over consumption, and purpose over pace.

For incentive planners seeking both business results and personal resonance, Canada delivers on every front.



Recommendations

Based on participant feedback and wider industry research, the following actions are recommended for destinations and partners:

1. Lead with purpose, not place

Frame the experience, then locate it in the destination.

2. Maximize authentic impact

Deliver emotional resonance through local immersion, storytelling and values alignment.

3. Prioritize ease and elegance

From seamless logistics to exquisite touches, every detail counts.

4. Partner with transparency

Vet your supply chain. Build trust. Be responsive. Make planners look good.

5. Tailor by type

Differentiate program design for executives, qualifiers and companions.

Closing Thoughts

Each participant was asked to complete the sentence:

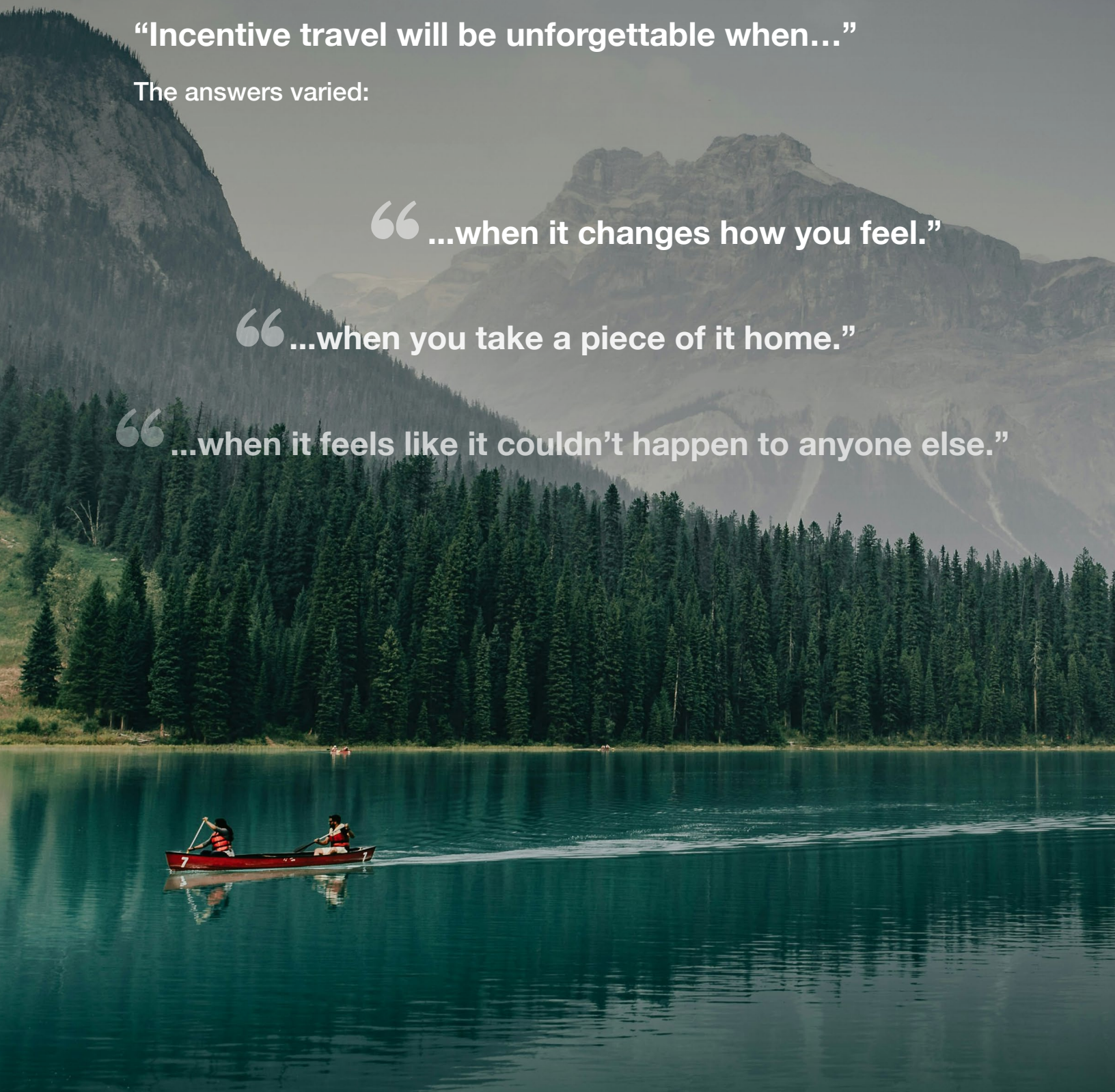
“Incentive travel will be unforgettable when...”

The answers varied:

“...when it changes how you feel.”

“...when you take a piece of it home.”

“...when it feels like it couldn't happen to anyone else.”



About the Participants

The eight workshop attendees represented global brands and diverse industries, including technology, automotive, and logistics.

Together, they plan incentive programs ranging from eight to 1,000+ participants across Europe, the Middle East, Africa, North America, and Latin America. They are the architects of motivation for thousands — and their feedback shapes the future of our industry.

Amongst the participants were representatives from:

- a multinational technology company
- a global payments company
- a high-growth cybersecurity company
- a global software as a service (SaaS) business
- a multinational tire manufacturing company
- a global provider of high-quality recyclable metal packaging

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Your commitment to excellence made this journey truly unforgettable.

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