

DESTINATION AREA ASSESSMENT

Portage la Prairie



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Cover front photo: National Indigenous Residential School
Museum of Canada, Facebook

Cover back photo: Island on the Prairies website



Executive Summary

Challenge

In recent years, Portage la Prairie has attracted a number of strong businesses and has developed some outstanding resident amenities. Tourism has not developed to the same extent, although there is renewed momentum thanks to a strong tourism committee and some good but taken-for-granted assets such as Fort la Reine Museum. Most promising is the National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada – now under development and not yet market ready – which has the potential to be a major national visitor attraction in Portage la Prairie as well as a powerful, tangible catalyst for reconciliation.

Opportunity

Investments in the National Indigenous Residential School Museum and its community could fast-track this important initiative and create a truly unique asset for Portage la Prairie. There is significant opportunity for the city, the Manitoba Indigenous Tourism Association and Travel Manitoba to support the museum and the Indigenous community to build out this compelling visitor attraction. At this early stage, there is need for everything from re-purposing the building's internal spaces to creating exhibition material to strategic marketing. Investment, especially in staffing, capacity and planning as the museum takes root, will ensure it is not only a successful destination driver but a genuine means of furthering reconciliation.

Outcome

A fully operational museum could be truly transformative in several ways – honouring survivors, educating visitors about the legacy and ongoing impacts of residential schools, supporting Portage la Prairie's collaborations with Indigenous residents, creating employment and research opportunities for Indigenous scholars and attracting a cohort of tourists to Portage who may not otherwise have considered visiting. It could also be a key differentiator for Manitoba tourism as a whole.



Photo: Mapio.com

About this Project

As part of a larger, province-wide destination management assessment study, Travel Manitoba commissioned 12 individual destination area assessments (DAAs) focusing on current and potential place brand communities.

The goal of these DAAs is to inventory and assess each community's tourism assets and experiences, to identify gaps and to highlight opportunities to increase visitors.

These DAAs were approached through the lens of Travel Manitoba's six key opportunity areas – winter, water, Indigenous experiences, human rights, Francophone and the North. The DAAs were also underpinned by significant research into current visitor motivations, Manitoba's short- and long-haul competitive landscape as well as a broader analysis of gaps in Manitoba's tourism products and transformational opportunities for growth.

Consultants Mary Agnes Welch (Probe Research Inc.) and Margaret Egan (Sinclair Barnes Limited) conducted each destination area assessment. The assessment involved the following steps:

- Desk research to review all relevant strategies, market research and online presence
- Creation of a stakeholder map to guide stakeholder interviews
- Curation of a tourism asset database (list appended)
- Overnight site visit (March 2022)
- Stakeholder and operator interviews (list appended)

As well, the project team gleaned additional insights into each place brand during five workshops with tourism stakeholders from across the province (lead by Twenty31's Greg Klassen, May 2022) as well as ongoing conversations with Travel Manitoba.

The information in this report is current as of May 2022.

Probe Research and Sinclair Barnes Limited are extremely grateful to Portage la Prairie's tourism leaders and operators for the time they spent with us, their insights and their commitment to tourism development.

The Basics

Location

Portage la Prairie is Manitoba's fifth largest city and is located in the Central Plains Region, an hour's drive from Winnipeg along the Trans-Canada Highway. It sits on the Assiniboine River and is surrounded by the Rural Municipality of Portage la Prairie.

The name Portage la Prairie derives from the French *portage*, meaning to carry a canoe overland between waterways or, in this case, across the prairies. The portage used by the traders from Fort la Reine (established in 1738) ran for 25 kilometres between the Assiniboine River and Lake Manitoba.

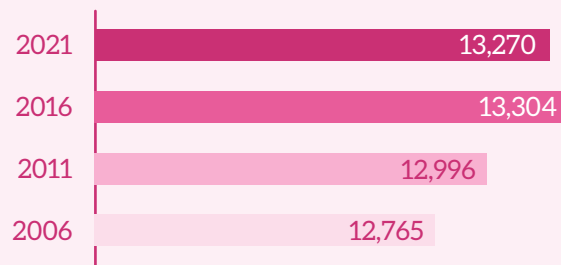


Portage la Prairie is located on Treaty One territory. There are three major First Nation partners in the immediate geographical area: Dakota Tipi First Nation, Dakota Plains Wahpeton First Nation and Long Plain First Nation, which comprise the Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council. The area also has a large Métis population.

Portage is an easy day trip, weekend break or short stay for visitors from Winnipeg and the surrounding areas who appreciate its small city feel combined with outstanding recreational amenities and two important museums. Its picturesque Island Park provides the inspiration for Portage la Prairie’s place brand *Island on the Prairies*.

Population

Population (Source: Statistics Canada)



The latest data from the 2021 Census show Portage’s population growth stalled at about 13,300 people, roughly the same figure recorded in 2016.

Though Portage has a relatively small population of newcomers and people of colour, it has a significant Indigenous population. Nearly 32 per cent of Portage residents identified as Indigenous in the 2016 Census. The latest figures from the 2021 Census, when they are released in the fall, may show an even more vibrant population of Métis and First Nations residents.

Top reasons to visit

Visitors to Portage la Prairie come for the combination of big city amenities with a small-town feel. Top tourism draws are recreation, culture – including art, music and museums – accessible nature and relaxed days out, weekend breaks or short stays.

Portage has excellent natural and built recreational assets that are family friendly. The outdoor **Splash Island Water Park** and indoor **Shindleman Aquatic Centre** at **Stride Place** both offer great water facilities including waterslides and Manitoba’s largest wave pool. The nearby **Delta** and **St. Ambroise** beaches draw campers, anglers and seasonal cottagers.

The scenic **Island Park** offers camping, playgrounds, tennis and golf in the summer and skating and cross-country trails (lit at night) in winter. Sports fans can watch local, provincial, regional and sometimes national sporting events in **Stride Place**’s two arenas. Arts lovers can take in a concert or an arts workshop

(visual, arts, dance, pottery) at **Prairie Fusion** in the **William Glesby Arts Centre**.

The nearby **Southport Aerospace Centre** sees visitors to its business park and military aviation facilities located on the site of the former **Canadian Forces Base Portage la Prairie**. Southport trains 80 per cent of all Royal Canadian Air Force pilots, and student accommodation is onsite.

At **Fort la Reine Museum**, visitors can explore the life of early pioneers, learn about fur trading history and regional Indigenous histories and navigate a corn maze.

While Fort la Reine tells the story of the region’s pioneer past, Portage la Prairie’s newest attraction is the **National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada**, a newly designated national historic site. It is located on the Keeshkeemaquah Reserve, part of the reserve lands of Long Plain First Nation. Development of this museum as a tourism destination is in its early stages. When fully developed – and through its various stages of development – the museum will be a unique opportunity to tell the story of residential schools and an important part of the journey to truth and reconciliation.

