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MacEachern, Melissa; Yun, Dongkoo PhD; MacDonald, Roberta PhD; and Hennessey, Sean PhD, "CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISITING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES MARKETS IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND: A LONGITUDINAL APPROACH" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 61.  
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# Characteristics of the Visiting Friends and Relatives Markets in Prince Edward Island: A Longitudinal Approach

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## Abstract

*This study attempts to better understand the VFR market in Prince Edward Island, Canada by using data set drawn from Tourist Exit Survey during the period from 2000 to 2004. The study provided an exploratory examination of trip characteristic variables between VFR and pleasure travellers and identified some significant differences between the two trip purpose groups. It also identified that the VFR markets are important and valuable for Prince Edward Island. The results imply that tourism marketers need to address the unique differences of the VFR markets in keeping with their trip patterns and characteristics.*

## Introduction

It has been known that visiting friends or relatives (VFR) contributes a significant portion of the international and domestic travel markets (Lehto, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001; Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; Paci, 1994; Seaton & Palmer, 1997) and economic benefits to destinations with great growth potential worldwide (Beioley, 1997; Lee, Morrison, Lheto, Webb, Reid, 2005; Meis, Joyal, & Trites, 1995; Mules, 1998; Navarro & Turco, 1994; Paci, 1994; Seaton & Palmer, 1997; Yuan, Fridgen, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995). In addition, it has been found that VFR travellers have unique characteristics in terms of their information search behaviors, trip planning, trip types, vacation activities, and spending patterns. As a result, it has been suggested that the VFR market requires tailor-made marketing efforts (Morrison & O'Leary, 1995; Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green, & O'Leary, 2000).

Although tourism marketers and researchers have now realized the VFR markets' importance and economic benefits, they have neglected or underestimated them compared to other pleasure markets due to such reasons as the complexity of the markets (hybrid travel), misunderstanding of the concepts related to the VFR (e.g., VFR as a major motive or a specific activity and typology of VFR), issues in domestic versus international, short-haul versus long-haul VFR, and difficulties in promoting to the market. (King, 1996; Morrison & O'Leary 1995; Seaton, 1994).

Many prior studies on VFR have demonstrated that it is a multifaceted and unique segment given it has a large proportion of the total volume of travel and a significant proportion of both domestic and international markets. VFR has unique trip characteristics in both the short- and long-haul VFR, including significant use of commercial accommodation, representing a viable niche market for the lodging industry (Hu & Morrison, 2002).

This study attempts to better understand the VFR markets in Prince Edward Island, Canada. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify some characteristics of the VFR markets by comparing the differences between VFR and pleasure markets using data set drawn from Tourist Exit Survey during the period from 2000 to 2004.

## Methodology

**Data.** This study used data drawn from the “Tourist Exit Survey (TES)” conducted by Tourism Prince Edward Island (PEI) in Canada. The main purposes of TES are to examine comprehensive statistics on the volume of travellers and their expenditure and to identify detailed characteristics of their trips (Tourism PEI, 2004). A 5-year term of data sets of the TES was used in this study during the period from 2000 to 2004.

**Samples.** Table 1 presents the TES data characteristics and samples used. During the period from 2000 to 2004, Tourism PEI collected a total of 16,640 samples. 14,641 samples were used for analyzing the data and identifying characteristics of VFR markets over time in PEI. Of these, 2,472 (16.9%) were VFR purpose travellers and 12,169 (83.1%) were pleasure travellers over time. The number of samples used overnight pleasure travellers to PEI rather than same day travellers and other purposes of trip.

Table 1. Total number of Samples collected and Samples used for the Study

Year	Total Samples	Pleasure Travellers	Overnight Pleasure Travellers *		
			VFR	Pleasure	Total
2000	2,523	2,225	357 (16.5)	1,802 (83.5)	2,159
2001	3,562	3,243	554 (17.8)	2,554 (82.2)	3,108
2002	3,536	3,283	525 (16.5)	2,662 (83.5)	3,187
2003	3,428	3,135	460 (15.1)	2,588 (84.9)	3,048
2004	3,591	3,296	576 (18.3)	2,563 (81.7)	3,139
Total	16,640	15,182	2,472 (16.9)	12,169 (83.1)	14,641

Notes:

1) \* indicates samples used for the study.

2) VFR indicates visiting friends and relatives.

3) Numbers in parentheses indicate % of each market size in each year for overnight pleasure travellers.

**Variables.** Trip characteristic variables, trip purpose, visitor types, types of accommodation, travel party size, trip duration, travel expenditure, and travel activity were used for analyzing the data and identify characteristics of VFR markets in PEI (see Tables 2, 3, and 4).

