

CHEZ MONIQUE RESEARCH'S PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Lynne Siemens
Department of Business
Malaspina University-College

Abstract

This case study focuses on a small cafe that operates on the West Coast Trail, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. In particular, the students will examine the challenges faced by the owner and ways that the owner can use research to improve business operations.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the case study and analysis, the students will:

1. Explore the operations of a hospitality business in a remote location;
2. Explore the ways that research can be used to improve business operations in the areas of logistics, marketing, menu planning and others;

Potential Learning Environment

This case contains useful learning content for students in courses such as small business, tourism marketing, business planning, entrepreneurship, research methods, and parks management.

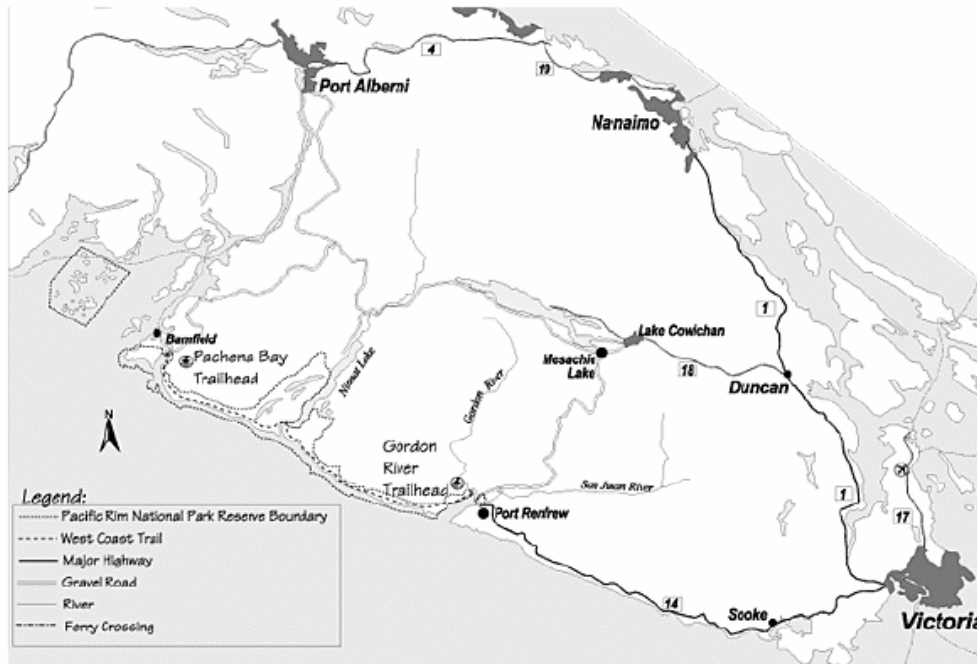
Introduction

This case will explore a small café located in a remote part of Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

The West Coast Trail

The West Coast Trail is a 75 km hike on the west side of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in the Pacific Rim National Park, managed by Parks Canada, a federal government department. Started as a life saving trail in the early 1900s, it is generally hiked in an average of 5-7 days as a through hike. (This means that hikers start at one end of the trail and finish at the other.) There are two starting points – Bamfield at the north end and Port Renfrew at the south end. Refer to Figure 1.

Figure 1: Map of the West Coast Trail



(Source: Quu'as West Coast Trail Society <http://www.alberni.net/quuas/destmap6.gif>)

The hike is a challenging one. Hikers must climb over rocks and logs, maneuver over hundred feet of ladders, ford bogs, streams and small rivers, and use cable cars to cross the larger rivers. The hike comprises of stretches through the forest and on beaches, much of which can only be accomplished during low tides. All this hiking is done with backpacks as the hikers carry their camp gear and food and in torrential downpours. (The trail is located in a rainforest.) Camping is at designated camping areas along the trail. To prepare hikers, Parks Canada requires that all hikers attend an orientation session, which includes a video of the challenges that they will face on the trail. Despite these precautions, there are injuries each year and there have been several deaths.

