

# Growth in tourist numbers predicted

BY ANDREW A. DUFFY, TIMES COLONIST JULY 5, 2012 6:39 AM



Visitors walk alongside Victoria's Inner Harbour last summer.

**Photograph by:** Lyle Stafford, timescolonist.com (June 2012)

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On a day when the sun made a much-awaited appearance, B.C.'s tourism industry saw a bit of light at the end of a dark tunnel as the Conference Board of Canada's travel market outlook forecast increases in overnight visits and visitor spending over the coming years.

The report said B.C. should see a 2.1 per cent increase in overnight visits and a 3.6 per cent increase in visitor spending to \$8.1 billion this year, with visits forecast to increase another 2.8 per cent and spending to hit \$8.5 billion in 2013.

"That's big growth, that's pretty good," said hospitality industry expert Frank Bourree, principal of Chemistry Consulting. "We saw growth of seven per cent annually for about eight years prior to 2007 and then in 2008 we started to go backwards, so this is quite a positive move forward."

The Conference Board said B.C. should benefit from strong employment growth in the West to boost domestic business and should continue to see the benefits of China granting Canada Approved Destination Status.

Bourree said the province should also benefit from improving weather. "Spring was soft, but we're expecting a decent summer and fall - it's all weather-driven here," he said.

Good weather tends to attract close-in visitors from the U.S. - typically Washington state, Oregon and

California, which more or less makes up Victoria's largest international market.

While the Conference Board report suggests U.S. visits to B.C. will be flat this year - 0.5 per cent growth in 2012 and 1.1 per cent in 2013 - there are signs that the traffic from across the border is heating up. According to Tourism B.C.'s latest figures, over the first quarter of 2012 U.S. visitation increased 1.9 per cent to 579,350 overnight visits.

"That's four months in a row that U.S. visitor numbers have been up and I think we will see that continue the rest of the year," said Bourree, noting there is pent-up demand to travel in that market.

"We're still at a 20-year low for U.S. visitation so we still have a long way to go but we haven't seen positive numbers for years - to get four months in a row is pretty amazing."

As for Chinese visitation helping to make up the shortfall from traditional markets, Dave Cowen, general manager of Butchart Gardens, said the province is a long way away from that.

Chinese visitation has been strong so far this year, even in the normally quiet first quarter of the year, but the volume remains small, he said.

"It certainly won't replace the U.S.," he said.

According to Tourism B.C., while there was a 23.4 per cent increase in the number of Chinese visitors to B.C. through the first quarter of this year, that represented only 33,910 overnight visits.

Cowen said that, overall, 2012 should be comparable with 2011, though the bulk of the business will be done during July and August given the poor weather at the start of the year.

That seems to resonate throughout the Victoria tourism industry, said Tourism Victoria's CEO Rob Gialloreto.

"We haven't predicted any growth for 2012," said Gialloreto, noting the first quarter was slowed by weather and not having major events as it had last year.

"But we expect that will pick up in July and August. Our operators and hotels, while no one is throwing any parades, are all saying things will pick up."

Gialloreto said a number of summer events and more visitation from emerging markets such as China should help.

"We are seeing slow and steady growth from emerging markets, and we really need that because we're trying to replace that tried-and-true base we had," he said, noting that means continued investment in China, India, Japan and Korea.

Across the country, the Conference Board is predicting visitation to Canada will increase by 1.8 per cent as a result of balanced growth in both domestic and international visits.

The report forecasts overall tourism spending to increase by 3.8 per cent in 2012 to \$40.6 billion.

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