**Data analysis.** This study employed a longitudinal approach using a series of data that was observed or measured at more than one point in time, possibly repeatedly, and developed over time (Bijleveld & van der Kamp, 1998). The study performed Chi-Square analyses and *t*-tests to identify some trip characteristics of VFR markets in PEI. Separate  $\chi^2$  analyses were used to identify the differences between categorical trip characteristic variables with the trip purpose groups. Similarly, a series of independent *t*-tests were analyzed on trip characteristics to determine whether variables in two groups differed.

## Results

**Visitor types and trip purpose.** In order to identify the differences between VFR and pleasure travellers and to capture better understanding of characteristics of each over time, Chi-Square analyses were performed on each of the two identified groups with respect to the variable of visitor types (first time visitor and repeat visitor). As illustrated in Table 2, statistically significant differences showed between VFR and pleasure travellers in visitor types over the years. Overall, VFR’s repeat visitors’ ratio has been much higher than pleasure travellers over time. VFR’s repeat visitors accounted for 75.3% to 84.2%, while first time pleasure travellers accounted for 50.5% to 54.7%.

Table 2. Visitor Types by Trip Purpose

Year	Variable	VFR	Pleasure	Total
2000	First time visitor	70 (19.6)	985 (54.7)	1,055 (48.9)
	Repeat visitor	287 (80.4)	817 (45.3)	1,104 (51.1)
	Total	357	1,802	2,159
	Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 146.53, d.f. = 1, p < .0001$			
2001	First time visitor	106 (19.1)	1,304 (51.1)	1,410 (45.4)
	Repeat visitor	448 (80.9)	1,250 (48.9)	1,698 (54.6)
	Total	554	2,554	3,108
	Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 2159.00, d.f. = 1, p < .0001$			
2002	First time visitor	83 (15.8)	1,367 (51.4)	1,450 (45.5)
	Repeat visitor	442 (84.2)	1,295 (48.6)	1,737 (54.5)
	Total	525	2,662	3,187
	Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 223.40, d.f. = 1, p < .0001$			
2003	First time visitor	88 (19.1)	1,318 (50.9)	1,406 (46.1)
	Repeat visitor	372 (80.9)	1,270 (49.1)	1,642 (53.9)
	Total	460	2,588	3,048
	Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 158.91, d.f. = 1, p < .0001$			
2004	First-time visitor	142 (24.7)	1,295 (50.5)	1,437 (45.8)
	Repeat Visitor	434 (75.3)	1,268 (49.5)	1,702 (54.2)
	Total	576	2,563	3,139
	Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 126.84, d.f. = 1, p < .0001$			

Note: Numbers indicate frequencies ( $n$ ) in each segment cell for each year, whereas numbers in parentheses indicate % within the segment.

**Types of accommodation and trip purpose.** To identify the differences between VFR and pleasure travellers over time, Chi-Square analyses were performed on each of the two identified groups regarding the variable of “type of accommodation used”. As shown in Table 3, statistically significant differences showed between VFR and pleasure travellers over time. As expected, VFR travellers were more likely to stay at their friends or relatives’ home (from 48.4% to 62.1%) over the years, whereas pleasure travellers were more likely to spend in hotels, motels or resorts (from 38.8% to 41.7%). In addition, cabin or cottage was the second preferred type of accommodation by both VFR and pleasure travellers.

**Travel party size, trip duration, and trip purpose.** To determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between the trip purpose groups with respect to travel party size and trip duration variables over the years, a series of  $t$ -tests were run. The results are reported in Table 4. Statistically significant differences between the trip purpose groups were found in all of travel party size and trip duration variables over time, excluding one item of “travel party size” in 2004. Overall, it was found that VFR travellers’ party size has been smaller than pleasure travellers over the years, whereas VFR’s trip duration has been longer than pleasure.

**Travel expenditure and trip purpose.** All of the travel expenditure categories indicate average spending per person per night rather than total amount of spending. The results are also presented in Table 4. Statistically significant differences between the trip purpose groups were

found in many of spending variables over time. In 2004, all of spending categories are significantly different between the two groups. Overall, it was found that pleasure travellers' expenditures in almost all of the spending categories have been higher than VFR travellers.

