

As hosts of the Vancouver Olympics, First Nations are ready to welcome the world

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By Remy Scalza

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PHOTOS



Urban pow-wows, like this one held just outside Vancouver, offer a glimpse into traditional aboriginal culture. "It's a competition that happens over three days with drumming and dancing," says Tewanee Joseph, director of the indigenous group that will be co-hosting the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver. (Remy Scalza)



Kathy James, of Cree and Blackfoot ancestry, braids her daughter's hair at an urban powwow held in a suburb of Vancouver. "There's literally one every weekend in the summer . . . but a lot of our own people don't even know about this," James says. (Remy Scalza)



Opened in 2002 on the land belonging to Canada's Osooyos Indians, NK'Mip Cellars is North America's first native-owned winery. Last year, NK'Mip -- which means "land where the river meets the valley" -- received more than 100,000 visitors, between the winery and adjoining resort and cultural center. (Remy Scalza)

It's an Olympic first that has drawn few headlines. When the 2010 Winter Games open in Vancouver, B.C., in February, four Canadian Indian nations will be on hand -- not as window dressing but as full-fledged hosts. "This isn't just get out the drums and feathers for the Opening Ceremonies," says Alex Rose, communications director for the Four Host First Nations, the society representing the four groups of Canada's indigenous people who will host the Games. "Those days are gone."

Largely gone, too, are the tepees, totem poles and tchotchkes that once defined aboriginal tourism in Canada. In their place has sprung up a new generation of indigenous travel experiences -- from urban powwows to luxe native-owned wineries -- aimed at courting the more than 250,000 visitors expected at the Games.

And though some offerings still play on familiar riffs, the best of the bunch offer a candid glimpse into a culture, and a tourism industry, seeking to redefine itself. "It's our time to be part of major things that are happening," says Tewanee Joseph, a member of the Vancouver-based Squamish Nation and chief executive of the aboriginal groups hosting the Games. "I call it our transition time."

Around Vancouver, one of the most visible expressions of this transformation has been the resurgence of a long-banned ceremony: the powwow. Outlawed by Canadian officials until 1951 and later confined to isolated reservations, powwows have experienced a renaissance in recent years, with events in large cities sometimes drawing nearly 100,000 dancers and spectators.

Technically a ceremonial dance competition with troupes of performers in elaborate regalia competing for prizes, the powwow is also a block party and a family reunion, with a bit of a Deadhead tailgating vibe thrown in. "Once you start, it becomes a big part of your life," says Kathy James, who traces her roots to Canada's Cree, Blackfoot and Anishinaabe Indians. "You start to feel more alive."

James and I are at an urban powwow on the Squamish Nation reservation, a grassy piece of prize real estate hemmed in by high-rises that's just minutes from downtown Vancouver. James is, in her own words, a powwow junkie. "There's literally one almost every weekend during the summer," she says.

This weekend-long powwow outside Vancouver is one of the year's biggest, drawing thousands of performers and spectators from all over the United States and Canada. "On Monday, we all say we get powwow hangover" from all the dancing, James says.

While competitors line up around a grassy circle and the day's crowd filters in, Squamish Nation member Wilfred Baker tends a bonfire at the edge of the gathering. Splayed down the middle and set up on stakes around the fire are at least a dozen wild sockeye salmon, shimmering orange in the midday sun.

"I learned to barbecue from my uncle, [and] he learned at the first powwows back in the '60s," Baker says. "I'm hoping to do something at the Olympics."

He has a line of customers for his \$7 salmon dinners by the time the drumming starts. Performers -- some in traditional dress, others in neon orange and pink ensembles that wouldn't be out of place at Brazilian Carnival -- pour in until the field is filled with color and feathers, all pulsing counterclockwise.

During a lull in the music, James tells me that she doesn't fully support the First Nations' involvement in the Olympics. "It's a small concession by the government to keep aboriginal people quiet," she says. But

the Olympic spotlight has brought benefits. "To the media," says James, "we're the drunks on the street. If we don't let people come here and learn, how do we get rid of those images?"

Move inland across British Columbia's Coast Mountains, however, and a very different idea of what aboriginal tourism should be is taking root, one that has little to do with dancing and headdresses.

