



Bring on the cruise ships

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COMMENTARY

Amid the many signs that spring has arrived, the one that gives me the biggest lift is the sight of the season's first cruise ship.

What began 35 years ago as an innovative way to bolster our tourism sector has turned into an annual commercial windfall for the city and our surrounding communities. This year alone, 78 ships are scheduled to visit, bringing more than 190,000 passengers and 75,000 crew.

That's more than a quarter of the population of our entire province, and these visitors bring an estimated \$68 million to the economies of the Saint John region and southern New Brunswick communities each year.

That figure represents only the direct economic impact, including spending by cruise lines, passengers, and crew in the Bay of Fundy region and jobs for New Brunswickers. Those jobs include tour companies, transportation and port workers, food and beverage workers, musicians and employees in the retail sector.

To see the indirect impact, one only needs to drive around and look at the transformation that has taken place in Saint John and surrounding communities.

When the cruise industry began, Saint John's historic waterfront was littered with vacant commercial and industrial properties. Today, the city's core is bustling with boutique shopping and a trendy bar and restaurant sector whose nearest rival is in Portland, Maine.

Disused grain elevators have been replaced with condominiums, and rusty sheds with two gleaming international cruise ship terminals. The upper stories of historic buildings have been converted into apartments and lofts. And because the uptown is thriving again, Saint John has become the place to be.

Surrounding communities have experienced similar growth and renewal, in part, thanks to the tens of thousands of cruise ship passengers who visit each year.

In Saint Andrews, increasing cruise traffic has helped offset the decline in car tourism as the U.S. and Canada implemented passport controls at the border. In St. Martins, it has led to a tripling in the number of seaside restaurants and cottages, a revitalized harbour, and the

province's first new covered bridge in 100 years – a bridge built taller and double wide to accommodate cruise ship buses.

The cruise ships have helped increase tourism to Saint John from elsewhere in New Brunswick as well, as residents flock to see Saint John Harbour filled with these majestic floating hotels.

This summer, there will be 14 double ship days and five triple ship days, each one calculated to draw thousands of New Brunswick tourists to Saint John in addition to our international visitors. The wave of cruise-related domestic tourism has fuelled a series of events and developments, from the annual Area 506 festival to a Waterfront Container Village of retail shops, performance space, food trucks, public art and pop-up activities that welcomes 500,000 visitors a year.

The length of the cruise ship season has grown in tandem with the scope and economic importance of the industry. This year's season began on May 7 and will end Nov. 7, with two thirds of the volume expected in September and October as visitors arrive hoping to catch a glimpse of New Brunswick's hardwood forest in the glory of its autumn colours.

This is a huge shift from the days when the tourism season in our region effectively ended at the start of September on Labour Day weekend.

Residents and communities certainly felt the pinch when cruise ship traffic was curtailed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Businesses have that much more to celebrate now that the industry is back and growing again.

The biggest ship of the season, Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's Oasis of the Seas, is due to arrive on May 30. She is sold out for this voyage and will be bringing more than 5,000 passengers and 2,300 crew.

Another 10 vessels will be making their very first calls on Saint John in the months to come, building on the momentum we've witnessed as the cruise business continues to grow.

The silhouettes of those ships on the horizon have but one destination for the people of greater Saint John: prosperity.

David Duplisea is Chief Executive Officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. His commentary appears monthly.