Table 3. Types of Accommodation by Trip Purpose

Year	Variable	VFR	Pleasure	Total
2000	Hotel/Motel/Resort	57 (16.0)	699 (38.8)	756 (35.0)
	B&B/Inn	31 (8.7)	268 (14.9)	299 (13.8)
	Cabin/Cottage	62 (17.4)	386 (21.4)	448 (20.8)
	Camping/Trailer Park	18 (5.0)	309 (17.1)	327 (15.1)
	Home of friends or relatives	182 (51.0)	87 (4.8)	269 (12.5)
	Other	7 (2.0)	53 (2.9)	60 (2.8)
	Total	357	1,802	2,159
Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 594.19$ , <i>d.f.</i> = 5, <i>p</i> < .0001				
2001	Hotel/Motel/Resort	69 (12.5)	997 (39.1)	1,066 (34.3)
	B&B/Inn	21 (3.8)	360 (14.1)	381 (12.3)
	Cabin/Cottage	62 (11.2)	484 (19.0)	546 (17.6)
	Camping/Trailer Park	40 (7.2)	478 (18.7)	518 (16.7)
	Home of friends or relatives	344 (62.1)	140 (5.5)	484 (15.6)
	Other	18 (3.2)	92 (3.6)	110 (3.5)
	Total	554	2,551	3,105
Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 1,121.16$ , <i>d.f.</i> = 5, <i>p</i> < .0001				
2002	Hotel/Motel/Resort	80 (15.2)	1,072 (40.3)	1,152 (36.1)
	B&B/Inn	29 (5.5)	383 (14.4)	412 (12.9)
	Cabin/Cottage	82 (15.6)	520 (19.5)	602 (18.9)
	Camping/Trailer Park	43 (8.2)	442 (16.6)	485 (15.2)
	Home of friends or relatives	254 (48.4)	132 (5.0)	386 (12.1)
	Other	37 (7.0)	113 (4.2)	150 (4.7)
	Total	525	2,662	3,187
Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 816.61$ , <i>d.f.</i> = 5, <i>p</i> < .0001				
2003	Hotel/Motel/Resort	56 (12.2)	1,066 (41.2)	1,122 (36.8)
	B&B/Inn	17 (3.7)	414 (16.0)	431 (14.1)
	Cabin/Cottage	83 (18.0)	493 (19.0)	576 (18.9)
	Camping/Trailer Park	36 (7.8)	424 (16.4)	460 (15.1)
	Home of friends or relatives	251 (54.6)	114 (4.4)	365 (12.0)
	Other	17 (3.7)	77 (3.0)	94 (3.1)
	Total	460	2,588	3,048
Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 971.58$ , <i>d.f.</i> = 5, <i>p</i> < .0001				
2004	Hotel/Motel/Resort	101 (17.5)	1,067 (41.7)	1,168 (37.3)
	B&B/Inn	35 (6.1)	383 (15.0)	418 (13.3)
	Cabin/Cottage	94 (16.3)	470 (18.4)	564 (18.0)
	Camping/Trailer Park	39 (6.8)	467 (18.3)	506 (16.2)
	Home of friends or relatives	300 (52.1)	122 (4.8)	422 (13.5)
	Other	7 (1.2)	48 (1.9)	55 (1.8)
	Total	576	2,557	3,133
Chi-Square Statistics: $\chi^2 = 923.70$ , <i>d.f.</i> = 5, <i>p</i> < .0001				

Note: Numbers indicate frequencies (*n*) in each segment cell for each year, whereas numbers in parentheses indicate % within the segment.

Table 4. Travel Party Size, Trip Duration, Travel Expenditures, and Travel Activities by Trip Purpose

