From part-time front-counter positions held when I was studying for my Bachelor of Arts degree in the early 2000s to positions with Destination Greater Victoria, Destination BC, Beattie Tartan and my current role in leadership with the not-for-profit Greater Victoria Harbour Authority, the tourism industry is where I have spent my entire 20-year career.

Tourism in BC is big business. In 2018, tourism generated $20.5 billion in revenue and had a direct contribution of $8.3 billion to BC's gross domestic product. In that same year, the industry employed 161,500 people and included more than 19,000 businesses, the majority of which are locally owned, small and medium enterprises. These numbers are staggering; the industry paced ahead of provincial economic growth for years. All of that came to a crashing halt in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic gained a foothold in BC and across the globe, putting an immediate stop to travel.

Enter Richard Porges, interim president and CEO of Destination BC, the province’s tourism marketing and development organization. While he stepped into the CEO role in late 2019, Porges has spent more than two decades with the organization. During his tenure with Destination BC, Porges helped to guide and shape the role the organization plays in both marketing the province and supporting industry. Before joining Destination BC, Porges served as a visiting and sessional lecturer in the economics, MBA and MPA programs at UVic.

I sat down with Porges via video call in mid-April 2021, seeking a deeper understanding of what the pandemic has meant for this vital economic engine for the province. I wanted to know how his academic and business experience helped him navigate his role as leader of Destination BC. We also discussed what he believes the future holds for tourism in the province and how he thinks we may come through this period stronger as a society and as an industry.
Weaving throughout our conversation was the question: Does tourism in BC have a future? 
Brian Cant: It's definitely been a year we never could have predicted. What were some of the biggest challenges in the last year for you and for Destination BC? 
Richard Porges: How do you manage and lead through what we have been through over the past year? We went from an environment where things were fairly predictable, and where you can plan ahead and put your plans into action, and changed to an environment where everything is fluid. At the beginning of the pandemic, when there was even more uncertainty and no one could predict how bad or how long it was going to last, I had to be agile and nimble and change my messaging, not only externally, but internally. I had to realize that I was telling people to do something one day that was completely different from what I had told them the day before.

Teamwork and collaboration are built around being able to walk down to someone's office for a chat or pulling a group into a meeting on the spot; we immediately shifted to everyone working at home. And not only were they all working at home, but everyone was coping with their personal circumstances brought on by the pandemic. They're trying to work, do home school with their kids and stay safe. So, how do you support both work getting done and the individual needs of your staff? Not everyone lives in a space conducive to a home office. It was challenging from an operational perspective; the way we operate changed overnight.

Our previous CEO departed in August 2020, and before that I was in a role where I could provide key strategic advice to her for consideration. But then there's a difference between being the one proposing and pushing advice to being the one to act on it. The position of CEO gives you enormous authority. Sometimes you're saying something to seek information or provoke thought and, when you're in the role of CEO, people take that more seriously and they think that's what you really want or mean. So, I had to learn to adapt my style to be more guarded and careful in what I was saying, especially during this time. It was finding this balance of being open to new ideas and pushing for those to happen, but being careful that when you do respond, people don't take that to be a direction to go off and do it.

BC: In those first few months from March to June 2020, what was your gut telling you about the strategic steps needed to get through this period of uncertainty? 
RP: I decided we needed to be realistic about what was happening. During those first few weeks there was a lot of denial in the industry and people were being overly optimistic. I went for the unvarnished truth. The sooner we were realistic about how bad this was, the sooner we would respond, and we did it and continue moving forward. Don't paper it over and don’t assume or hope it will disappear. We were very quick out of the gate to create worst-to-best-case scenarios about what could happen and plan against those, rather than hope for the best and try to adapt as things shifted. We didn't want to do that and find out we were wrong.

BC: What were some of the biggest challenges in the last year for the tourism industry as a whole? 
RP: It's been interesting. Not only does the industry face all the pressures we have encountered at Destination BC, but they've also faced increased financial pressures and uncertainty. A lot of not-for-profits and small operators don’t have financial reserves or the ability to go to lenders for financing, whereas large organizations do. The heart and soul of this industry is the small businesses, started by families and individuals and built over a lifetime. For them to see their business vanishing before their eyes is absolutely heartbreaking. I've stood by and watched people who I have worked with for more than 20 years lose their entire investment and have felt fairly helpless in that regard. Our staff have also built really close relationships with many of those individuals as we've worked collectively to promote BC and their businesses for years. It's tough.