Despite these reasons to visit, the majority of Portage’s tourism assets are not market ready, and none are export ready. Among the 80 assets identified, including restaurants, hotels

and attractions, one-half are rated only “doors open” and only eight (10 per cent) are market ready.

Getting there

Driving is the main transport mode to Portage la Prairie. Driving times from key cities include:

- From Winnipeg – 1 hour (85 km)
- From Brandon – 1.5 hours (127km)
- From Saskatoon – 7 hours (699 km)
- From Minneapolis – 8 hours (803 km)

From Winnipeg, the Trans-Canada’s conditions are good, well-serviced and well-marked although winter conditions can be treacherous with increasingly regular weather-related closures. The town centre is walkable, but Portage’s major attractions are spread out and there is no public transport, so a car is needed. There is a taxi service on demand.

There is a once-a-week bus service between Winnipeg and Regina stopping in Portage la Prairie. Via Rail operates a service from Winnipeg several days a week to a varying schedule, while air travelers usually come through Winnipeg.

Connectivity

Portage la Prairie has reasonably fast hardline internet service throughout the city, averaging 50/10 Mbps. However, wireless service is much slower, according to Canada’s Broadband Internet Service Availability Map. Over-the-air mobile speeds are just 5/1 Mbps throughout the city, on average.

Another issue: Both wireless and wireline speeds on the city’s west side, the new [Microtel Inn and Suites](#) and the [National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada](#), are considerably slower than most visitors would expect. For example, the average hardwire speed is less than 5/1 Mbps. Cellular speeds are only slightly better.



Photo: Fort la Reine Museum, Travel Manitoba

Portage la Prairie's Tourism Assets

Natural features

Portage La Prairie's location in the continent's post-glacial flood plain has blessed it with highly fertile, rich, clay-loam soils abundant in nutrients, and is responsible for its growth as a major agricultural centre of wheat, vegetables, berries, grains and lentils. This bounty is evident in the rural areas and small towns surrounding the city and has drawn several global food processors to the area. It also offers a daytrip draw with a good farmers market and berry picking opportunities at Mayfair Farms and others.

Portage la Prairie sits on the Assiniboine River. There are many lakes in the area including the urban Crescent Lake in Island Park. Lake Manitoba and the Assiniboine River, as well as other water bodies in the area such as the Portage Spillway, offer good fishing in both summer and winter. Common species include Walleye, Perch, Northern Pike, Goldeye and Silver Bass.



Delta Marsh, a 30 kilometer stretch of wetlands just inland from Lake Manitoba, is an active wildlife breeding and migration staging area for a wide array of waterfowl and songbirds.

Accommodations

Portage la Prairie has a good range of accommodations for a city of its size, including chain hotels, motels, bed & breakfasts and campgrounds. However, only four of the 14 accommodation assets identified in Portage and Southport could be considered market ready, and at least three are estimated to be “doors open” only, with very limited visitor information or booking options available online.

Chain hotels include:

- **Days Inn by Wyndham**, minutes from downtown with an indoor pool and hot tub.
- **Canad Inns Destination Centre**, a full-service hotel, conference and banqueting centre with an indoor pool and waterslide. The lobby level houses an **Altos Restaurant**, **Tavern United** sports pub and **Playmakers Gaming Lounge** billed as a “boutique casino”.
- **Super 8 by Wyndham**. Close to **Splash Island Waterpark**, the hotel also has an indoor pool and salt water hot tub.

- **Microtel Inn and Suites by Wyndham**, located on and in partnership with the **Long Plain First Nation** and next door to the **National Indigenous Residential School Museum**.

In the Southport area, the site of the former Canadian Forces Base, **Barker Suites** and **Mynarski House** both offer full suite accommodations. They cater mainly to business visitors to the large business park and to those taking aircraft training.

Local motels include:

- **Westgate Inn**, newly refurbished and featuring two Tesla charging stations.
- **Hi-Way Motel**, budget-friendly with a kitchenette in rooms.
- **Sunset Motel**, which offers a garden with grill and picnic tables for guests' use.
- **Yellowquill Motel**, a pet friendly motel with laundry facilities available.

Map of accommodations (city and region)

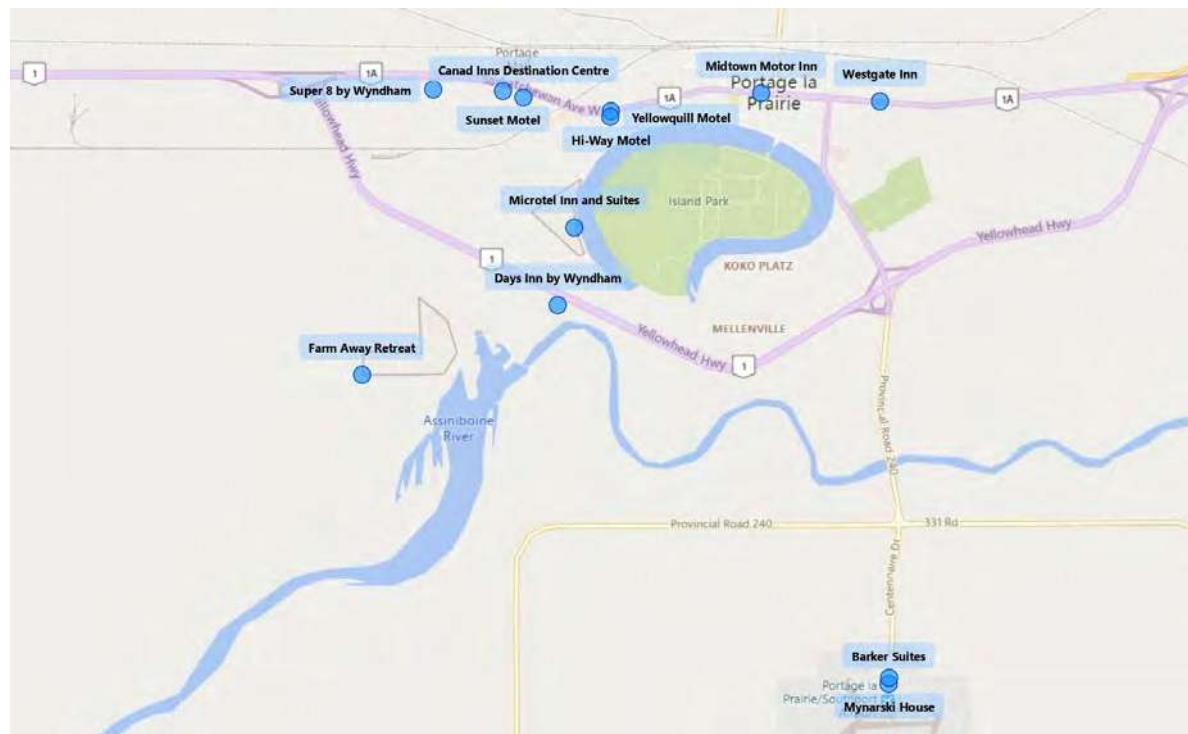




Photo: Farm Away Retreat, Travel Manitoba

Bed & breakfasts and Airbnb-style accommodations are not well established in the area, although some owners book rentals privately. Given Portage's inventory of handsome historic homes that are well-located near downtown and outdoor amenities, this is a market gap and so a potential opportunity for unique accommodations.