Variable	2000			2001			2002			2003			2004		
	VFR	PLR	t-value	VFR	PLR	t-value	VFR	PLR	t-value	VFR	PLR	t-value	VFR	PLR	t-value
Travel Party Size	2.8	3.1	-2.72**	2.6	3.1	-8.03***	2.3	2.7	-5.31***	2.8	2.9	-1.68	2.8	3.0	-1.93
Trip Duration	7.2	4.7	7.02***	7.1	4.5	8.25***	6.8	4.4	8.51***	6.6	4.5	5.57***	6.0	4.1	6.76***
Travel Expenditure *															
Average spending per person per night	81.5	103.8	-4.88***	57.2	102.7	-17.55***	63.9	107.3	-14.60***	73.3	114.7	-9.77***	71.1	117.0	-14.45***
Accommodation	38.3	39.8	-0.58	32.3	39.9	-4.07***	13.9	37.6	-17.13***	15.7	41.9	-13.31***	19.8	41.8	-13.70***
Food & beverage	27.0	29.1	-1.23	21.1	30.8	-9.15***	21.7	29.3	-7.43***	24.4	31.3	-5.03***	23.0	33.0	-10.27***
Transportation	17.7	14.7	1.14	11.8	13.9	-1.12	5.9	4.8	1.47	6.3	4.3	2.25*	9.4	13.4	-5.07***
Recreation & entertainment	19.8	20.1	-0.04	17.8	29.7	-1.25	6.8	9.7	-4.49***	6.8	10.0	-4.54***	6.4	11.8	-8.03***
Shopping	28.9	29.9	-0.43	21.0	28.8	-4.93***	13.5	21.6	-9.11***	17.5	22.6	-4.02***	12.1	16.2	-4.51***
Other spending	0.4	0.3	0.33	9.7	12.6	-1.09	2.0	4.0	-3.57***	2.4	4.4	-3.27***	0.9	1.7	-3.27***
Travel Activity **															
Experiencing Acadian Culture	19.3	26.6	-3.10**	23.6	32.7	-4.47***	19.8	29.8	-5.13***	18.9	27.0	-4.02***	21.9	30.6	-4.49***
Beach Visits	65.5	74.4	-3.26***	67.5	73.7	-2.84**	68.4	72.5	-1.87	69.1	72.1	-1.26	60.1	66.7	-2.94**
Bird Watching	14.6	22.6	-3.79***	18.1	23.4	-2.92**	18.5	22.3	-2.02*	15.7	19.7	-2.15*	15.3	17.1	-1.10
Boating/ Canoeing/ Kayaking/ Sailing	17.4	11.4	2.77**	14.3	11.3	1.82	14.1	10.7	2.07*	13.7	8.8	2.88**	8.2	7.8	0.29
Camping	9.5	19.4	-5.46***	10.6	21.9	-7.27***	11.4	19.5	-5.08***	9.8	17.0	-4.57***	9.7	19.3	-6.54***
Canada's Birthplace Attractions	-	-	-	24.2	34.1	-4.84***	24.2	35.0	-5.19***	18.7	27.9	-4.53***	20.1	27.4	-3.86***
Confederation Trail	12.9	18.9	-2.99**	16.1	21.1	-2.89**	14.7	21.2	-3.75***	15.0	18.9	-2.12**	14.9	23.9	-5.24***
Craft/Souvenir Shopping	70.0	79.3	-3.55***	64.1	73.6	-4.30***	63.0	72.4	-4.11***	63.7	70.8	-2.95**	56.8	63.1	-2.79**
Cycling	7.3	10.0	-1.78	6.7	9.7	-2.50*	7.0	8.8	-1.37	6.1	7.8	-1.39	4.7	6.6	-1.93
Deep Sea/Salt Water Fishing	12.0	6.0	3.30***	8.1	6.8	1.07	8.8	5.7	2.32*	5.2	4.8	0.35	6.8	3.8	2.65**
Driving Tour	-	-	-	48.2	57.7	-4.07***	56.0	58.2	-0.94	43.5	53.1	-3.82***	36.5	47.3	-4.84***
Festival/ Event	32.5	27.5	1.86	25.1	24.2	0.42	23.6	21.0	1.30	18.7	18.9	-0.12	18.9	17.0	1.07
Founders Hall	-	-	-	12.8	16.4	-2.27*	14.7	19.2	-2.61**	11.5	16.9	-3.23***	11.8	17.8	-3.90***
Fun/Theme parks	19.3	22.8	-1.48	17.9	20.8	-1.59	17.5	18.9	-0.76	17.2	19.0	-0.95	19.3	14.4	2.75**
Golf	20.2	14.7	2.39*	19.9	15.7	2.23*	21.1	14.6	3.44***	17.8	14.2	1.90	14.1	12.1	1.22
Harbour/City/Land tours	12.6	19.0	-3.23***	11.0	15.8	-3.15***	8.8	12.5	-2.67**	8.0	14.6	-4.51***	12.7	18.2	-3.48***
Hiking	16.5	26.3	-4.39***	19.3	24.3	-2.66**	17.7	23.2	-2.96**	20.4	23.3	-1.41	11.3	19.4	-5.29***
Live Theater	19.0	20.4	-0.59	19.3	18.1	0.68	17.1	17.1	0.05	15.2	18.7	-1.87	15.5	15.3	0.07
Lobster Suppers	41.7	46.0	-1.49	39.9	47.7	-3.38***	39.6	47.4	-3.32***	40.9	46.8	-2.39*	33.2	40.3	-3.26***
Night Life	16.2	14.2	0.96	17.7	14.5	1.79	17.0	12.6	2.46*	14.6	13.0	0.90	10.1	12.2	-1.49
Sightseeing	72.5	84.2	-4.65***	67.9	81.0	-6.16***	72.0	84.0	-5.73***	78.7	85.4	-3.31***	63.0	74.4	-5.20***
Shopping (general merchandise)	60.2	56.8	1.21	56.9	51.5	2.31*	57.5	54.8	1.16	63.5	53.2	4.17***	43.4	37.0	2.82**
Sports (participant)	11.5	10.6	0.49	13.4	11.8	0.99	15.2	12.7	1.50	13.0	11.4	0.99	6.9	5.3	1.39
Sports (spectator)	8.7	4.6	2.59**	10.5	7.0	2.48*	8.6	5.2	2.58**	5.9	4.6	1.08	4.2	2.8	1.52
Visiting Anne of Green Gables Attractions	24.9	47.6	-8.80***	26.2	47.8	-10.23***	25.5	46.8	-9.98***	25.7	42.8	-7.60***	29.0	46.1	-8.03***
Visit National Parks	37.3	58.7	-7.61***	41.9	58.7	-7.28***	43.8	58.9	-6.36***	39.8	54.9	-6.07***	38.4	51.9	-6.01***
Visit Friends/Relatives	79.8	18.6	27.02***	87.9	19.5	42.91***	82.1	18.1	34.86***	84.3	19.9	34.46***	73.3	16.1	28.84***
Visiting Historical/Cultural Attractions	31.9	46.4	-5.28***	34.1	47.2	-5.84***	31.0	44.2	-5.86***	25.7	37.4	-5.21***	33.0	44.9	-5.42***

