



KUDOS TO KINGSTON

BY DONNA CARTER

Ontario's oldest city blends a rich historic past with modern bells and whistles for memorable meetings.

With the famous Thousand Islands on its doorstep, Kingston, Ont., is home to one of Canada's most beautiful natural assets, but local meeting partners are quick to point out the city is not a one-trick pony. "For years, we focused on selling the Islands, when we really had a lot more to sell," says Erin Cookman, sales director for Four Points by Sheraton, one of the town's premier meeting hotels. "While recognizing the significance of the islands, we realized our location in the middle of three major centres was of great importance to our clients and therefore to Kingston's marketing strategy." Notwithstanding the city's vibrant waterfront setting at the confluence of Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River and the Rideau Canal waterway, Kingston's bigger picture includes an array of accommodations, engaging off-site venues and a host of entertainment options.

GOOD VALUE

"There's no better value for meetings and conferences than Kingston," says Venicio Rebelo, general manager of the Ambassador Conference Resort.

Strategically situated halfway between Toronto and Montreal, this historic city that was the first capital of 19th century Canada and home to the country's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, has come a long way from its pioneer beginnings, when streets were mud-packed roads lined with hastily constructed wooden buildings. Today, Kingston is arguably one of the handsomest towns in the country, punctuated by architecturally splendid limestone buildings (hence its nickname, "the limestone city") together with a selection of contemporary hotels, scores of restaurants, theatres, art galleries, vintage trolley tours, 21 world-class museums and a delightful waterfront bustling in summer

with tour boats offering scenic Thousand Islands cruises. "We're a unique destination in the province, with an eclectic blend of choices and a phenomenal historic heritage. We have big-city amenities and service without the big-city bustle and cost," says Rob Carnegie, tourism marketing director for the Kingston Economic Development Corporation (KEDCO), a body whose mandate includes offering comprehensive meeting support services. Moreover, he says access to the city is good, with eight Air Canada flights a day from Toronto as well as VIA Rail service.

ACCOMMODATING SPACES

Kingston has more than 2,000 guestrooms, but the number of hotels equipped to host meetings pigeonholes the city as a mid-tier destination best able to accommodate groups up to 250. Downtown major hotels include the Four Points by



Fort Henry



Sheraton (a block from the waterfront) featuring 171 rooms and 14,000 sq. ft. of meeting space together with the harbour-side 126-room Radisson and the 197-room Holiday Inn. Both the Radisson and Holiday Inn also offer substantial meeting space, and all three of these downtown hotels feature grand ballrooms for gala dinners and special events.

Groups on a limited budget or whose programmes are more suited to an academic environment may find Queens University a good fit. Just minutes from city centre, Canada's oldest degree-granting institution has a conference/hospitality division that, in summer, offers extensive residence-style accommodations together with ample state-of-the-art meeting space, lecture halls and on-site dining. Likewise, the city's St. Lawrence College features 247 affordable dormitory-type rooms, a lecture theatre seating 175, a variety of meeting rooms, catering facilities and on-site event-management services.

Moving away from downtown, the most popular choice is the 251-room Ambassador Conference Resort, on the edge of the city, where millions of dollars have been spent turning the property into one of Kingston's finest upscale hotels. "For groups who have a tight agenda and need

a facility that can host all their meeting needs under one roof, this is the place to be," says Erin Finucan, the Ambassador's senior sales manager. "With 22,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and a variety of top-of-the-line rooms for special events, the resort affords groups the flexibility of multiple venue options, from executive boardrooms to the Ambassador ballroom, ensuring each conference or meeting can choose what best fits their needs," she says.

"Although Kingston is best positioned to host small-to-medium-size meetings and conferences, numbers can be increased for groups willing to have delegates lodged in more than one hotel," says Carnegie.

HISTORIC GEMS

As an off-site venue, nothing fits better with Kingston's history than Fort Henry, a huge 19th century limestone citadel that sits on a hill overlooking the city. First built by the British during the War of 1812 to guard the harbour against American attack, this National Historic Site is frequently used for programmes ranging from traditional barracks banquets to casual barbecues under the stars. Dining at the fort falls under the stewardship of on-site caterer Jessup Food and Heritage owner Paul Fortier, whose reputation for

both modern and re-created cuisine from the 1800s is legendary. A lunch or dinner event can include an historic tour of the site, with costumed interpreters, a fife and drum exhibition and dining in the officers' mess complete with soldier servants dressed in replica uniforms, followed by a giant fireworks display. To enhance a fort event, a local costume rental company can provide groups with period attire consistent with the dress that would have been worn during the 1800s.

