

STAR POWER

Celebrities bring a high-voltage 'wow' factor to themed incentive trips.

The appeal of celebrities isn't news, as our Hollywood-mad culture venerates stars and starlets of all stripes. What *is* news, however, is that tour companies are starting to incorporate celebrities into their incentive trips.

"Adding a celebrity or SME component to an incentive trip is a creative way to step up the 'wow' factor," says Alanna McQuaid, director, sales and marketing, for Exclusive Travels, which is working with a number of Canadian celebs, including TV chef Michael Smith, to create themed incentive tours. "We have captured the imagination of not just our clients, but the celebrities themselves are enthused by the unique opportunity to showcase their expertise in some of the most culturally rich and beautiful places on earth."

STAR POWER. No doubt, celebrity chefs deliver high-voltage 'wow' factor. Thanks to the public's obsession with all things culinary, aided and abetted by 'gastro-porn' magazines and, especially, the Food Network, chefs have attained rock-star status.

And in the world of Canadian TV chefs, none has a higher profile than Smith, whose three Food Network shows, *The Inn Chef*, *Chef at Home* and *Chef at Large*, are among the specialty channel's highest-rated programmes.

"As a chef, I really enjoy sharing the amazing culinary experiences I've stumbled onto in my travels, and helping my guests find tasty new memories of their own," says Smith. "Food is universal, and perhaps the most memorable part of any travel experience – especially when seen from a chef's perspective."

THEMED EVENTS. Exclusive offers several themed incentive trips involving Smith, including a food-lover's tour of P.E.I., culinary boot camp in Toronto and dining at Michelin three-star restaurants in London and Paris.

Exclusive is also working with Kevin Brauch, the Food Network's *Thirsty Traveler*, and cookbook author Rose Reisman, and has organized tours led by Dr. Linda Bramble, wine educator, sommelier and writer, who has taken groups to Italy, Spain and Argentina

Further afield, in New York City, PRA Destination Management offers incentive groups a chance to meet Broadway actors as part of a theatre night. For the price of a small donation to New York charitable organization Broadway Cares – PRA president Patrick Sullivan suggests at least a \$500 donation – groups can experience a post-performance, cast-member Q&A or mix-and-mingle cocktail party. Headliners aren't guaranteed, but supporting players are happy to do pro-bono work, he says.



In Canada, the trend toward celebrity-themed incentive tours is a recent one. For several years, Exclusive had been promoting celebrity trips to the leisure market. But about 18 months ago, owner Flavia St. Clair, realizing that "the incentive market is always looking for something different and special," broadened the celebrity focus to include that niche.

She offers tips on star-driven incentive trips.

CLIENT'S NEEDS. Know the client's needs and budget. A programme could involve everything from having the celebrity/expert on the entire trip (featuring daily highlights), to having the celebrity make select appearances (for example, at the welcome reception, a specific showcase event and the gala evening).

GOOD FIT. Ensure a good fit. "Matching the right celebrity to the right group is vital to the success of the programme," says St. Clair. "It is extremely important to know your audience for any event." She only works with celebrities/experts who are at ease with groups and who enjoy participating in these types of events. After all, it has to be beneficial for everyone involved. Also, group size is key. These sorts of trips work best for groups of less than 60 people, where, with a well-structured programme, everyone gets some quality time with the celebrity – which, of course, is the whole point.

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