

Smile, you're a tourist attraction

BY MARIO TONEGUZZI, CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 23, 2010

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Over the years, Calgary has built a solid reputation as a tourist destination for visitors from across Canada, the United States and the globe.

And it's really not surprising to see millions of visitors grace our city with their presence on an annual basis.

After all, we do have some significant attractions.

The mountains and Banff, of course, are a magnet.

Then there's the staples of the industry such as the Calgary Stampede, Heritage Park, Canada Olympic Park, the Calgary Tower, the Bow River, Stephen Avenue Walk. I could go on and on and on with a list of places which grab the attention of out-of-towners -- and keep bringing them back year after year.

We will always have those attractions to fuel the tourism industry here -- an industry that generates more than \$1 billion to the economy each year.

But an interesting plan is unfolding that will most definitely give that industry a boost. That boost is needed considering the tough challenges it faced in 2008 and 2009 with the economic downturn.

Tourism Calgary in partnership with the Calgary Hotel Association and other organizations is making a concerted effort to bring events to the city which will naturally bring in the tourists.

2009 was a good example of that with premier events like the Gemini Awards, the WorldSkills competition, the Tim Hortons Brier and the Grey Cup.

Not only do they add more visitors each year but they also generate more money into the economy and they also expose the city to a wide audience nationally and internationally.

I've met Randy Williams, the fairly new president and CEO of Tourism Calgary, a few times now and I'm impressed with his ambitious plans for the city. Those plans include these signature events.

The comic fantasy Kooza, a Cirque du Soleil production under the Big Top at Stampede Park, is an example of that. So too is the annual general meeting next March of the Inter-American Development Bank which will have perhaps up to 5,000 movers and shakers in our city.

It's these types of events that create an urgency to travel to a destination. That's what Cirque and the IDB annual meeting and sporting and entertainment events do.

Kooza is the first major event promoted through a partnership between Tourism Calgary and the Calgary Hotel Association's Destination Marketing Fund that seeks out big-time attractions and events to market regionally and nationally.

Promotion and ticket packages are being offered through visitcalgary.com.

And Williams tells me this is where the focus is going to be in the next few years.

In Tourism Calgary's annual report for 2009, Williams called 2008 and 2009 "extremely challenging" with 2010 a year of rebuilding and 2011 and 2012 a time of "recovery and real growth."

"Our reputation, and our future, will be built on the principles of collaboration and partnerships," he says.

There is one other tourist attraction that is often mentioned by people when they're here -- the people of Calgary.

We're the best ambassadors for the city.

It's important that we treat visitors with the western hospitality we have come to be recognized for on an international scale.

That often is a main reason tourists will keep coming back to the city -- or not.

Mario Toneguzzi appears regularly in Neighbours

mtoneguzzi@theherald.canwest.com

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