



Indsights

A Window into the Indigenous Economy

Case Study

Gulf Island Seaplanes

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Gulf Island Seaplanes

Meet Alison



Meet Alison

Alison Evans is the owner of Gulf Island Seaplanes, located in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Alison runs the business with her partner Sean Evans. Alison is from Hagwilget First Nation, and she has always had a passion for mixing her Indigenous heritage with her business interest. Gulf Islands Seaplanes has allowed Alison to build a business while continuing to support other Indigenous businesses and communities.

Before starting Gulf Islands Seaplanes, Alison worked for several years as a legal assistant in Kamloops, British Columbia, before moving to Nanaimo and becoming a stay-at-home mom. Like most moms, her time was spent raising her children, transporting them to and from extracurricular activities, and running the family's household. Being the go-to mom at school for her children and other children in the community was extremely rewarding for Alison, but she always wanted more.

As her children grew, Alison began to think about what was next in her journey, and she began to think more about the idea of starting a business. Alison discovered earlier in life that she liked to make decisions — the perfect characteristic of a business owner. An opportunity arose when Sean was able to take over a local flying route from Gabriola Island to Vancouver. After thinking it over for a few days with her partner, Gulf Island Seaplanes was born.

The Inspiration



The Inspiration Behind Starting Gulf Island Seaplanes

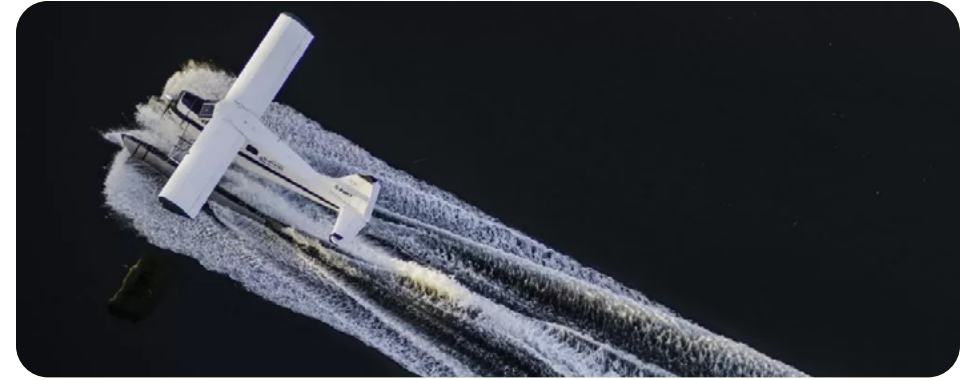
Sometimes in business and life, fate can play an unsuspecting role. Alison had been thinking of starting a business before Gulf Island Seaplanes, but for one reason or another, other business opportunities never struck a chord with Alison. As Alison put it:

“When the opportunity arose to possibly start a business, we did get close to it on a couple of different ideas that we had previous to Gulf Island Seaplanes, but in the long run, I decided not to do it, which I think was because this was meant to be our path. And when it arose, the choice was easy. And we were a bit terrified, but also excited.”

It turns out that this was the right decision for Alison, as Gulf Island Seaplanes has allowed her to continue to look to her own Indigenous identity and incorporate those teachings into her day-to-day business operations. It also allowed her to contribute to reconciliation and to help highlight positive narratives surrounding Indigenous businesses — both of which are extremely important.



Products and Services



Products and Services

Gulf Island Seaplanes is a local airline that operates out of the Nanaimo region of British Columbia, specifically on Gabriola Island. It offers local flights to the mainland airport in Vancouver and to the airport located within Coal Harbour in downtown Vancouver. It also flies to Hornby Island from Coal Harbour and conducts scenic tours around Coal Harbour for locals and tourists who wish to see the mountains and harbour from the sky.

Gulf Island Seaplanes is popular because of its charter options. Many customers need to land in remote locations or move crew members to hard-to-reach sites. Gulf Island Seaplanes fulfills those options. It has worked with government agencies, construction companies, engineering companies, and research firms. The opportunities are endless for her customers as her planes can land anywhere there is water, unlike traditional aircraft.