The trail is open from May 1 to September 30 each year. To protect the trail from overuse, a quota system is in place, which means a maximum of 62 people can start each day between the two trailheads. Of this number, 52 are people who have made reservations. B.C. Reservations Systems, a provincial government agency, coordinates the reservations during the trail's busiest times from the middle of June to the middle of September.

The trail is in a national park, but it crosses or runs along side 6 Indian Reserves. Over the years, a variety of commercial activity has started on the trail, primarily on the reserve land. Chez Monique, a small café at km 45 on Carmanah Beach, is one of those operations.

Chez Monique

Chez Monique occupies a unique place on the West Coast Trail. It is located about half way on the trail in terms of time and distance. In addition, the trail runs right in front of the tarp and log café which means that all hikers must pass it as they go by. There is a designated campsite on Carmanah Beach, about a kilometer from the cafe. The owner/operator, Monique, has been in business for approximately 13 years, growing from a small stand selling pancakes to an operation that offers a varied menu.



Chez Monique's (Photo: Lynne Siemens)

Chez Monique's customers are almost exclusively hikers. The menu is diverse. Breakfast includes eggs, potatoes, toast, oatmeal, and coffee. Lunch and supper ranges from hamburgers and salmon burgers and fillets to vegetarian meals. Candy, muffins, fruit, beer, sport drinks, and soft drinks are also available. Besides food, Monique also sells hikers' necessities (sunscreen, film, and some emergency gear.) Above all, Monique provides information and support, especially to first time hikers. She has been known to give wet and cold hikers a warm and dry spot to sleep.

The only other place to purchase food on the trail is at Nitinat Narrows where hikers take a small boat across the Narrows to continue the hike. This point of the trail is on Indian reserve land and the band runs the ferry service and offers a limited menu selection compared to Chez Monique's. (Monique's husband is a member of this band.) There is no camping at Nitinat.

Operations

The café operates roughly from 7 am to 10 pm. The hours are set by the flow of hikers and the tides. The hikers generally set their walking time by the tides to allow for hiking on beaches, some of which are only accessible at low tide.

The beach is not accessible by road nor is it serviced by electricity or plumbing. This means that planning is very important because Monique cannot quickly run to the store for more supplies. To support this, she uses a computer to track inventory and sales. Weekly shopping trips are made in Langford, a city located outside Victoria or up island in the City of Nanaimo. Both are about 1 ½ hour driving time away from Port Renfrew where Monique keeps a van parked. Peter, Monique's husband, makes the trips for supplies which he stores in Port Renfrew at a business operated by friends. There, frozen items are kept in a freezer. Every couple of days, Peter then makes the trip from the beach by zodiac boat to Port Renfrew to pick up the necessary supplies. This trip is about 45 minutes, one way in good weather, on the open ocean.

Since there is no electricity or indoor plumbing on the beach, stoves are powered by propane and coolers are filled with ice to keep items refrigerated. Water is filtered from a stream on the property.

The operation has grown beyond one person so Monique relies on family members for help during the hiking season. Monique and her husband live on the beach all year round.

Marketing

Since Monique started operations, she has observed that most hikers have come to rely on the café for at least one meal while they are on the trail; to the point that hikers are packing one less meal because they know that they can eat at Monique's. Other trends that she has noted include that the hikers are spending more on their hiking gear and there appear to be more vegetarians on the trail. In addition, besides Canadians and Americans, there is a large percentage of Europeans, especially Germans, who come to hike.

Marketing is fairly simple for Chez Monique's. Promotion is entirely by word of mouth by others. Monique does not do any herself. The range of promotion includes newspaper and magazine articles and mention in trail hiking books. One of the main hiking books, "The West Coast Trail and Other Great Hikes" (8th Ed.), makes mention of Monique's: "At the Bamfield end of the beach on the Indian reserve, there is a small settlement. Over the last few years the Nytom family has operated a small restaurant and food store here. The beer is cold and the conversation as spicy as the food." (pg. 21)

Hikers themselves spread the word through conversation and websites. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of websites that mention Monique's with testimonials and pictures.

Despite her location as the primary café on the trail, Monique is careful in her pricing. Food is considered a necessity and as a result, Monique does not take advantage of the customer. Menu prices are in line with similar items in Port Renfrew and other communities, despite the additional costs associated with getting supplies to the beach.

