

Scenic Caves Nature Adventures most innovative tourist attraction in Ontario Tourism award recognizes unique new activities and adventures

Major investments in new attractions at Scenic Caves Nature Adventures are already paying off in increased visits -- and now the Tourism Federation of Ontario (TFO) has recognized the Town of Blue Mountains/Collingwood destination as the most innovative operator in Ontario.

The Tourism Innovation Award praises the new activities and endorses owner Rob Thorburn's drive to make Scenic Caves a four-season eco-adventure tourism destination. In the last year and a half, Scenic Caves has introduced such unique attractions as Ontario's longest suspension footbridge, a Nordic Ski Centre, and new this spring, a treetop canopy walk complete with breathtaking zip lines.

It's a great strategy. In a year when the industry was hit hard by West Nile Disease, the ongoing fallout from 9/11, SARS, air travel uncertainty, mad cow disease, the East Coast blackout, and the economy, Scenic Caves welcomed 25 percent more visitors, including a surge of traffic during the spring and fall -- traditionally quiet times.

Ten years ago, when Rob and Marg Thorburn purchased Scenic Caves, it was a venerable attraction in need of major resuscitation. It offered a self-guided tour of the Escarpment crevasses and historical native sites, but little more. Over the last decade, Thorburn has made many improvements, including landscaping the grounds and adding attractions for children. But he has always dreamed of making the most of the location's dramatic potential and tapping into the growing eco-tourism market.

"This property is a true gem," says Thorburn. "It has natural, geological and historical features you won't find anywhere else in the province. It has everything the outdoor tourist is looking for. By enhancing the activities, we're opening up a whole world of light adventure to those who want something a little more exciting and unique."

The first push came last year with the opening of a new Nordic Centre, which offers 16 kilometres of groomed trails through the rugged and beautiful Niagara Escarpment forest, complete with amazing views and a cozy chalet setting for skiers. Then, last spring, the first visitors braved the suspension footbridge, a 126-metre span which arcs over a forest valley and offers stunning views of Georgian Bay and the surrounding countryside.

And new this spring, Scenic Caves is introducing the Eco Adventure Tour, a guided hike through the forest canopy, which offers natural history, education, eco adventure and native history... as well as an opportunity to soar on zip lines like the hero of an action movie. Each of the activities complements the other, sharing resources and offering a rich, action-packed package for visitors.

Clearly, Thorburn is achieving his goal. In fact, Scenic Caves offers at least a dozen of the activities identified by the Canadian Tourism Commission's outdoor tourism strategy.

Thorburn accepted the award from Ontario Tourism Minister Jim Bradley at the TFO's second annual "Awards of Excellence", held recently at Casino Rama.

The TFO innovation award was one of only two awards of excellence presented to tourism industry leaders at the annual gala, and recognizes and promotes best practices in the industry. "In light of the events of the past few years, it's more important than ever for us to celebrate leaders within our industry," says Cheryl Paradowski, President of the Ontario Tourism Education Corporation, and Chair of the TFO Awards Committee. "These are leaders who keep thinking ahead, who keep moving forward, and who respond to challenges proactively and with creativity."

Scenic Caves is located in the Town of the Blue Mountains, at the top of Scenic Caves Road. This winding, picturesque route climbs the Niagara Escarpment just minutes from the town of Collingwood and the Village at Blue Mountain. It's about 20 minutes from Wasaga Beach, and less than two hours north of Toronto. For more information, visit www.scenicaves.com.