

## **Curtain rises on blockbuster cultural season: New performing-arts theatre, ROM, AGO creating 'buzz' city hopes will woo tourists**

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By Jennifer Lewington

The Toronto-only production of *The Lord of the Rings* opens in only six days, the kickoff for what local officials hope is a comeback year for tourism -- with culture centre stage.

The musical extravaganza based on J. R. Tolkien's legendary tales is the opening act for new or expanded cultural institutions opening over the next 18 months, part of the city's "live with culture" festivities. The cumulative effect, so government and industry spokesmen hope, will raise Toronto's international profile after years of tourism decline.

"All the buzz in the city is definitely a plus, giving people a renewed incentive to come to Toronto," said Alex Filiatrault, director of marketing for the Four Seasons Hotel. The upscale hotel is a close neighbour of the Royal Ontario Museum, which is set to unveil its "crystal" addition in 2007. Blocks away, the Art Gallery of Ontario's Frank Gehry expansion is set for 2008.

This year alone will see a \$40-million expansion of the Ontario Science Centre and a 30-per-cent enlargement of the Gardiner Museum. A bigger Royal Conservatory of Music is scheduled to be unveiled next year.

The major cultural newcomer in 2006 is the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, nearing completion on Queen Street, that will house the Canadian Opera Company and the National Ballet. The splurge of government and private-sector cultural funding behind these projects is a boon for tourism officials.

"Toronto finds itself having the most powerful story it has ever had to tell with all the new cultural assets," said Andrew Weir, vice-president of Tourism Toronto, the industry visitor and convention bureau. The spotlight on culture is a bonus for the major conventions, booked several years ago, set to arrive this year. The annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in May is expected to draw 20,000 visitors, while the world AIDS congress in August is estimated to bring 20,000 participants and 2,000 media. An unusually large number of major conventions -- 14 in all -- are scheduled for Toronto, not counting several major sports events such as an international dragon boat competition in August. But despite a rebound in business and leisure visitors since 2003, when the deadly SARS virus hit Toronto, the tourism picture is mixed.

In 2005, Tourism Toronto reports, the number of overseas visitors climbed to 1.6 million, up 9.5 per cent from 1.4 million in 2004. An aggressive marketing campaign last fall by Tourism Toronto drew 312,000 visitors from Britain in 2005, up 15 per cent over 2002.

However, the U.S. market remains weak because of higher fuel costs, a strong Canadian dollar and uncertainty over future rules for U.S. travellers returning home.

Tourism Toronto estimates 2.7 million U.S. visitors came to the city last year, down from 3.2 million in 2000. The big weakness is a drop-off in travel from states near the border from which people can drive to Toronto. Both city and provincial tourism officials are concerned about U.S. plans, still under discussion, to require Americans to have new security documents to return home.

"It's a serious concern for us and a threat to the Ontario tourism industry," said Gary Wheeler, a spokesman for the provincial Tourism Ministry. "The best solution is for travellers to continue to use commonly available identification" such as a driver's licence with photo ID.

Despite the obvious obstacles to luring back Americans, Tourism Toronto has a \$24-million war chest -- fuelled by a self-imposed hotel room tax -- that funds a significant marketing campaign for U.S. and overseas markets.

The spin-off impact of events such as *The Lord of the Rings*, says Mr. Weir, is to generate international media attention. "It's an opportunity to put Toronto in the spotlight and let people know something new, creative and edgy is happening year."