Of the services offered, customers love its scenic tours of the harbour, and, as a result, there are talks of expanding their tours

to include Indigenous cultural tours in and around the harbour. The Indigenous cultural tours will include an Elder narrating their flights while sharing stories of the surrounding Indigenous Peoples and cultures. For Alison, this is a wonderful opportunity to share knowledge through positive stories of the local Indigenous populations while contributing to the overall theme of reconciliation.

“I do believe that offering the cultural, scenic flights that we’re going to offer is reconciliation in action, sharing positive stories of resilience. And the people that were on this land, I think it’s uplifting and something that everyone in BC, Canada, and the world even needs to hear about and be part of. And hopefully, learn how incredible Indigenous people really are. Yes, there are a lot of negative stories out there, especially in the last couple of years. But I think that being part of the positive narrative that’s coming out is a huge part of why we’re doing it.”

Route Map



Challenges

Starting in the aviation industry can be very daunting as planes, fuel, and maintenance are not cheap. Working in aviation also requires a certain skill set and expertise that Alison did not have, but this was an opportunity for her to develop other skills that were crucial to the business. In the early days, she spent time bookkeeping and running the office.

For Alison, being an Indigenous woman in a male-dominated industry has been challenging. Alison credits her success to curiosity and a willingness to learn as much as she can about the industry. For her and Gulf Islands Seaplanes to be competitive within this industry, she felt it was important to be able to back her words and actions with industry knowledge.

Allison credits her willingness to be prepared as much as possible as a key characteristic that helped her overcome these challenges. Being prepared also gave her the confidence to continue to push forward.

For entrepreneurs — who often don't get to do things over again — doing it right the first time is extremely important.

“Fake it till you make it. Realistically, in almost everything I do, I feel so insecure beforehand, but I really prepare. Like I was saying before, I really try to do my best to think of all aspects of what might happen and be prepared. And so, when you do that, you may not do everything perfectly, but at least you can say you did your best.”

Operating a business that is reliant on visitors and tourists can be difficult to navigate during economic downturns. The global COVID-19

pandemic shut down borders, putting a stop to tourism. The aviation industry was hit hard, and businesses had to adapt and change their business models to survive. For Alison, this was an opportunity to think of new ideas and flight offerings that Gulf Island Seaplanes could offer. Out of this difficult time came the idea of offering new scenic tours for tourists when borders began to open.

Competitive Landscape

Seaplanes are synonymous with British Columbia. A short walk through the harbour in Vancouver and one can see seaplanes flying in and out regularly. Seaplanes are a great way to get around the province due to their flexibility when it comes to landing, particularly along the coast, where the terrain will not allow for runways and the traditional infrastructure needed to land airplanes. As a result, the seaplane industry within British Columbia is highly competitive.

To put it in perspective, in Canada, two large national airlines service Canada, with smaller airlines offering services in a regional capacity. A quick Google search for seaplane operators in British Columbia results in about half a dozen companies offering various flight options servicing the province and into the northwest region of the United States.

To remain competitive, providers will need to offer services and experiences that set them apart from the competition. Gulf Island Seaplanes was able to do this by offering flights connecting the underserved Gabriola Island to Vancouver International Airport and the Vancouver Harbour Flight Center. They have forged a partnership to offer flights to the Indigenous-owned Siwash Lake Wilderness Resort and will offer direct flights for customers staying at the luxury resort on

Challenges

the Caribou Sea (MyVanCity, 2022). Furthermore, Gulf Island Seaplanes is preparing to add new Indigenous cultural, scenic flights around Vancouver in which passengers can learn more about the Indigenous history of the area, stories of resilience, and culture (MyVanCity, 2022). Expanding the business and offering these new services was crucial for Gulf Island Seaplanes to separate itself from the competition:

“Flying from Vancouver Harbour positions us in a competitive market as it is a central and desirable location, which will open us up to further partnerships and connect us to more passengers” (MyVanCity, 2022).