"We give people something well beyond a good meal," says Fortier, "and before piping them into the dinner hall, we sometimes start an event off with what we call a 'spirits' tour." For this special introduction, guests are taken to stations around the fort to sample the same liquid spirits that would have been drunk by 19th century soldiers such as grog, tots of rum and British India pale ale. "People really have fun with the spirits tour and the whole dinner experience; no matter how conservative they are, they typically loosen up and let their hair down," he says. An officers' mess dinner can accommodate up to 250 and an outdoor tented event in the parade square can seat up to 2,000.

Another of the city's most impressive landmarks is the historic, 700-seat Grand



Harbour and City Hall



The patio at
Chez Piggy Restaurant

Theatre, Kingston's premier performing arts and culture venue. Built in 1879, this elegant grand dame of theatres is nearing the end of a multi-million-dollar renovation project slated for completion in March, 2008. Over its history, famous artists such as Harry Houdini, Al Jolson, Oscar Wilde and Sarah Bernhardt have performed on the Grand's stage. Today, the theatre presents a roster of high-profile entertainers performing dance, drama, comedy and music. "Planners who really want to wow delegates will arrange a night at the Grand," says Carnegie.

TEAM-BUILDING

Among the city's often-used team-building options is The Boiler Room climbing gym, an indoor rock-climbing facility featuring more than 40 different 30-ft.-high scaling walls plus a 100-ft. chimney ranked the highest indoor climb in Canada. "When we get participants out of their suits, their corporate roles fall away and they become authentic with each other," says Boiler Room owner Catherine Wills. She says the strategy and team dynamics of climbing is easily transposed to a business environment. The philosophy behind this approach derives from Plato, who said, "we learn more about

each other in an hour of play than in a year of conversations." The Boiler Room can offer a variety of programmes specifically tailored to issues such as team development, conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving. Wills says the ideal size for a three-hour corporate session is between 15 and 40 delegates.

Kingston's harbour location makes it a natural for water-based team building, a niche filled by Cirrus Management

Training and Sailing Inc. The company offers one- to five-day programmes aboard a 44-ft. sail-training vessel called Rainbow Quest. With participants working together as a sail team, this is an experiential programme that can focus on issues such as meeting corporate challenges and developing a sense of cooperation. Company owner and specialist in leadership training and team building, Robert Boucher, tailors programmes to a company's specific objectives.

WHAT'S NEW

The city's biggest news is a (yet to be named) \$46-million sports and entertainment centre scheduled to open in February, 2008. "This facility will really add a new weapon in our tool kit," says Rebelo. "It will be a selling feature that will help us attract people we've never been able to get in the past." The 5,000-seat, multi-use complex will host hockey and other ice-related events as well as providing a venue for big-name entertainment. In addition, the building will house four meeting rooms, restaurants and a sports café. ■

— Donna Carter is a Cobourg, Ont.-based freelance writer.

ALL ABOARD

A lunch or dinner cruise aboard one of three large vessels owned by **1000 Islands Cruises** is a frequently requested group function, says Krista Doyle, project co-ordinator with Kingston-based Events & Management Plus Inc. The cruise fleet includes a 300-passenger vintage paddle wheeler, a 150-passenger river steamer and a modern, 180-passenger, glass-domed catamaran. All three can be booked for exclusive-use events such as scenic harbour excursions or sunset dinner cruises, during which delegates are treated to a memorable journey among the gorgeous Thousand Islands. For instance, on board the catamaran, a group can enjoy a gourmet, three-course dinner together with music, entertainment and a commentary about historical and important sites throughout the cruise.

For a programme option that is less of a water journey and more of a dining experience, visit Wolfe Island (largest of the Thousand Islands) for a special lunch or dinner at the historic **General Wolfe Restaurant and Hotel**. Delegates are bused from their hotel to Kingston harbour's car ferry for the 20-minute ride to the island. Established in 1860, the General Wolfe building has only nine guestrooms. Consequently, the property's major focus is its 130-seat fine-dining restaurant dedicated to food preparation following Old World traditions. "We specialize in French cuisine and there's nothing else like us in the area," says owner Eliska Ismail. "We welcome groups for exclusive use of our dining room and, of course, our striking water views are free."