Two B&Bs are available just outside town at:

- **The Blue Heron View**, located near **Delta Beach** and bookable on Airbnb.
- **Farm Away Retreat**, a family-operated farm on the site of the original family homestead which is a bed & breakfast as well as a wedding and special events venue.

Portage la Prairie is well served by campgrounds such as **Creekside** and **Delta Beach** campgrounds, which have the advantage being close to the city itself. These are ideal for families with young children who often don't want to camp in remote locations.

A full listing of accommodation assets can be found in the Appendix.



Photo: Delta Marsh and Beach, Travel Manitoba



Photo: Mole Guacamole

Restaurants and food options

Portage la Prairie is home to a reasonable number of culinary options offering the visitor a choice of familiar, national franchises such as **Tim Hortons**, **A&W**, **Boston Pizza** and some well-reviewed independent restaurants with a cluster of Greek and Mexican options. However, here again, none of the 21 food and drink assets identified are likely market ready. About a dozen culinary assets could be rated as visitor ready, with the rest rated “doors open”.

Notable restaurants include:

- **Over the Coals**, Greek and Mediterranean
- **Bill’s Sticky Fingers**, Greek food and pizza, open late
- **Om Indian Cuisine**, Indian and vegetarian-friendly restaurant
- **Mole Guacamole**, Mexican
- **Chronic Tacos**, a Mexican taqueria inspired by Southern California
- **Lita’s Station**, classic diner open for breakfast, brunch and lunch

- **What’s the Scoop?**, seasonal ice cream bar locally famous for its ice cream cakes
- **Jimmy’s Submarine & Dairy Delight**, a well-loved fatboy burger joint

There are two sports bars, the **Midtown Inn** in the **Midtown Motel** and **Tavern United** in the **Canad Inns**. There are no craft breweries or taprooms in Portage la Prairie, so an opportunity exists to develop interesting drink options.

Portage la Prairie runs successful events and promotions such as **Poutine Days** and **Burger Days**. In 2021, Burger Days generated \$90,000 in revenue for 13 participating restaurants. It’s also a hub of u-pick berry farms (as well as major food processing companies such as **Roquette** and **Simplot**, which are major employers but do not offer any food tourism opportunities).

A full listing of food and beverage assets can be found in the Appendix.

Map of restaurants and food options

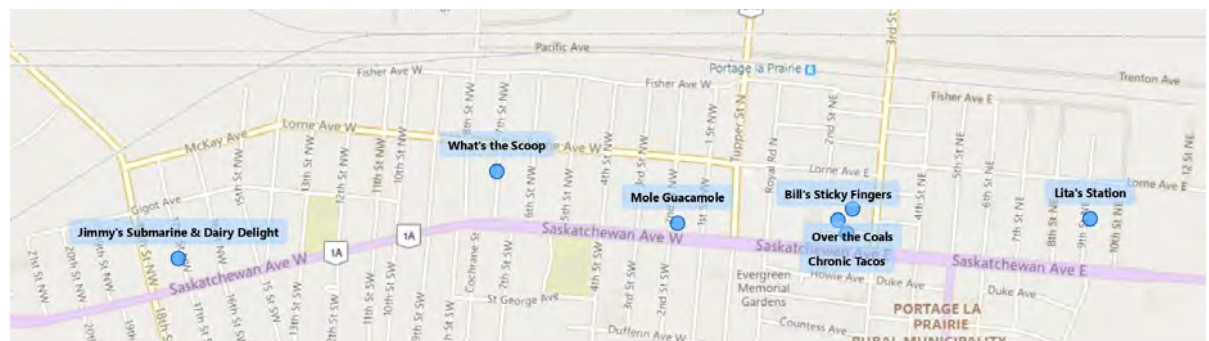




Photo: Over the Coals



Photo: The Little Red Barn, Facebook

Shopping

Shopping in Portage la Prairie is not a significant tourist draw. However, it is an important amenity for locals and for residents of the many smaller surrounding towns, especially the national chains such as **Walmart**, **Shoppers Drug Mart**, **Sobeys** and **Canadian Tire**. These visits are now often shop-and-go, so there is an opportunity to attract these shoppers to engage with and spend money in the city's other facilities and attractions.

There are a few small, independent shops in the city centre which have some modest tourist interest, in part because they carry unique merchandise and works of local makers. These include **Mil-Jeanne Flowers** and **Axcenz** for flowers, giftware and ladies clothing, **Heritage**

Book & Gift Shoppe selling inspirational books, bibles, music and wall art and **Prairie Fusion Arts & Entertainment** whose gallery and gift shop sells original local art, supplies, cards and prints.

In addition, the rich local produce around Portage La Prairie is available from several seasonal farmers markets and farm shops and includes the produce of Portage's popular strawberry season. The **Portage Farmers Market** features products from local crafters, bakers, gardeners and home-based businesses. **The Little Red Barn** and **Mayfair Farms** are farm shops that sell direct to the public, as does **Riverbend Orchards** which sells plants, jams, pies and fruit.

A full listing of shopping assets can be found in the Appendix.



Photo: Prairie Fusion Arts & Entertainment

Events and festivals

Portage la Prairie holds several events and festivals throughout the year, many of which are returning after the pandemic closures. With a few exceptions such as the Manitoba Airshow held at the Southport Aerospace Centre, which draws visitors from outside the region, most of Portage la Prairie's festivals are local and attract visitors from the nearby towns along with friends, family and returning residents. In other words, none of Portage's festivals are currently significant tourism drivers, and nearly all lack basic marketing such as updated websites or even Facebook pages.

Notable festivals include:

- **Portage Potato Festival** (August). A free festival celebrating all things potato with activities, entertainment, beer gardens and food trucks.
- **Whoop & Hollar Folk Festival** (August). Multi-genre music and arts festival with a unique, small-festival experience. The festival is perhaps the most reliable and sophisticated in its marketing and visitor information.
- **Winterfest**, an initiative of the Portage la Prairie Community Revitalization Corporation.
- **Santa Parade of Lights** (Dec.)

