

Summer 'staycations' in Eastern Ontario

Shakespeare, pancakes and local festivals offer budget-friendly getaways

Visitors cross a bridge in the town of Perth in Eastern Ontario.
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With a lot of stress to deal with and not a lot of money to escape it, many Canadians are trading sandy beaches and swim-up bars for something a little closer to home. That's why Eastern Ontario's scenic small towns are promoting the "stay-cation" this summer: A family-friendly trip that's far enough from the city to forget your urban worries, but close enough to be practical and affordable. If all you need is a reason to go, these towns are finding creative ways to provide one by hosting events and activities ranging from a Shakespeare festival to whitewater rafting. One tradition got started in the summer of 2002, when the word "recession" was far from anyone's mind. A group of actors was travelling through small towns in Ontario putting on plays. They passed through Prescott, Ont., and performed Romeo and Juliet at the town's open-air, riverside amphitheatre – the only one of its kind on the St. Lawrence River. The actors loved the town, the town loved the actors, and they struck up a partnership. A festival was born. In its first humble season, Prescott's St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival drew a total audience of 1,900. This year's showing of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Measure for Measure*, from July 11 to Aug. 15, is expected to attract more than double that number. Considering the population of the town is 4,200, that's pretty impressive. Jessie Ritchie, the festival's general manager, estimates the event contributed \$780,000 to the town's economy last year. About half of the people who attend the festival come from outside the region, she said. Ritchie expects ticket sales to rise again this year despite the recession. Last year, ticket sales went up even though the weather was bad and gas was at \$1.40 a litre, she said. "This year, with gas prices being less, with people finding things to do in the local area, I would say if anything our audience should increase." Perth, Ont. is another small town using

its riverside charms to draw in tourists. It experiences a swell of visitors every summer when cottage season begins. Madeline Bouvier, co-manager of the Perth and District Chamber of Commerce, said people who visit the town for the first time go home with rave reviews. When she moved there from Ottawa 10 years ago, people wondered why. “Spend a weekend here and you’ll see why,” she said. Perth’s many summer festivals and events have been popular tourist draws for a long time. But Bouvier said she expects free admission will bring even more visitors this summer. The Festival of the Maples is one of these free events. This year’s festival, on April 26, is the 33rd time the town has celebrated the end of maple syrup season. The festival takes place in Perth’s historic downtown, where the usually quiet streets are lined with stalls featuring local vendors. Visitors can start off their day with a pancake and maple syrup breakfast, catch a horse-drawn trolley to see the musical acts providing street entertainment, and learn about pioneer cooking and crafts. Perth also gets a lot of long distance runners and cyclists from all over the region who come to exercise on the Rideau Trail. Goat runs, or challenging trail races, take place every month from March to October. Currently, word of mouth has been all the marketing necessary to bring in people from out of town. But the county is working with a local running store and the Chamber of Commerce to put pamphlets with running and cycling routes online to promote the area as a hub of endurance fitness. The Ottawa Valley tourist association started planning for the recession early. They took out radio advertisements on Toronto stations to attract people to their booth at recent trade shows. Summer tourism is extremely important to the Ottawa Valley, best known for its whitewater rafting. And Melissa Johnston, the marketing co-ordinator for the region’s tourist association, said her goal is to use the recession to convince visitors to make longer trips to the Ottawa Valley instead of taking vacations abroad. “Visitors are still coming here,” she said. “Everybody’s challenge is to get them to stay longer and spend more.”

More information

- www.beautifulperth.com
- www.prescott.ca
- www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca
- www.ottawavalley.org