"There's this age-old notion that aboriginal culture has to be locked into a style from the 1700s," says Chris Scott, chief operating officer of the Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corp. "Aboriginal tourism shouldn't have to fall into that Hiawatha-Pocahontas image."

Numbering fewer than 500 members, the Osoyoos -- or NK'Mip in their traditional language -- enjoy a heady distinction among Canada's tribes: They have more or less single-handedly rewritten the book on aboriginal tourism.

The sprawling Osoyoos reservation is a four-hour drive east of Vancouver. Along the way, the scenic route plunges from alpine peaks and glacial valleys down to Canada's only desert, a shimmering landscape of canyons, silvery lakes and tumbleweeds. Led for the last 25 years by a charismatic chief who is equal parts impresario and messiah, the Osoyoos operate 11 different businesses here, including an 18-hole championship golf course. But easily their largest and most lucrative venture is NK'Mip Resort, Canada's first and only aboriginal tourism mega-complex.

It's hard to miss. Sitting all alone on a bluff overlooking 26-mile-long Osoyoos Lake, the resort includes 226 villas and suites, a \$9 million cultural center, an aboriginal-inspired spa and an on-site winery. On the drive in, vineyards compete for real estate with sage brush and signs warn of rattlesnake crossings.

"I don't think anyone else has an aboriginal destination resort of this caliber," Scott says. "We've attracted \$125 million in investment over the last eight years."

At the heart of the resort is NK'Mip Cellars, the first native-owned winery in North America. Though not a traditional crop, grapes have been cultivated by the Osoyoos since 1968. And since the late '90s, the band has been at the vanguard of a wine revolution in western Canada, helping turn their dry valley into what some have called the Napa of the North.

"This one has some really nice strawberry and fresh berry notes in it and kind of a smoky cherry," says Lindsay Anderson, a member of the Osoyoos who leads tastings at NK'Mip Cellars. We're trying a 2007 pinot noir, part of the winery's Qwam Qwmt line, named after an aboriginal word for "excellence."

In the cool interior of the tasting room, Anderson pours a few more pinots, merlots and Rieslings. They're all good. The sleek, stylish winery -- 18,000 square feet of tiled floors and vaulted ceilings -- has turned out some of the most heavily lauded vintages in the region. And an on-site bistro, serving such plates as grilled bison, venison tenderloin and candied salmon, helped draw more than 50,000 guests last year.

"I think it really makes the band proud that, as aboriginal people, we're successful," Anderson says. "Having the resort here has made a huge impact."

With success, however, have come questions. With its Santa Fe-style architecture and on-site golf course, how aboriginal is NK'Mip Resort? Deeper still: Just what passes for indigenous tourism in Canada today?

"Yes, it's an aboriginal resort," chief operating officer Scott says. "So does that mean it should just be a series of tepees or only serve baked salmon? We want to make decisions that are appropriate from a business perspective and look toward the future."

After a final chardonnay, the tasting group at the winery filters out into the hot afternoon sun. A dusty lane leads to the Desert Cultural Center and, inside, the smiling face of Charlotte Stringham. "I've got the best job on the reserve," says Stringham, an Osoyoos Indian who came home to manage the center after living in the United States for 30 years.

Today, she's busy. In the lobby, she rounds up a group of visitors for a walking tour into the desert beyond the resort: dry, cracked hills, thick with sage and antelope brush, where the Osoyoos have lived for generations.

"Right now, we're not a moneymaker at the cultural center," she says, "But we wanted to be able to teach the outside world about the Osoyoos."

The dream is not a new one. Before leaving, Stringham pauses before an exhibit of yellowing sketches and paintings made nearly a century ago by students at the reservation's first school. In 1916, a progressive chief, sensing the changes that were coming, brought in outside teachers to give English lessons and show the Osoyoos "how to meet the world upon its own terms." As the Olympic spotlight turns on Vancouver, Canada's aboriginal people are wrestling with this challenge once more.

Pulling open the door, Stringham slips on a pair of dark sunglasses and steps outside. At least a dozen travelers -- cameras and water bottles in hand -- march dutifully behind her, out the door and into the dry heat of Osoyoos Indian land.

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