- **The Portage Ex**, celebrating the significance of the region's agricultural heritage since 1872, with a midway.

Portage la Prairie also celebrates its cultural diversity with two important cultural events:

- **I Heart Heritage Festival** (August), a partnership between the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre and Fort la Reine Museum. (This festival did not return in 2022 but may in future.)

- **National Indigenous Peoples Day**, celebrated in 2022 by participation in the National Indigenous Peoples Day Walk organised by the Portage la Prairie Friendship Centre and the Portage la Prairie Community Revitalization Corporation.

Sporting events and tournaments, most held at Stride Place, attract out-of-town visitors who could be enticed to engage more with the city's amenities and therefore increase revenue potential.



Photo: Portage Exhibition, Facebook



Photo: Fort la Reine Museum

Tourism services

The Portage Regional Tourism Committee, re-established in 2020, has prioritised improving tourism services and particularly tourism information. A leaflet listing the city's attractions called *100 Things to Do and See* has been a success in building awareness among visitors and locals of the activities in their area.

Portage la Prairie has a marketing relationship with Travel Manitoba and the committee is looking at ways to promote their city to domestic and international travellers. At the time of our site visit in March, plans were underway to produce new guides featuring the place brand and focusing on accommodation, dining, arts and culture. The challenge facing the Portage Regional Tourism Committee is that, while their plans are good, creative and collaborative and would almost certainly be effective, implementation is restricted by lack of staff capacity.

Tourism information such as the *100 Things to Do and See* is available online and at the tourist information centre located in **Fort la Reine Museum**.

Enabling Environment

Tourism leadership consists of a regional tourism committee led by the economic development director. It sits as a subcommittee of Portage Regional Economic Development (PRED). The 15 committee members represent the major regional tourism stakeholders, each with distinct specializations in one of eight different tourism categories. The committee is configured to ensure representation and participation of key constituencies. For example, it works closely with the Portage Urban Indigenous Peoples Coalition. A member of the coalition sits on the tourism committee as does the manager of the Microtel, part owned by Long Plain First Nation.

The tourism committee has a strategy and plan, reviewed semi-annually, making Portage one of the few place brand communities with such an action plan. The committee has also instituted several successful marketing initiatives highlighting and leveraging the city's assets.



While there is a growing appreciation of tourism as an economic driver, barriers still exist. There is still some opposition from older and rural residents who are happy with the status quo. This hurdle is recognised by the tourism committee, which has a mission to “*get the community on board*”. Council buy-in can be a barrier, as demonstrating tourism’s return on investment is a challenge. The tourism committee hopes to conduct an economic impact assessment to help support the case for tourism development but lacks the resources or the model to do so.

The local business community, including Roquette, McCain and Simplot, are supportive corporate citizens. These companies have a vested interest in building a great community to attract and retain their workforce, which includes many newcomers to Canada. This translates into business support for local initiatives including tourism. A proven business case would further facilitate the tourism committee’s ability to make a case for support to these companies.

Portage la Prairie is not a member of the regional destination marketing organization,

Central Manitoba Tourism, choosing to spend money directly on its own projects. The consequence is that Portage la Prairie does not benefit from the collective regional marketing provided by the RTA.

Lack of capacity is a significant barrier to implementing the tourism strategy. This includes lack of time (tourism is generally one of a number of portfolios each committee member handles), lack of staffing and lack of tourism knowledge and skills.



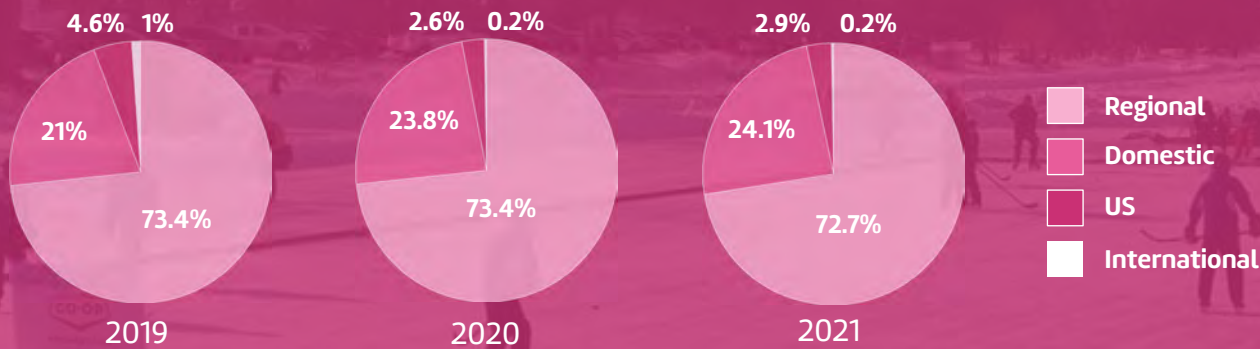
Photo: Island Park - Travel Manitoba

Target Markets

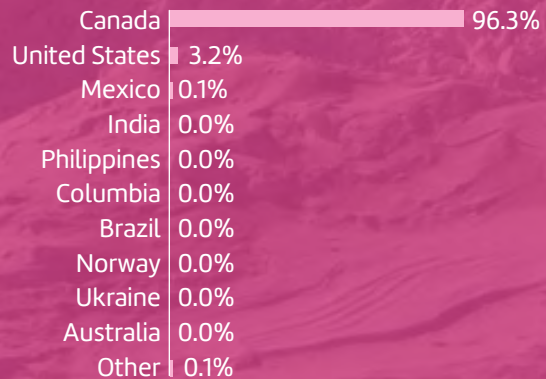
Who visits now?

Portage's visitors are largely other Manitobans, primarily from Winnipeg but also from Brandon. Only about five per cent of Portage's visitors came from the United States prior to the pandemic.

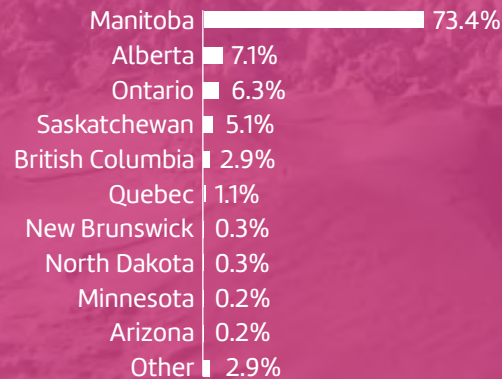
Visits by Tourist Segment



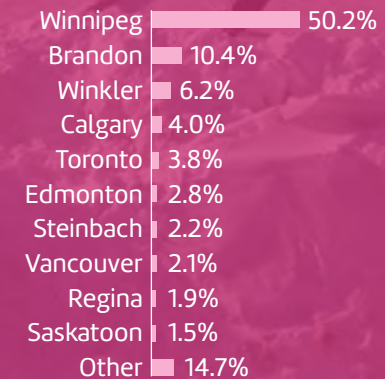
Visitation by Country



Visitation by Province or State



Visitation by Metro Region



Source: Domo near mobile data

Summer visitors include families from nearby towns and from Winnipeg drawn to Portage la Prairie's centrally located, convenient and affordable recreation facilities such as **Splash Island** and **Stride Place's** aquatic centre. Camping at nearby beaches such as Delta Beach and Island Lake Park appeals to Manitobans who want an affordable, well-serviced tenting experience that's not remote or backwoods.