Tourism

British Columbia is known for its beautiful mountains, lush national parks, and rugged coastline. Tourists from all over the world flock to British Columbia to ski, hike, and experience many of its exciting activities and cities. Tourism is vital to the British Columbian economy — in 2020, tourism was worth over \$7 billion and contributed close to \$730 million in provincial taxes (Ministry of Jobs, Economic Recovery and Innovation, 2022). There are over 19,000 tourism businesses that operate in the province and employ over 45,000 British Columbians (Ministry of Jobs, Economic Recovery and Innovation, 2022).

Gulf Island Seaplanes may not be your typical tourism business in that it does not survive solely on tourists and visitors. Still, like other tourist-friendly businesses, it is susceptible to the same struggles that can happen when visitors and customers are not traveling. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to global travel, and, to an extent, local and domestic travel were also impacted by local government restrictions. As a result, Gulf Island Seaplanes was forced to suspend its services for close to a year. As the pandemic subsides and travel

picks up, businesses need to look at ways that they can broaden their business or look at ways that they can change their business for the better.

As Alison puts it: “We took our time to refocus our purpose during the pandemic, and we are so proud to not only come out the other side of the pandemic with our business intact but expand our business further than ever before” (MyVanCity, 2022).

“We took our time to refocus our purpose during the pandemic, and we are so proud to not only come out the other side of the pandemic with our business intact but expand our business further than ever before”

- Alison Evans (MyVanCity, 2022)

Building the Business



Opportunities

For Alison and Gulf Island Seaplanes, an opportunity was created to offer an additional flight from Coal Harbour in downtown Vancouver to Hornby Island. Other airlines have flown this route for some time but often left their passengers in a precarious situation — they were forced to walk in ankle-deep water and through private properties to get to the road to connect to additional transportation options.

Alison saw this as an opportunity to reach out to a local business to seek their permission to use their dock. Using the dock allowed passengers to exit the plane and walk across the dock rather than through the water. This was a learning experience for Alison as it showed her that communication is important and that you just never know what may happen when you reach out to another company. As Alison put it, she “thought somebody had done it before, but apparently, nobody had.” A valuable lesson was learned:

“Just because those are big corporations doesn’t mean they’ve thought of everything. So, I think that for us, we learned a lot in that process and hopefully use it in the future for more expansion.”



Organizational Structure

A positive company culture is critical. Gulf Island Seaplanes operates in a way that removes the typical hierarchical structure found in most businesses. As Alison puts it:

“We try our best to have a level playing field for all employees, whether you’re a dock hand on the dock or Shawn and I in the office. We’re all willing to do any job that needs to be done. It isn’t the dock hand’s job to do anything that we wouldn’t do ourselves. And we really try to portray that ourselves so that everyone within our company also understands that they don’t get to be in charge of anything without working together”.

A more collaborative work environment has played a factor in Gulf Islands Seaplane’s success and, in doing so, has left those who work with Alison and Sean feeling as though they are part of a family rather than just another part of the business.

Indigenous Values and Culture

Indigenous Values and Culture

Alison's Indigenous heritage plays an important role in her business's day-to-day operations. Alison operates her business in such a way that she is proud of everything her business does. This attitude stems directly from Alison's roots and the Seven Generations — the decisions that are made today will result in a more sustainable and prosperous world for the next seven generations.

“So, you think of the seven generations behind you and the seven generations in front of you and making those generations proud and setting the stage for future generations to also be proud of what you've done.”

Alison credits her teachings and her heritage for a recent business decision that will have a direct impact on the current and future generations: carbon offsets. Gulf Island Seaplanes is becoming carbon neutral. The decision to pursue going carbon neutral can be traced back to the connection that Alison and other Indigenous Peoples hold to the environment.

The environment is extremely important to Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous businesses. Gulf Island Seaplanes wants to be an example and be at the forefront of respecting the importance of the environment within the aviation industry.



References

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Acknowledgements

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