Notes:

1) VFR indicates visiting friends and relatives, whereas PLR indicates pleasure purpose travellers.

2) \* (travel expenditure) = average spending \$ per person per night; \*\* (travel activity) = % of participation

***Travel activity and trip purpose.*** According to the results of *t*-tests, significant differences between the trip purpose groups were found in many of travel activity variables over the years. The results are shown in Table 4. On the whole, it was found that pleasure travellers were more likely to be involved in diverse travel activities than VFR travellers. In detail, VFR travellers were more likely to engage in travel activities such as boating/canoeing/kayaking/sailing, going to deep sea or salt water fishing, playing golf, shopping (general merchandise), and participating in a sports event, including visiting friends or relatives, whereas pleasure travellers were more likely to involve in a variety of cultural, historical, and natural activities in PEI.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Historically, PEI has experienced high repeat visitation. Nonetheless, it was found that VFR's repeat visitors' ratio has been much higher than pleasure travellers over time. Although repeat visitors accounted for more than 45% of the total pleasure travellers, most of VFR travellers were repeat visitors (more than 75.3% of the total VFR over time). It implies that VFR is one of the most important markets in terms of attracting repeat visitors. Thus, tourism marketers need understand the unique differences of the VFR markets in keeping with their trip patterns and characteristics.

Looking at the results by accommodation types, VFR travellers were more likely to stay their friends or relatives' home, whereas pleasure travellers tended to stay in hotels/motels/resorts. Another finding is that cabins or cottages have been preferred by both VFR and pleasure travellers. Therefore, marketers or tour operators may need to consider cottage or cabin as a preferred accommodation product. Presumably, travellers' preferred accommodation type may change over time. Thus, marketers need to explore and monitor these changes.

VFR travellers' party size has been smaller than pleasure, but their trip duration has been longer. However, VFR travellers' average spending per person per night has been smaller than pleasure, perhaps due in part, to their preferred accommodation type (homes of friends and family). Tourism marketers must balance the objectives of increasing expenditures and improving overall visitation numbers in their marketing strategy. The VFR market represents high repeat visitation, yet lower expenditure or yield as compared to pleasure travellers. This is an important measure to manage. Tourism marketers must continuously monitor changes in spending patterns over time in order to generate incremental tourism dollars and to promote specific markets.

According to the results of travel activities, VFR travellers were more likely to enjoy specific activities such as boating/canoeing/kayaking/sailing, going to deep sea or salt water fishing, playing golf, shopping (general merchandise), and participating in a sports event, including visiting friends or relatives, whereas pleasure travellers were more likely to involve in diverse cultural, historical, and natural activities. Thus, travel market and travellers' behaviour research is needed to develop and promote specific activity-based products for specific travel markets.

In summary, this study is exploratory rather than explanatory, but it identified that the VFR market is important and valuable to Prince Edward Island although further in-depth research is needed (e.g., research on ways to promote to the VFR market from a pragmatic perspective). It provided an exploratory examination of trip characteristic variables between VFR and pleasure travellers and identified some significant differences between the two trip purpose groups using longitudinal data sets.

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