Winter is quieter with the exception of sports tournaments, many (such as the Olympic curling trials) cancelled during the pandemic. As tournaments return, their large audiences of sports teams, their families and supporters represent significant increased visitation and revenue. The opportunity exists to create itineraries, packages and experiences to entice these visitors to stay longer, explore the city

beyond the sports arena and to spend money on accommodation, food and retail.

Business visitation is a year-round opportunity. Local companies such as Roquette, McCain, and Simplot bring in colleagues, associates and potential employees for meetings and interviews. Visitors to the Southport Aerospace Centre often stay for extended periods for aviation training and research projects. Business visitors often stay close to their hotels - including air trainees and business visitors in Southport - but there are opportunities for them to explore other amenities in the city.

Who could visit?

In addition to encouraging existing visitors to return more often, stay longer and spend more in Portage la Prairie, key opportunity groups or untapped target markets exist among:

- **Families**, including extended, multi-generational families looking for a central and affordable gathering place with child-friendly activities (such as **Splash Island**) within an easy drive and with reasonable accommodation and food choices. Positive social media marketing and influencer posts on parents' Facebook and Instagram groups could have an impact here.
- **Sports tourists**, including competing teams, their families, friends and supporters.

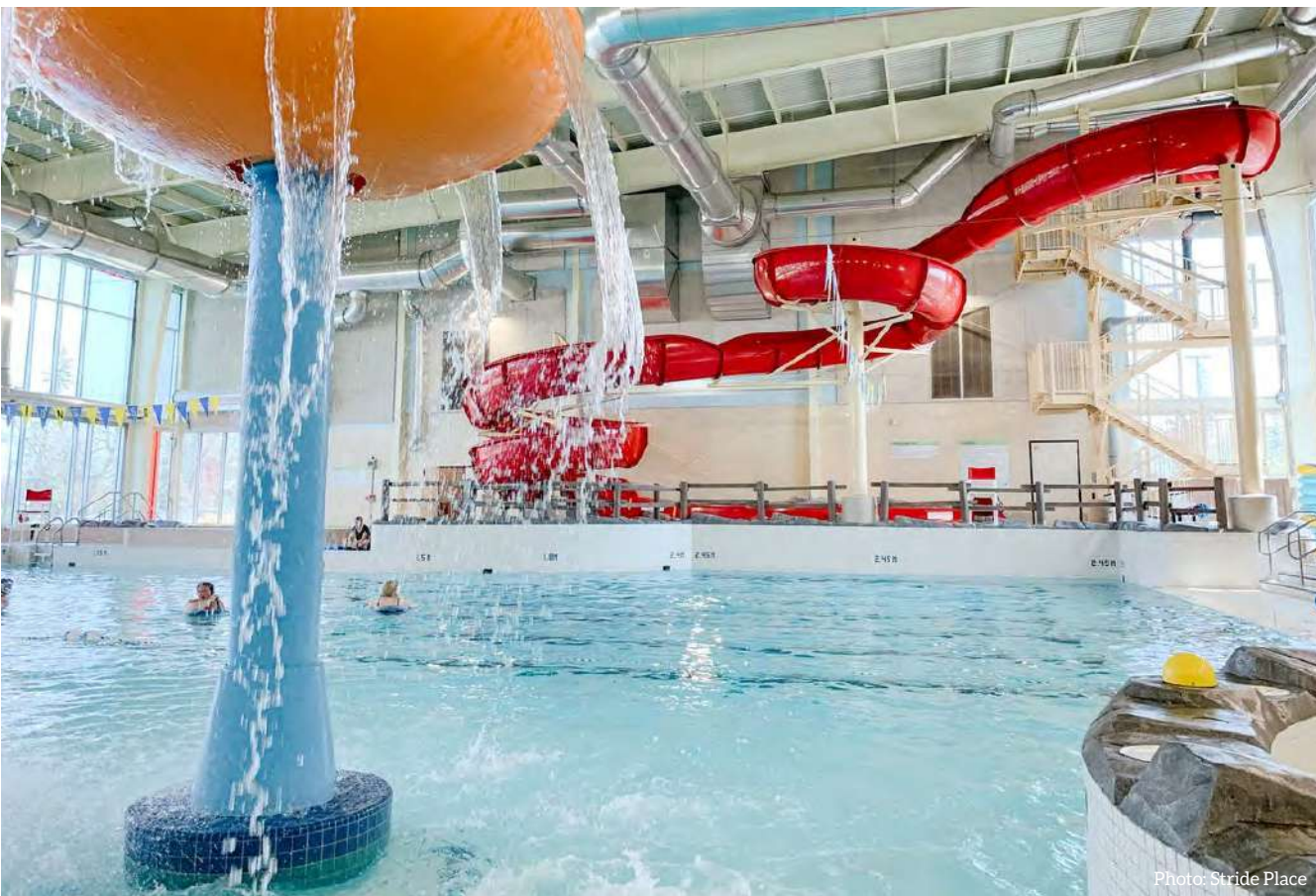


Photo: Stride Place

Creating packages and promotions could encourage longer stays and use of more town amenities, particularly independent restaurants and museums.

- **Business visitors.** Are there opportunities to partner with multi-national companies located in Portage la Prairie to offer itineraries, packages and bespoke tours to their visiting colleagues, particularly those interested in reconciliation and the history of residential schools?
- **Anglers and hunters** – such as hunters who visit Delta Marsh during the seasonal hunt for Canada Geese, Snow Geese and ducks. White-tailed Deer is also hunted in summer. Anglers head to the Assiniboine River to catch Walleye, Perch, Northern Pike, Goldeye and Silver Bass and for winter ice fishing on Lake Manitoba.

