

## MANITOBA

# New attractions lift capital up a peg or two

With the opening of a national museum, Nordic-inspired retreat and Arctic exhibit, Winnipeg is warming up as a tourist destination

## MARK Sissons WINNIPEG

We've all heard the jokes about Wintereps, the climatologically and geographically challenged heart of Canada, the classic Prairie town that many Canadians would rather be from than in. I'm a case in point: I spent much of my youth in the Peg and left 30 years ago.

The city has taken a fresh beating lately, with *Maclean's* magazine dubbing it the country's most racist city, citing the chronic poverty and discrimination faced by its large First Nations population. Exaggerated or not, similar condemnation could apply to many Canadian communities facing hard historic truths.

With these thoughts in mind, I've come back to my old hometown to take a fresh look and explore a more positive notion—that Manitoba's capital is on its way to becoming a bona fide tourist destination with some special attractions.

## Urban Zentuary

Unless they're ice fishing, snowmobiling or cross-country skiing, many Winnipeggers tend to head indoors to unwind and re-energize during the colder months. But with the January opening of the Therma Spa in \$15-million, 50,000-square-foot, Nordic-inspired haven nestled in wooded parkland, they can play outdoors without fear of frostbite.

It's a detoxifying experience influenced by Scandinavian techniques based on thermotherapy—alternating hot (saunas, hot tubs) and cold (frigid pools) with rest (endorphin-releasing nap rooms) and massage options.

"Being here feels like you're miles away from the city in the heart of nature," says general manager Frederick Jenni as we tour the complex of Nordic baths and waterfalls, a steam bath, a cedar-scented Finnish sauna and sumptuous relaxation areas.

We're just a 20-minute drive from the city centre, adjacent to the Crescent Drive Golf Course. Jenni is right—it feels as if I've stumbled into a Shangri-la hidden in the boreal forests of northern Sweden. And it's one that offers a full menu of luxury body treatments and a fine-dining restaurant.

## Bears blast

Twisting, twirling, diving and



Assiniboine Park Zoo's Journey to Churchill features several rescued polar bears. ASSINIBOINE PARK ZOO



The Canadian Museum for Human Rights is the first national museum built outside of the Ottawa region. JOHN WOODS/THE CANADIAN PRESS

wrestling above my head, two polar bears play in a Plexiglas under-driver tunnel known as the Sea Ice Passage, the hit attraction in Assiniboine Park Zoo's Journey to Churchill exhibit, which opened last summer.

Rescued from the shores of Hudson's Bay, Storm and Hudson, along with four other bears, now reside in the most comprehensive northern species exhibit of its kind in the world, along with wolves, Arctic fox, muskoxen and other wildlife.

"We see this as the perfect fit for anyone heading to Churchill (to see polar bears). They can come here to get educated first," says Kevin Hunter, the zoo's director of marketing, as he shows me around the exhibit, which includes the International Polar Bear Conservation Centre.

At the visitor interpretive centre—packed with interactive displays, educational games and video interviews with polar bear researchers and conservation managers—Hunter explains that Journey to Churchill helps the zoo actively contribute to its goal of environmental and wildlife education, research and conservation.

The exhibit's most recent polar bear arrivals, sibling cubs Blizard and Star, were found orphaned on the tundra. "Their mother was nowhere to be seen, a wolf pack was in the area, and there was absolutely no hope for these cubs' survival," Hunter recalls.

"So we sent our vet to Churchill to assess the bears, then decided to bring them here. We would never remove a viable polar bear

from the wild," he adds.

## The rights stuff

Winnipeg's other major new tourist attraction is the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the first national museum built outside the Ottawa region. Controversial since its inception, as much for what was left out as for what is addressed, this hulking mass of glass, concrete, stone and steel was designed by American architect Antoine Predock.

"Our galleries aren't set up on the basis of particular ethnic groups, or even different human rights issues or categories," explains Maureen Fitzhenry, the museum's media relations manager, as we ascend one of the back-lit alabaster ramps that connect the various galleries.

"Instead, they explore educational themes about human rights itself as a concept and an aspiration, which makes us unique in the world."

Intended to represent "a journey from darkness to light," this kilometre-long pathway reaches its apex in the museum's 100-metre-high glass pinnacle, named the Ziggy Asper Tower of Hope after the late Manitoba entrepreneur, politician and philanthropist who first came up with the idea of a museum dedicated to human rights education.

The 10 permanent galleries are filled with interactive digital installations, video clips, displays and artifacts that attempt to humanize often-abstruse concepts via innovative storytelling techniques.

"We're not a collection of all the human rights stories of Canada or the world that are worthy of telling," says Fitzhenry as we explore the Turning Points for Humanity gallery, where large monitors depict the contribution and power of grassroots movements and social activism. "We are using examples to support the themes, not choosing examples with underlying themes."

The material, which opened last September, is fascinating and often moving, but can be overwhelming. To fully absorb all it has to offer, it deserves multiple visits.

The writer was a guest of Tourism Winnipeg; it did not review or approve this article.

## IF YOU GO

## NEW ATTRACTIONS

Therma Spa offers an all-day thermal experience, with access to baths, saunas and relaxation areas, starting at \$45. Hour-long à la carte massage therapy and body treatments start at \$95. No reservations required. Its restaurant serves light fare, as well as full meals such as seared bison and sweet-brined bison rib-eye. Open daily, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. (775 Crescent Dr., [therma.ca](http://therma.ca))

At Assiniboine Park Zoo, explore Journey to Churchill, the most comprehensive northern species exhibit of its kind in the world. Adult admission, \$18.50; children 3 to 12, \$10. Open daily, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. ([assiniboineparkzoo.ca](http://assiniboineparkzoo.ca))

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, located near the Forks in the heart of the city's historic core, is open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (to 8 p.m. on Wednesdays). Adult admission, \$15; families \$42. ([humanrights.ca](http://humanrights.ca))

## MORE TO DO

If you loved *The Da Vinci Code*, don't miss Don Finkbeiner's Hermetic Code Tour, for \$29.95, you spend two hours exploring the Freemason symbols and secret codes hidden in the architecture of the Manitoba Legislature. ([hermlandtravel.ca](http://hermlandtravel.ca))

More history can be had at the Forks, Winnipeg's central meeting place, where people have gathered to trade for more than 6,000 years; it's packed with markets, museums, theatres, dining and shopping. ([theforks.com](http://theforks.com))

The Winnipeg Art Gallery showcases pieces from the world's largest collection of contemporary Inuit art. Open Tuesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. (to 9 p.m. on Friday). Adult admission, \$12; students, \$8. (300 Memorial Blvd., [wag.ca](http://wag.ca))

## WHERE TO EAT

In the heart of the Exchange District, the award-winning Deser—à la mode offers gourmet dishes such as smoked lamb ragout, pork belly and venison. (85 Princess St., [decranid.com](http://decranid.com))

## WHERE TO STAY

Winnipeg's newest boutique lodging, the minimalist Merc Hotel, is located on the riverfront in Stephen Juba Park, an easy walk from the Exchange District. King rooms start at \$149 a night. (333 Waterfront Dr., [merchotel.com](http://merchotel.com))

Mark Sissons

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