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Five Countries Craft Unique Showcase for Incentive Buyers

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Partnership is not a word often used among competitors, especially high-profile incentive destinations who might frequently find themselves bidding for the same piece of group travel incentive business. But five countries bond together once a year to do just that: organize a three-day hosted-buyer marketplace for top incentive buyers in North America that offers preset appointments. It's called [Trailblazers](#) and this year it was held July 15–18 in Whistler, British Columbia, an incredibly beautiful incentive destination that tied in perfectly with the event's theme: Reach New Heights.

Approximately 60 buyers gathered with a like number of suppliers—hoteliers, destination management companies, tourist boards, and venues representing the five country sponsors: [Canada](#), [Britain](#), [Ireland](#), [Monaco](#), and [Switzerland](#).

“We were probably the first to offer North American buyers an exclusive hosted-buyer appointment schedule” when Trailblazers began some 17 years ago, says Robin Thompson, director, meeting and convention sales, for the Canadian Tourism Commission. It was first called Five Star Edge, then Headliners, according to Cindy Hoddeson, director, meeting and incentive sales for the Monaco Government Tourist Office in New York. “I think partnering with other tourist boards and putting this event together is one of my favorite parts of my job,” she says.



[View the full Photo Gallery of the 2011 Trailblazers gathering here](#)

Buyers had one-on-one appointments throughout the weekend, learning about news in the U.K. and Monaco, both having just hosted rather large crowds around some very significant royal weddings; and news of good value in Ireland resulting from the government lowering the Value Added Tax from 13.5 percent to 9 percent, according to Marie McKown, manager, business tourism, Tourism Ireland, New York. Switzerland remains a magnet not only for incentives, but for financial, pharmaceutical, research, and technology meetings, due to its expertise and influence in those business sectors, according to Caroline Pidroni, director of sales and

marketing, Switzerland Convention & Incentive Bureau, New York.

The host destination, always in one of the five sponsoring countries, invests quite a lot to bring buyers together each summer, and Whistler was no exception. The exquisite Fairmont Chateau Whistler, located about 75 miles north of Vancouver, played host. It stands tall among its five-star sister hotels, either destination resorts or urban oases originally built by CP Hotels (which later merged with Fairmont and Princess Hotels), which dot the Canadian landscape from Vancouver, Victoria, and Whistler in the West, to Banff, Lake Louise, and east to Toronto and Québec and the Canadian Maritimes.

Pacific Destination Services Inc., the terrifically competent DMC, treated attendees like incentive winners from the moment they were greeted at the Vancouver Airport for the trip north, driving past some of the most amazing mountain coastal views in North America. (Visitors can also take a train to Whistler.) Other destination hosts included Tourism Whistler and Whistler Blackcomb, the official alpine skiing venue for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

It must be the pure joy of living in one of the most gorgeous cities (Vancouver) and regions (north to Whistler, south to Victoria) that makes residents of British Columbia so happy to showcase their home. They give you not only touristy tidbits, but education about the region's environment, animal kingdom, its Olympics chops, and the essence of its social and economic fabric.

Karen Goodwin, vice president of sales for Visit Whistler, who welcomed everyone on the first evening, said that when people visit Whistler they often want to push themselves to the limit, to step outside their comfort zones. That certainly rang true for many of the Trailblazers (and—ideally—for your incentive winners), who on one free afternoon had numerous mountain summer activities from which to choose. Many who had never ziplined before took part in a Ziptrek bear tour, where they jumped out of trees, hanging only by a harness on a cable, some 160 feet over white rushing waters in a temperate rainforest between Whistler and Blackcomb mountains; or sped around the wilderness in ATVs; or paddled canoes through the stunning waters of Whistler Valley.

The highlight for many was the final gala evening at the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, just across the street from the Fairmont (which is also next door to the Four Seasons), where entertainment was provided by Whistler's two Native cultures, the Squamish Aboriginal people and the Lil'wat Aboriginal people.

The next Trailblazers event takes place in Edinburgh, Scotland, July 27–29, 2012, at the Sheraton Grand Hotel & Spa. The dates coincide with the opening day of the Olympics, taking place some 330 miles to its south and east. Host VisitBritain, and Laurie Scott, business development manager, promise to make the event Olympic-worthy.

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