There is also untapped potential by leveraging “hidden gem” assets and targeting special interest groups. While these may be smaller, often niche target audiences, they have potential for multi-day stays and will tend to spend money on their hobbies or interest areas. Additionally, they are often easy and cost effective to target by using special interest communication channels and working with their special interest associations. While Portage la Prairie could not target all of these immediately, these are some to consider:

- **Railway enthusiasts.** The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian National Railway intersect in Portage la Prairie, one of the few places in Canada where the two meet. This has made Portage la Prairie an ideal place for railway aficionados to view trains. The **CP Rail Station Interpretive Centre and Heritage Park** is home to the local model railroad club.
- **Eco-tourists.** Nearby Delta Marsh is an active wildlife breeding and migration staging area, attracting birders from all over the world to see migrating waterfowl and songbirds. The Arboretum in Island Park is a four-acre educational collection of over 300 different prairie-hardy trees, shrubs and vines.
- **Aviation enthusiasts,** including visitors to the Manitoba Airshow who could be persuaded by targeted marketing and packages to turn a daytrip into an overnight stay, or to trip-link with Winnipeg’s new Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada.

Finally, the National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada is a new asset with huge potential for authentic, Indigenous-led tourism. Portage la Prairie is working closely with Long Plain First Nation, on whose reserve land the museum sits, and with the adjacent Microtel owned in partnership with Long Plain

First Nation. This Museum is core to our lead recommendation for tourism development and is discussed further in our recommendations.

Competitor Assessment

Portage la Prairie’s proximity to Winnipeg is both an advantage and a disadvantage. While the city has plentiful activities for families with young children, the situation is not strong for older teenagers and twenty-somethings who tend to look to Winnipeg for shopping, entertainment and nightlife. Equally, many Winnipeggers and people in short-haul locations are unaware of what is available in Portage la Prairie so lack reasons to visit. Better tourism assets and better awareness of those assets, particularly Portage’s possibilities for a weekend break, can reverse this attitude.

While early still in its development, the National Indigenous Residential School Museum will be the only museum of its kind in Western Canada and one of only two such museums in Canada. It will provide visitors a unique, Indigenous-led opportunity but may face competition from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and its exhibits on residential schools.

SWOT Analysis

Based on interviews, a site visit as well as desk and market research, we've identified several strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. These are summarized here and explored in depth in the following pages.

<h2>S</h2> <p>Strengths</p>	<h2>W</h2> <p>Weaknesses</p>	<h2>O</h2> <p>Opportunities</p>	<h2>T</h2> <p>Threats</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-established and well-managed tourism committee • Strong, established assets (particularly historic and family-friendly ones) • Location close to Winnipeg on the Trans-Canada Highway 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of enabling environment capacity • Asset gaps (particularly unique accommodation and retail assets) • Location (too close to Winnipeg's rival attractions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximize benefits of current assets (particularly historic assets) • Develop new assets, particularly the National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada • Strengthen marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global disruptions (pandemic, recession, etc.) • Climate change impacts, particularly flooding • Lack of momentum around staffing and the creation of a business case for tourism investment • A slowing of progress developing the National Indigenous Residential School Museum

Strengths

Well-established and well-managed regional tourism committee that is fully integrated within Portage Regional Economic Development:

- Inclusive of Portage la Prairie's cultural makeup including Indigenous peoples, as well as all tourism sectors (accommodation, museums etc.).
- Structure and a strategic plan provide continuity to the tourism committee, which enhances ability to focus and implement ideas.
- Built-in mechanism and schedule to review strategies and plans.
- Aware of organisational gaps (lack of economic impact assessment) and taking steps to fill these.

Strong established assets:

- Family-friendly recreation assets are particularly strong (e.g., Stride Place, Splash Island, Island Park).
- Historical assets such as Fort la Reine Museum and a plethora of historical homes are well-established (but under-used).
- Nearby nature that combines family-friendly recreation and beaches with

unique eco-tourism assets such as Delta Marsh, which have potential to be enhanced as tourism draws.

Location:

- On the Trans-Canada Highway and an hour from Winnipeg.
- Close to three of the province's strongest, most innovative First Nations – Long Plain, Swan River and Dakota Tipi.
- Proximity to nature appeals to visitors who want outdoor experiences including camping but not fully remote locations.

Weaknesses

Lack of capacity to catalyze tourism growth:

- Insufficient staff resources dedicated to tourism. The momentum is volunteer-driven.
- Lack of economic impact assessment to demonstrate to funders and decision-makers the spin-off value of tourism investments, and lack of resources to undertake this economic impact assessment.
- Limited and inconsistent budget which fluctuates each year.
- Volunteers have great intentions but not always relevant skills.

Asset gaps:

- Lack of interesting accommodation, particularly B&Bs, despite historic housing stock that could make this a feature.
- Unique, independent retail opportunities are limited. There are adequate big box stores but these are not tourism draws, and there is not a critical mass of small, interesting, entrepreneurial stores especially in town centre.
- Lack of infrastructure to attract major events. There is good capacity for sporting events at Stride Place, but not the accommodation, retail and restaurant choice and quality to make a complete offer.
- Assets operate in silos. There is no obvious cross promotion or visitor packages. Visitors tend to be destination-led (Splash Island, Fort la Reine Museum) but do not often engage with the rest of town such as city centre restaurants, nature walks at Island Park, etc.

Location:

- Although a potential advantage, proximity to Winnipeg may also be a disincentive, especially if awareness of Portage la Prairie's tourism draws is low and attractions in Winnipeg look similar – or better.

Opportunities

Travel Manitoba has identified several key opportunity areas for provincial product and experience development. Both human rights and Indigenous experiences align with Portage la Prairie, particularly in connection to the National Indigenous Residential School Museum. This is discussed further below as part of our lead recommendations for product development.

Other key tourism opportunity areas identified by Travel Manitoba including Francophone, winter and water are not strongly applicable to this destination at the time of assessment.

Additional opportunities include:

Maximise the benefits of current assets:

- Fort la Reine Museum. Can aspects of its programming and exhibits be extended to other locations in the winter season? These could include displaying some travelling exhibits in the Stride Place foyer or interpretive signage in the centre of town.
- Portage's collection of 139 designated heritage buildings, including many older homes belonging to important Manitobans, are an underused asset. There may be the short-term potential to create self-guided audio tours or

itineraries to better capitalize on these mostly privately owned properties.

Develop new assets:

- The National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada, even though it exists as a building, can be classified as a new asset as it is still early in its development phase. It has potential to be a boulder – certainly for Portage la Prairie and potentially for Manitoba – and to integrate with Portage La Prairie's larger Indigenous strategy. (This is discussed next as part of our lead recommendation for tourism transformation.)



Photo: Fort la Reine Museum, National Trust for Canada

- Additional new assets that could fill key gaps include quirky, independent, characterful retail to attract visitors and locals, unique destination accommodation and worth-the-drive restaurants.
- Maximise possibilities of all assets with a view to packaging, bundling, cross-promoting and creating itineraries. For example, there may be opportunities for special interest tours linked to the aviation history of the area, including Southport.

