

Dukes up

At a time when “everything else is feeling kind of dour,” Cathy Duke says tourism is the bright light of the St. John’s economy.

“Look, people are anxious to come here and spend their money. We need to capitalize on that ... In fact, the timing couldn’t be better.”

As CEO of Destination St. John’s, Duke is in a position to know — and to do something about it. “Corporate business is down,” she begins. “Hotels, restaurants feel it. Oil prices have dropped, the provincial government has cut back. And the St. John’s city budget ...” She shakes her head.

“But our industry has really matured in the last 15 or 20 years,” she says. “Tourism operators are educated about what customers want. They don’t want to do a bus tour, jump out and take a photo ... They don’t want to go to a museum and read a poster or plaque.

“They want to go out on a hike and have a boil-up. They need someone to take them. They want to go sea kayaking or go out on a boat and see whales and icebergs, but they also want to participate, in a kitchen party or what have you. Operators are creating those experiences. We’ve got great hotels, boutiques, restaurants ...”

Duke embraces her role as salesperson for St. John’s, and the province. She talks quickly, and with enthusiasm; she loves the city and sees potential around every corner.

Duke and the Destination St. John’s team submit proposals for some 175 conferences, meetings, and sports events every year; the city hosts about 100 events annually. Some are major — like the three “big wins” of 2015: the Tim Hortons Brier (2017); a conference of 500 members of the Professional Convention Management Association (fall 2016); and the Canadian

Society of Association Executives (fall 2017). “And when they come and experience the city we hope it’s really going to take off,” Duke says with glee.

They’ll also experience the new, twice-as-big, fully connected St. John’s Convention Centre, which officially opened in June. Duke praises the new centre, but knows that a building isn’t what’s going to bring traffic to the island. “We have to have the convention centre, but if it wasn’t in St. John’s, it wouldn’t give us an advantage ... We’ve been really successful because people want to come to Newfoundland.”

And fortunately, Duke says, St. John’s has made great strides as a host city. “I always need to see the challenge ahead of me. When I came to Destination St. John’s [in 2011] I could see what needed to be done in terms of building up the marketing team and getting ready for the new convention centre.”

Her next challenge? Attracting fresh blood: “Everywhere in Canada is depending on Canadian visitors; we’re all after the same market.” She’s set her sights on Ireland and the U.K. For the first time, in 2016 St. John’s has three regular direct flights to Europe, from May through October. “That direct access is crucial. Last year, we hosted 17 meeting planners from London, and have several requests for proposals out of that. We need to make sure those flights stay in St. John’s.”

Duke mentions one more personal goal: “I really hope that as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians we come to believe that tourism is a big piece of our future. It’s not just a little industry where students work for the summer ... These are real jobs, they’re important, and exciting, and well-educated people are needed.”



Social Start

Cathy Duke, the CEO of Destination St. John’s, started her career as a social worker. But she left the field after two years: “I wasn’t able to leave work at work. It really took over my life — it was very stressful. I didn’t know what to do.” She settled on getting an MBA.



Townie Teen

Duke spent her earliest years in Fox Harbour, a small town on Placentia Bay; her dad worked at the base in Argentina. She moved to St. John’s at 10 and “almost” considers herself a Townie.

Giving back

“Dad always encouraged us to give back. And with every job opportunity I had to look at it and think, am I still contributing?”

