

Executive Summary

The Industry Advisory session confirmed strong engagement across operators, councils and stakeholders and provided clear direction on the structural priorities required to strengthen the region's visitor economy.

Industry sentiment is steady but cautious. While visitation volumes remain solid in peak periods, operators are experiencing shortened booking windows, margin pressure and uneven midweek demand. The group agreed that the region must shift from being perceived primarily as a weekend day-trip destination to a connected, year-round stay destination.

Extending length of stay - particularly midweek - was identified as the single most important economic lever to improve yield, resilience and regional dispersal.

Participants also articulated a clear evolution in expectations of Tourism East. The organisation is increasingly viewed not only as a marketing body, but as a regional connectivity hub, advocate and facilitator - responsible for aligning industry, councils and state stakeholders; reducing structural friction; supporting collaboration; and strengthening access to data, distribution channels and funding opportunities.

High-alignment growth opportunities include trail connectivity, multi-day itineraries, night-time activation, targeted market diversification (including diaspora and emerging international segments), and improved digital integration and cross-selling capability. However, these opportunities are constrained by planning inconsistencies, funding inequities and fragmented systems, which require coordinated advocacy and governance reform.

The session reinforced the need for clear measurement of the Destination Management Plan's impact, including tracking length of stay, midweek uplift, trail usage, business sentiment and industry participation.

Overall, the advisory process demonstrates strong industry goodwill and readiness to collaborate. The strategic priority now is disciplined sequencing — focusing on yield, connectivity and structural enablers that will position the region for sustainable, year-round growth.

Key Findings

1 From Day-Trip to Stay Destination

The Opportunity

The region is still perceived as a weekend day-trip market. That perception is suppressing yield. Participants consistently pointed to:

- Short booking windows
- Weak midweek trade
- Limited nighttime activation
- Lack of anchor accommodation
- Collaboration between businesses, events and attractions

Growth Levers Identified

A. Destination-Level Accommodation

- Branded or high-profile hotel development (e.g., wellness hot spring model)
- More room stock to service weddings + international groups
- Accommodation that “signals” overnight worthiness

B. Multi-Day Itineraries

- Trail-based 3–4 night walking routes
- Arts and artisan trails
- Food-and-farm journeys
- Wellness retreats at multiple price points not just luxury
- Multi-night packages

C. Night-Time Economy

- Nocturnal wildlife walks
- Astronomy experiences
- After-dark garden openings
- Pop-up dining
- Cultural night events

Why This Matters

Longer stays increase:

- Spend per visitor
- Cross-business collaboration
- Regional dispersal
- Off-peak smoothing

If you do nothing else strategically over 3 years — extend length of stay.

2 Trail Connectivity & Nature-Based Product Development

The Opportunity

Trail infrastructure is viewed as “low hanging fruit” with high multiplier impact.

Strategic Potential

- Link existing trails into week-long itineraries
- Bundle trail use with accommodation + food stops
- Activate small-town cafés along routes
- Adding arts installations along trails
- Package guided nature / citizen science experiences

Upside

- Low capex compared to major attractions
- High dispersal benefit
- Strong alignment with wellness positioning
- Climate-adaptive tourism (if marketed correctly)

This aligns directly with the DMP priorities around environment, resilience and competitive experiences.

3 Market Diversification: Diaspora & Emerging International

This was one of the most commercially practical discussions.

The Opportunity

Untapped or under-targeted segments:

- Indian-Australian families
- Muslim-Australian families
- Chinese-Australian visitors
- Southeast Asian markets

- High-value independent US/UK travellers

The insight: many of these groups are already visiting free public sites — but not converting to paid product or overnight stays.

Growth Tactics Identified

- Culturally relevant food + itinerary packaging
- Targeted digital channels (WeChat, RedNote, diaspora platforms)
- Align with major Melbourne events (Australian Open etc.)
- Promote halal-friendly and family-friendly experiences
- Convert export product (wine, cherries, gin) into tourism journeys via QR

This is not about replacing the domestic market.

It's about layering new segments without cannibalising weekends.

4 Technology & Discoverability

Operators were clear: fragmentation is costing business.

The Opportunity

A. AI Discoverability

- AI-driven mapping tool (AEO vs traditional SEO)
- Real-time recommendation engines
- Consolidated operator database

B. Unified Booking & Cross-Selling Platform

- Cross-sell tours + accommodation at checkout
- Bundle events with tastings
- Centralised event calendar (widget/API model)
- Centralised place for accommodation, restaurants, transport, retail that events could link to rather than listing again on individual event sites (widget/API model)

C. QR-Driven Export-to-Tourism Linkages

- QR codes on wine/cherry/gin exports
- Convert global buyers into experiential visitors
- Storytelling beyond the product

This is a structural shift from passive listing to active conversion.

5 Events as an Economic Engine

The group sees events as a smoothing mechanism.

The Opportunity

- One meaningful event every weekend across shires
- Shoulder-season programming
- Township-level activation
- Collaborative multi-venue events
- Embed arts and culture into trails

The important nuance raised:

Grow midweek without weakening weekends.

Events must add incremental visitation — not just reshuffle.

6 Governance, Advocacy & Funding Leverage

The Opportunity

Tourism East can become:

- The connectivity hub
- The unified advocate
- The funding aggregator
- The data intelligence centre

Key structural opportunities:

- Harmonise planning approvals across councils
- Simplify POPE and event processes
- Revise tiered membership model (with clear value exchange)
- Review charges for banner poles / shared assets
- Capture case studies to guide new investment
- Advocate for regional funding access disparities
- Onboarding of new businesses with active outreach

Without governance simplification, product growth stalls.

7 Data & Measurement as a Strategic Lever

Operators want clarity on whether growth strategies are working.

The Opportunity

- Track length of stay changes
- Monitor booking lead times
- Trail usage analytics
- Spend tracking via mobile/credit card data
- Event ROI measurement
- Partnership uptake metrics

If you don't measure midweek uplift, you can't prove success.

Data strengthens:

- Grant applications
- Advocacy arguments
- Board confidence
- Industry buy-in

8 Brand & Narrative Expansion

One of the most subtle but powerful themes.

The brand needs to:

- Extend beyond "wine + day trip"
- Integrate Dandenong Ranges, Nillumbik, Cardinia
- Tell a people-nature-place story
- Move beyond historical fact recitals
- Embrace wellness + creativity + serenity

The opportunity isn't rebranding.
It's narrative deepening.

9 Visitor Servicing Reinvention

With limited traditional visitor centres, the group sees opportunity to:

- Develop digital-first visitor servicing
- Pop-up in person kiosks at events
- Embed event widgets across websites
- Encourage listing on ATDW more aggressively
- Train operators on digital integration

This is about meeting visitors where they are — not opening more centres.

The Big Strategic Pattern

Stop operating as a collection of great businesses.
Start operating as a connected destination ecosystem.

The highest-impact opportunities are:

1. Length of stay extension
2. Trail-based dispersal product
3. Night-time economy activation
4. Diaspora & international targeting
5. Unified booking + AI discoverability
6. Governance simplification + funding leverage

Everything else supports those six.