Strengthen marketing:

- Longer-term, as the residential school museum expands its offerings, create a

marketing plan of regional and national scope with this asset at the core.

- Shorter-term, create familiarisation campaigns for local leaders, tourism operators and residents to help them serve as ambassadors for the city and ensure they know what assets and experiences to suggest to visitors. Indeed, a one-page fact sheet for staff at hotels, major restaurants and attractions could be developed to ensure visitors get reliable, consistent tips on what to do in town.
- Target special interest groups – including railway enthusiasts and eco-minded

visitors – for daytrips to Portage la Prairie. These are niche markets but involve people who often spend significant money on their interests and will visit smaller, more off-the-beaten-path destinations.

- Create in-town restaurant deals for families visiting Fort la Reine Museum as well as nearby beaches (Delta, St. Ambroise) that have almost no amenities of their own. Beachgoers, cottagers and those renting Airbnbs could be enticed to come into Portage more often for midweek restaurant deals and other experiences.



Photo: Island on the Prairies, Facebook

Threats

There are no significant threats that are particular to Portage. Instead, the threats tend to apply to Manitoba's tourism industry as a whole. These include:

- The lingering (or renewed) effects of the pandemic or another health emergency that dampens tourism and sets back business and asset development. Staffing challenges and additional COVID-related protocols made the pandemic a very

intense time for operators, and a similar global health disruption is a significant threat.

- Related to this, an ongoing shortage of service staff and the impact this has on customer service and experience development.
- Climate change, which presents an increasing threat to Manitoba's destinations, particularly due to flooding

or high-water levels and wildfires. Portage, being so close to the Assiniboine River, is particularly at risk of flood-related damage and disruption. The unpredictability and physical threat posed by extreme weather also present challenges for operators and the need for additional flexibility and disaster planning.

- Rising gas prices and the threat of recession, which could hinder tourism generally, particularly among short-haul target markets. However, rising gas prices and costly international travel may also present an opportunity for Portage la Prairie to highlight the enjoyable elements of a staycation in a town with several activities to choose from.
- A lack of funding and staff capacity, which is common in many place brand communities but notable in Portage because of the lack of staff dedicated to tourism.
- The lack of momentum toward the creation of a business case or economic impact study to help make the case for further municipal and First Nations investment in tourism.
- Logistical delays around the development of the National Indigenous Residential School Museum.



Photo: Island on the Prairies, Facebook

Destination Development Recommendations

Lead Opportunity: National Indigenous Residential School Museum

While Portage la Prairie has many good recreational and outdoor amenities, its major developing asset, the National Indigenous Residential School Museum, is unique not just in Manitoba but in Western Canada.

Located within the former Portage la Prairie Indian Residential School and on the urban land of the Long Plain First Nation, it was created, as its website states, to provide “a place where people can learn, share, heal and move forward with a greater understanding of the forces that shaped and forever changed multiple generations of First Nations people.” Its purpose is twofold:

- To create a memorial to those who went through the experience, to honour them and to help many of the survivors with their journey of healing.
- To showcase Indigenous history, the vibrant culture, stories, languages through exhibits, artifacts, pictures and displays.



The museum will be a unique opportunity to tell the story of residential schools and a powerful, tangible catalyst for reconciliation. While not currently market ready, once fully developed it could be a major, potentially national visitor attraction in Portage la Prairie. Supporting and accelerating development of the National Indigenous Residential School Museum offers a transformational experience development for Portage la Prairie.

Investment in the museum would have these advantages:

- It would accelerate the museum's development and increase its ability to be market-ready by elevating the visitor experience, the marketing reach, the exhibits and curatorial work and potential partnerships with other Indigenous operators in the travel trade. Significant

investment would allow an immediate start on the many ideas and plans that exist but that can't yet be realised due to limited staff and funding.

- It would help deliver on Portage la Prairie's goals to be inclusive and representative of the Indigenous community.
- It would create a new and genuinely unique visitor experience that is worth a special trip to Portage, potentially benefitting other local tourism operators and businesses.

What is needed?

The National Indigenous Residential School Museum is a new museum with all the development issues that entails. One great advantage is that it already has a building, although given its age, there are significant construction and logistical issues to be addressed.

As we learned on our site visit, the museum has a wealth of archival material that is in the process of being sorted, catalogued and tagged. This material can form the basis of both permanent and occasional - or even touring - exhibits. Investment could help the museum accelerate this archival, curatorial and exhibit development process and support programming, exhibition creation, restoration



Photo: National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada, Facebook

of delicate materials, translation from or into Indigenous languages, digitization, film and print production and interactive visitor information and communication.

Investment could also support developing and restoring the fabric of the building itself and its grounds, to maximise the options of the spaces and to elevate the visitor experience. This includes additional meeting and research space, spaces to host special events and areas purpose-built for student learning and school groups. It could also include a restful space only for residential school survivors and their families.

Capacity gaps have also been identified in areas such as grant-writing to unlock further funding, archivists to tackle the large amount of historical material and exhibition designers.

Investments in these areas, and others the museum's staff identify, could help realise this transformational tourism development opportunity.

Next steps

- Review visitor experiences at contemporary museums – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – to generate ideas for maximising and exhibiting the wealth of archival material on hand. Detail what it would take to build out these elements and exhibits. Look particularly at how best to present

the material in different Indigenous languages and how interactive museum tools can facilitate this.

- Consider creating an online version of the museum – to allow people who cannot visit (including survivors) to engage with the material and to promote the museum

and create interest in in-person visits.

- Create clear lines of leadership and communication to include the museum, survivors, the wider Indigenous community, the Manitoba Indigenous Tourism Association and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership organisations in



NATIONAL INDIGENOUS
RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL
Museum of Canada Inc.



Portage la Prairie such as the Portage Urban Indigenous Peoples Coalition.

- Look to help fill capacity and museum skills gaps – such as sorting, cataloguing and preserving archival material, exhibition creation and production and administrative tasks such as grant-writing.
- Investigate resources such as Community Futures to help with business planning.
- Create a recruitment and training program to build a roster of Indigenous museum guides – both paid positions and volunteer.
- Continue to conceive and renovate the building, as well as invest in exhibits and museum experiences to create a complete visitor experience.
- Ensure accessibility to allow visitation by Elders and especially elderly or mobility-challenged survivors.
- Longer term, maximise the use of the museum's location on Long Plain First Nation and adjacent to the new Microtel. There are possibilities to extend programming and artifacts such as temporary exhibitions in the hotel, and to host conferences, workshops and student visits.