BC: Tourism is collaborative, and I think it's very different from almost every other type of industry in that respect. Of course, we're still competitive in many ways, and it doesn’t matter if, for example, your hotel is full; you'll take somebody to a competitor and not just leave that person without any assistance. 
RP: It is a pretty amazing industry in terms of how people work together. It's also come a long way in the last 20 years. I think that is a great example. In what other business are you asking your customers to help your competitor? What is most important in tourism is a happy customer, and whether it is your bottom line or someone else’s is less important. In BC, so many of our partners realize they are marketing the destination and not their individual business. The collaboration is amazing to see.

BC: You're an expert in the research field, specifically tourism research. What was the recent research showing you about the industry in the province? 
RP: There have been no surprises in industry performance. The tourism industry is obviously in a very bad situation right now. In late May 2020, we projected a 65 per cent 70 per cent decrease in revenue for the year. Although the numbers aren’t in, I feel that this is where we will end up. What was different in our research than what has happened was the decline in employment. Government support, such as the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy, have been critical in preserving jobs and allowing employers to keep staff on. This is twofold; it shows that businesses overall care about the staff they have today, and it allows them to plan for the future, knowing they will need qualified staff in the rebound.

I’ve been surprised that we have seen fewer businesses than expected close. Despite that enormous decline in revenue, we've only seen 16 per cent of businesses close. I am encouraged that most businesses have survived this long. If we come out of this soon enough, we might not see the attrition that was expected or anticipated.

BC: Staying with research, what insights do you have about our recovery? 
RP: The industry has grown faster than the BC economy as a whole since 2011. We have a unique product to offer visitors. From thousands of years of culture to our environment, tourism in BC is well-placed to recover from this. We have continued to invest in having an even more compelling story to tell from a branding and marketing standpoint.

We have the right systems in place for the future. I'm sure we will have some permanent changes in place for travel. What those changes look like is yet to be determined. But that will not deter many people from travelling again and we as a province should be ready to welcome people back efficiently. There is also huge pent-up demand for people to want to travel. It is built into our DNA to want to travel and explore.

BC: What do you see as the greatest challenge and opportunity in the tourism industry in the post-COVID world? 
RP: I see mostly opportunities. The Province of BC has planned for our recovery with tourism-specific investment and destination development, which will set us up well for the decade ahead.

I have also heard from industry around the province that this is a time that the tourism sector needs to be more advocates for supporting tourism, sustainability and regeneration in our own province. That will be a legacy that helps improve BC’s destination and will make it more attractive in the future.

The biggest challenge I see is that, as a province, might forget about the difficulties faced over the past year and that we won’t continue to prepare for the next crisis. It might not be a pandemic, but there will be another crisis.

BC: You’ve had a remarkable career and I know you want to be a thoughtful, passionate person. What areas have you drawn upon from your career that helped you navigate this situation we're in? 
RP: One of the advantages of a long career is that you learn not to panic as much. I joined in 1999, I have worked through SARS, wildfires, the financial crisis and now this. Each of those major events and changes have given you perspective. Academic training combined with hands-on experience has also allowed me to test ideas, to look at cause and effect and to learn how to recognize what is transient or long-lasting and to see what is a trend versus a blip. Although I didn’t study human resources, I have been aligned with the work that is done in that field through teaching in the MBA program and seeing it applied in the workplace. I continue to come back to how critical it is to ensure you invest in your organizational culture.

BC: What would you have changed in the last year if you could go back? 
RP: It’s interesting; I don’t know if I would change a lot. Human nature makes us overly optimistic, but if anything, I would have listened to the scientists and what they were saying, especially during this time. When it came to the warnings about the second wave, I personally didn’t take those warnings as seriously as perhaps I should have; I was overly optimistic about our collective ability to avoid a second wave of COVID-19. The lesson for me is that there is deep expertise in every field, and to not let my own biases or wishful thinking lead me to disregard the perspectives and advice of experts.