POINT OF VIEW

Atlantic Canada is a far cry from Toronto, New York and London. Meeting and convention planners explain why that’s a good thing.

By: Sandra Phinney

Okay. So Atlantic Canada doesn’t have mega conference venues like the Jacob K. Javitz Centre in New York, where thousands of people can gather for meetings and conferences. It matters not. What we do have in this part of the world is chutzpah, along with location, location, location.
Patricia Donnelly heads the marketing and communication team at the Fredericton Convention Centre. She says, “A lot of it has to do with hospitality. But Maritime hospitality is much more than a word. It’s a feeling. We pride ourselves on providing unforgettable memories and experiences.”

Meeting planners usually alternate their national meetings east-central-west. Donnelly says, “Atlantic Canada has a reputation for being friendly, welcoming, and for hosting fun meetings with great food and entertainment. Groups are never happier than when the meeting is scheduled in the east.”

She loves to encourage people to come east in general, and to Fredericton in particular. Donnelly says, “This city is perfect for a 300-600 person conference. It has all the advantages of a large city, including advanced technology, along with the convenience of a small city.”

Another plus is a unique sales partnership called Rendez Vous Fredericton. Led by Fredericton Tourism, key meeting and accommodation partners make a point of staying informed of each others’ properties. Their motto is: “A call to one of us is a call to all of us.” Members actually pass leads to their competition, when it’s the best option for everyone concerned.

Donnelly points out a perk specific to delegates: “They have exclusivity in our cities; they are noticed by front line staff; they don’t get lost like they do in bigger cities. And relationship-building opportunities amongst the attendees are ripe for the taking.”

Meeting and conference venues in Atlantic Canada are all situated in

Plan ahead: schedule your conference to coincide with an event, such as Halifax’s annual Jazz Festival, or one of the big name talents who regularly take center stage at Mile One Centre in St. John’s. Or head to Moncton’s Capitol Theatre, where choices range from enjoying live theatre to dining on stage. Photos (l-r) courtesy of Destination Halifax, Destination St. John’s and Moncton Tourism and Culture.

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attractive settings replete with lots of trees, parks, and water. There is precious little noise pollution, no smog, and traffic congestions are rare. With decent venues and a plethora of cultural attractions laced with authentic experiences – it’s easy to see why conference planners love to head east.

Destination Halifax’s Andrea Young describes Halifax as an urban resort. “This is where the boardroom meets the boardwalk. And we’re closer than you think – only 1.45 hours to Boston and New York; 2.25 hours to Chicago; 2.5 hours for Toronto and six hours to London.”

A big bonus from Young’s point of view is the proximity of raw nature that’s just a step away from city centre. “Within 20 minutes, people can be strolling beaches, surfing pristine waters, or go tidal bore rafting on the world's highest tides.”

Destination Halifax confirms 125 to 150 new group bookings annually. Business is brisk – and growing. The origin of business (as opposed to origin of individual attendees) is 75 per cent domestic, 25 per cent non-domestic.

Hail Halifax

It’s not uncommon for Andrea Young and her team at Destination Halifax to receive comments like this:

“Another great conference in Halifax. Love the east coast hospitality and you can’t top the friendliness in the Maritimes.” Justice Canada

“This was our most successful conference yet. Although the weather didn’t cooperate, everyone commented on how well executed everything was and how welcoming and friendly people were.” Audi Canada National Parts and Service Conference.

But not all conferences are held in the provincial capitals. White Point Beach Resort in Liverpool, N.S. is open for business year round. White Point’s marketing manager, Donna Hatt, says, “With the oceanside setting and its influences, people take time here to smell the salt air, and listen to the surf. They relax, rejuvenate, and become more productive and efficient. Yet the pace is tide-like — rolling gently in and out.”

Hatt adds that it’s all about reconnecting and giving yourself permission to ‘be’ with your team, play with your team, connect with your team, whether that’s at a roundtable discussion or milling around a campfire on the beach.