Additional Recommendations

In addition to our lead recommendation, there are several others that could help grow visitation to Portage la Prairie:

- Realise the untapped potential in visitors already coming to Portage la Prairie, such as families going to Splash Island, shoppers to the big box stores, sports teams and fans to Stride Place. Create promotions and itineraries to encourage them to come more often and see more of the city and the area, and spend more money.
- Work with the area's large companies such as Roquette, McCain and Simplot and with the Southport business park to create special packages for business visitors so they get out and spend money in the town rather than stay in their hotel rooms.
- Target and create packages for members of special interest groups who may be unaware of Portage la Prairie's "hidden gems" such as hunters and birders who may wish to take a detour to Delta Marsh, as well as railway enthusiasts.
- Consider ways to make better use of the city's heritage homes, perhaps as potential B&Bs or Airbnbs, or to create more engaging architectural walking or visiting tours.

Photo: Photo: National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada, website



Photo: Splash Island Water Park



Photo: Fort la Reine Museum - Inspirock

Appendices

Stakeholder and Operator Interviews

- Lee Beaton, *Prairie Fusion*
- Lauren Beckwith, *Southport Aerospace Centre*
- Lorraine Daniels, *National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada*
- Emma Ens-MacIver, *Fort la Reine*
- Scott Greenlay, *Delta Beach Cottagers Association*
- Preston Meier, *City of Portage la Prairie*
- Eve O'Leary, *Portage Regional Economic Development*
- Shash Patel, *Microtel Inn and Suites by Wyndham*
- Angie Shindle, *Portage Regional Recreation Authority*
- Brittany Solvason, *National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada*
- Kaley Young, *Central Manitoba Tourism*

Tourism Asset List

This inventory of 82 assets focuses on those that are positive visitor demand generators – those assets that are in themselves reasons to visit or that help to complete or augment a visit. These include key experiences, festivals and events, shops and restaurants and accommodations. While we recognise the importance of supporting assets that ensure visitors have access to necessary services during their stay, we have not included those supporting services primarily used by residents such as gyms and fitness studios, beauty salons, banks and real estate offices.

Asset	Readiness (estimated)	Sector
Arthur Meighen House	Doors Open	Attractions
Barker Suites	Visitor Ready	Accommodations
Bill's Sticky Fingers	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Boun's Lao Street Eatery	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Canad Inns Destination Centre	Market Ready	Accommodations
Canadian Pacific Railway Heritage Park & Interpretive Centre	Doors Open	Museums & Galleries
Chronic Tacos	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Connery's Berry Farm	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Corn Maze at Fort la Reine	Doors Open	Attractions
Creekside Camping & RV Park	Visitor Ready	Campgrounds & RV Parks
Crescent Lake Skating Trail	Doors Open	Attractions
Days Inn by Wyndham	Market Ready	Accommodations
Delta Beach	Doors Open	Attractions
Delta Marsh	Doors Open	Attractions
Dick's Cafe	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Dutch-style Windmill	Doors Open	Attractions
Farm Away Retreat	Market Ready	Accommodations
Fort la Reine Museum	Market Ready	Museums & Galleries
Four Winds Cultural Centre	N/A	Attractions
Golden Eagle at Keeshkeemaquah	Doors Open	Attractions
Great Grey Owl statue	Doors Open	Attractions
Great Wall Chinese Restaurant	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Heatz	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Hi-way Motel	Visitor Ready	Accommodations
Ice Car Races at Crescent Lake	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
Island Park	Doors Open	Parks
Keeshkeemaquah Conference and Gaming Centre	Visitor Ready	Attractions
Jimmy's Submarine & Dairy Delight	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Lake Shore Restaurant & Bar	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Lita's Station	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Little Spruce Cafe	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Made in Manitoba Expo	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
Manitoba Airshow	Visitor Ready	Festivals & Events
Manitoba Softball Hall of Fame and Museum	Doors Open	Attractions
May Mei Chen's Chinese Restaurant	Doors Open	Food & Drink

Asset	Readiness (estimated)	Sector
Mayfair Farms	Visitor Ready	Attractions
Microtel Inn and Suites	Market Ready	Accommodations
Midtown Motor Inn	Doors Open	Accommodations
Mil-Jeanne Flowers & Axcenz	Doors Open	Shopping
Miller's Camping Resort	Visitor Ready	Campgrounds & RV Parks
Mole Guacamole	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Mr. Mike's Steakhouse Casual	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Mynarski House	Visitor Ready	Accommodations
National Indigenous Residential School Museum of Canada	Visitor Ready	Museums & Galleries
NayOrts	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Night Market	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
Om Indian Cuisine	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Oriental Pearl	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Our Farm Greenhouses	Doors Open	Shopping
Over the Coals	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Portage Ex	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
Portage Farmers' Market	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Portage Flying Club	Doors Open	Other
Portage Golf Club	Visitor Ready	Attractions
Portage Industrial Exhibition Campground	Doors Open	Campgrounds & RV Parks
Portage Junk Yard Dogs	Doors Open	Sports
Portage MCC Thrift Shop	Doors Open	Shopping
Portage Sandhills Wildlife Management Area	Doors Open	Outdoors
Portage Snowmobile Trails	Doors Open	Outdoors
Portage Potato Festival	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
Prairie Fusion Arts & Entertainment	Visitor Ready	Museums & Galleries
Riverbend Orchards	Visitor Ready	Attractions
Rotary Santa Parade of Lights	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
Roycan's Country Haven B&B	Visitor Ready	Accommodations
Seasons Family Restaurant	Doors Open	Food & Drink
Solomon's Home Garden Gift	Visitor Ready	Shopping
Southport Golf Course	Visitor Ready	Sports
Splash Island Waterpark	Visitor Ready	Attractions
St. Ambrose Beach	Doors Open	Attractions



Photo: Island on the Prairies Facebook

Asset	Readiness (estimated)	Sector
Stride Place	Market Ready	Sports
Sunset Motel	Doors Open	Accommodations
Super 8 by Wyndham	Visitor Ready	Accommodations
Tavern United	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Tornado's Restaurant & Lounge	Visitor Ready	Food & Drink
Vintage Heather's Antiques	Doors Open	Shopping
Westgate Inn	Visitor Ready	Accommodations
What's the Scoop	Market Ready	Food & Drink
Whoop & Hollar Folk Festival	Visitor Ready	Festivals & Events
William Glesby Centre	Market Ready	Performing Arts
Winterfest	Doors Open	Festivals & Events
World's Largest Coca-Cola can	Doors Open	Attractions
Yellowquill Motel	Doors Open	Accommodations

Design: simplelifedesigns.ca



Photo: Fort la Reine Museum, Island on the Prairies, Facebook



Photo: City Hall, Island on the Prairies, Facebook