A hamburger with chips is about \$9.00 at Chez Monique's compared to about the same in Port Renfrew, though with French fries. Beer, however, is considered a luxury item and is priced accordingly. Monique charges 5 for a can of beer.

Challenges/The Future

Chez Monique has been operating for approximately 13 years and Monique is turning her thoughts to the future of the operation. There are several challenges that need her attention.

First, both Monique and her husband are in their mid-60s and are interested in retirement. They both feel that they cannot continue the pace that is required by an intensive seasonal business. It is not clear, however, if any family members are interested or able to step in.

Second, planning the logistics is becoming more difficult. Some of these challenges are ones that must be continually addressed while others are new.

1. As always, the weather plays a very important role. Bad weather means hikers stay in their tents, rather than hike. Bad weather also can make the run to Port Renfrew difficult, if not dangerous. As a result, Monique must carefully plan the timing of runs to ensure that supplies are at the beach when required. If hikers do not come, food goes bad. If they do come and Monique is not prepared, it can mean more trips to Port Renfrew and Langford/Nanaimo, increasing time and costs.
2. There has been a steady decline in the number of hikers undertaking the West Coast Trail. Due to trail popularity, Parks Canada instituted a quota system of 8,000 spaces on the trail each year. In 2002 and 2003, only 5,600 spaces were used. (Parks Canada is addressing this by publishing materials that debunk the myth that the trail is always full in order to encourage more hikers.) This also impacts on Monique's ability to plan, order, and organize her operations from year to year.
3. Finally, because there is no road access, Monique must carefully plan menu items to ensure that the food can survive a boat ride in chopping ocean water.

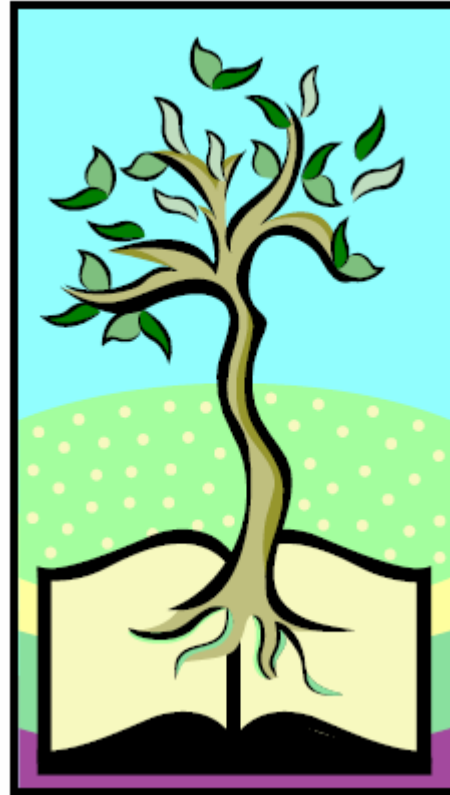
Finally, as mentioned above, there has been a steady decline in the number of hikers on the trail. This is prompting Monique to consider ways to diversify her operations. Some ideas that she is considering is offering new services to hikers, boating in customers for dinners on the beach, and building cabins to extend operations to all year round.

Discussion Questions

1. In what areas could Monique conduct research? To answer what questions?
2. What tools could she use?
3. How could Monique use this research to address her future challenges? What further research could she do?

Informed Leisure Practice:

**Cases as conduits
between theory and
practice**



Nicole L. Vaugeois, Ph.D.
Editor

Volume 1

11th Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 17-20, 2005 at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo, British Columbia

Nicole L. Vaugeois, Editor

Informed Leisure Practice:

Cases as Conduits Between Theory and Practice

Volume 1

11th Canadian Congress on Leisure Research

May 17-20, 2005 at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo, British Columbia

The Recreation and Tourism Research Institute

ISBN: 1-896886-06-X

For additional copies please contact:

The Recreation and Tourism Research Institute

Malaspina University-College

900 Fifth Street, Nanaimo, B.C. V9R 5S5

Canada

Phone (250) 740-6396

Email: Vaugeois@mala.bc.ca