Recently, conference planners made a special request. Could they have a casual yet savoury dining experience that would facilitate mingling? Easy peasy request for the White Point team. They produced “Tastes of the UNESCO Biosphere reserve.” Picture this: fresh Atlantic lobster tails grilled on the BBQ, Eel Lake Oysters on the half shell, Mersey Point Solomon Gundy and smoked salmon, Digby Scallops wrapped in dulse, and served with a selection of Annapolis Highland Vineyard Wines. Hatt says, “As the sun set and the surf crashed on shore, delegates sipped, savoured, connected, and enjoyed dinner al fresco.”
Rod Cunningham (principal of management consulting firm, MacKellar Cunningham & Associates Ltd.) says that although data for the meetings and convention market in Atlantic Canada is not easy to measure (because it’s not recorded consistently, and even basic definitions such as how large a meeting must be to qualify often differ by location and hotel property), one way to arrive at a general estimate is to look at overall room sales and apply more-or-less standard ratios.

“For example, last year (2012) almost exactly 6 million hotel/motel/resort rooms were sold in the four Atlantic provinces,” Cunningham says. Of this total, 56 per cent – or 3,396,000 rooms – were sold in the six largest cities: Halifax, Fredericton, Moncton, Saint John, St. John’s and Charlottetown.

“The meetings and convention sector typically accounts for 15 to 20 per cent of city room sales. Applying a mid-way ratio of 17.5 per cent would result in approximately 594,000 meeting and convention rooms sold in the six cities last year,” he adds.

The Fredericton Convention Center’s recent economic impact report found meetings and conventions generated $317 in direct spending per room sold. (This includes on-site sales and an expenditure component for local delegates). By applying this average to total room sales, the result is approximately $190 million that’s being spent in these six cities.

“If you add meetings and conventions that are held in resort areas and smaller cities, the total impact of the sector (in Atlantic Canada) should safely reach – or exceed – the $250-million mark.”
Rhonda Hutton nods. To her, it’s all about the experience. She loves to quote Newfoundland’s Department of Tourism’s answer to why some people want to come to the ‘Edge of the Earth.’

“There are hundreds of reasons, but if we could boil it down to just one, it might be this: you might never find another place that makes you feel at the same time … lost and found. It’s the place where things just happen, where the unexpected is the norm and is just slightly off kilter with the rest of the world.”

That might help explain why 50-60 per cent of the delegates who attended one of the 100 conferences in St. John’s last year extended their stay in the province – and brought extra people. Hutton tucks in, “This could be a bucket list syndrome, and we’re fine with that!”

The number of conferences held in St. John’s is expected to soar as soon as the much-anticipated expansion of the St. John’s Convention Centre is completed. “There’s pent-up demand by national and international organizations to hold their conventions here,” she adds. “We just need to be able to increase our capacity.”

When Michael Matthews (executive director, Meetings & Conventions Prince Edward Island, MCPEI) was asked to define in three words what makes Atlantic Canada a dramatically different destination from other places in North America, he replied, “Access. Access. Access! For example, from shaking hands with the Lt. Governor to the Minister of Tourism, or making special arrangements at the Airport – we can make things happen.”

With the recent opening of P.E.I.’s new convention centre on the waterfront, the meetings and convention slice of the tourism pie just got a whole lot sweeter. Already, the East Coast Music Awards (ECMAs) and delegates from the Transportation Association of Canada each are slotted in for 1,000 members in 2014 and 2015 respectively – to mention just a couple of bookings.

Move over, Jacob K. Javitz Centre. Atlantic Canada doesn’t have your size, but she has the goods!

Fond farewell

Michael Matthews of Meetings & Conventions Prince Edward Island says he loves hosting FAM tours because the feedback is always positive. Here are some excerpts from a recent letter from Erin Benjamin, executive director for the Canadian Arts Presenting Association:

“I look forward to our relationship with MCPEI and the other partners and members who make PEI such a wonderful province – and place to do business.

“I have my cow chips, my Anne hat, my lobster USB, a camera full of incredible pictures, sand still between my toes and many new friendships.

“It’s not often thank-you letters I write from my office end with a sentence like that! It was a privilege to participate and it’s going to be a joy to plan our return.”