

FOCUS

OVER THE BORDER

The growth of tourism in Niagara Falls, Ont.

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On a sunny spring afternoon, Asian tourists climbed off a bus in the Fallsview District of Niagara Falls and made their way toward the iconic waterfalls, many with cameras in hand.

Those who didn't immediately head to a nearby overview were busy taking selfies near the Fallsview Casino.

Those 40 tourists are symbolic of the more than 14 million people a year who visit Niagara Falls, Ont. They come not only for the dramatic views but for a growing list of attractions.

City leaders have 20/20 vision when it comes to increasing tourism. They want to welcome 20 million people annually by 2020.

The impact of this economic engine is felt in Southern Ontario and across the Niagara River in Niagara Falls, N.Y. and Buffalo.

In the past two decades, tourism has grown to the point where it sustains the city year-round.

"Even in the winter, on some of the worst weather weekends, we are packed," said Wayne Thomson, chairman of Niagara Tourism.

A council member and the former mayor, he was a leading advocate of the city's coming of age as a regional tourism hub. The effort began in the mid-1990s when he led a community effort to land a gambling venue.

Casino Niagara opened in 1996 at the base of the Rainbow Bridge and was followed by Fallsview Casino in 2004. The casinos collectively attract nearly 10 million patrons each year and have drawn the attention of industry giants such as Caesars Entertainment Corp., Mohegan Sun Entertainment and Hard Rock Gate Entertainment Inc.

Those businesses are vying to take over the Niagara Falls casinos next summer from Ontario Lottery & Gaming Corp.

Attracting that level of international corporate interest was a pipe dream a few decades ago.

"It used to be that most of the workers got laid off just after Labor Day," Thomson said.

Now the tourism industry generates a \$2.2 billion economic impact.

In the last two decades, the number of hotel rooms increased nearly 280 percent from 5,000 to more than 14,000.

Occupancy runs between 63 percent and 68 percent and during the May-to-October period it jumps to more than 98 percent.

A growing list of attractions contributes to that.

Clifton Hill still is anchored by wax and novelty museums but the tourist hot spot has attracted international chains such as Rainforest Cafe and TGI Fridays.



BUSINESS FIRST

Pre-season indicators including advance hotel bookings have Niagara Tourism Chairman Wayne Thomson predicting a busy year for Niagara Falls, Ont.

► Developer Harry Oakes' HOCO Ltd. spent more than \$20 million in recent years to build such attractions as the Niagara Speedway, a go-cart-meets-roller coaster ride that will debut this summer.

► A \$132 million, 5,000-seat theater/entertainment complex is being developed in the Fallsview District that will connect directly with Fallsview Casino. The theater alone is expected to attract at least 1 million new visitors a year.

"It is getting easier to attract new investors and investment dollars," Thomson said. "It has been a long time in coming."

Other success stories include: ► Hornblower Niagara Cruises, now in its fifth season, attracted 2.5 million riders for boating excursions and extended the season – weather permitting – from early April until early December.

► The Scotiabank Convention Centre, which opened in April 2011, is booked more than 330 days a year and annually welcomes more than 1 million people.

Thomson said the development of new attractions will help Niagara Falls reach the goal of 20 million tourists, but so will a pair of provincial initiatives.

► In July, an Ontario-sanctioned marijuana dispensary will open in Niagara Falls.

Thomson said U.S. states including Colorado and California saw a spike in tourists when pot became legal.

"I expect the same thing to happen here," Thomson said.

► By 2025, or perhaps as soon as 2022, Ontario may make GO Train service available year-round between Niagara Falls and Toronto. The train

now runs between the two cities during peak summer months.

The change would make it easier for tourists to commute between Niagara Falls and Toronto while bypassing the busy Queen Elizabeth Way.

"The impact of that would be huge on many different levels," Thomson said. "Everything helps and matters."



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