

Via Rail:

Workhorse of the North



Railway serves the unique needs of northerners, tourists

BY MARGARET ANNE FEHR

As a railway operating in Northern Manitoba, Via Rail is just as important to transporting tourists to the remote reaches of the province to experience the unspoiled terrain and magnificent wildlife as it is to the day-to-day operations of land-locked communities.

Catherine Kaloutsky, Via Rail media contact for Western Canada, explains that the thrice-weekly Winnipeg to Churchill route provides essential service to land-locked communities that depend on the railway for a variety of reasons in addition to the valuable role of carrying tourists north.

“Northern Manitoba communities rely on Via to manage their business affairs as well as getting them to and from doctor’s appointments,” says Kaloutsky.

And infrastructure improvements should only strengthen the rail line in the years to come.

A couple of years ago, Via Rail, the Canadian government, the Province of Manitoba and Keewatin Rail invested in infrastructure improvements which are expected to be completed within the next few years.

In the realm of tourism, the corporation works with tour operators to execute the tourism events that have branded Manitoba North as a unique global destination. Manitoba tour operators create travel and tourism packages that include Via Rail.

Rail Travel Tours based in Winnipeg is such a one. Daryl Adair, owner and tour operator, operates tours on many of Canada’s passenger trains, providing interesting ‘insider knowledge’ about the trains, the towns they pass through, and the local features to be enjoyed in each community.

“The Winnipeg to Churchill train travels past the Prairies, the Canadian Shield, the Boreal Forest (or Taiga) and lastly, the Arctic Tundra,” says Adair. “This is the only rail passenger journey I am aware of in North America that passes through these types of ecosystems outside the windows of the same train,” he says.

“Rail Travel Tours host tours include viewing the beluga whales throughout the year and a package to experience the polar bear migrations round trip from Winnipeg by rail,” says Adair.

Photo courtesy of Mark Reimer



Photo courtesy of Frontiers North Adventures

Rail Travel Tours factors into a handful of popular Frontiers North programs, including: the northern lights tour in spring, the beluga tour in July and August and the polar bear tour in late fall.

“We are also considering bringing back a version of our independent package that sees visits to northern communities for extended stays in Thompson, Gillam and The Pas as well as Churchill. I have also thought about bringing people to the King Miner Contest in Thompson for Nickel Days and again taking people to the Trappers Festival when the schedule of the train travels to and from The Pas during the daytime. Currently it is in the middle of the night.”

A new addition to the roster of train packages is the upcoming Canada Day in Churchill event from June 28 to July 4, 2011. A traveller who has already booked her seats for the tour commented, “This trip will be a great way for my husband and myself to celebrate Canada Day – and we have been to Ottawa for Canada Day celebrations four times, so this will be another great way to celebrate Canada’s birthday.”

There’s an aspect of appreciating what’s in your own province that Adair routinely witnesses.

“Our foreign visitors really enjoy their travels to Northern Manitoba. I remind Canadian guests who may shrug off the idea of travelling to Northern Manitoba and Churchill that people from around the world are travelling thousands of miles to experience what we have here. Sometimes we take for granted what is in our own back yard,” he says.



Photo courtesy of Mike Macri



Photo courtesy of Richard Day Daybreak Photography

“I also tell them that the history in Northern Manitoba is fantastic and you appreciate how big the Prairie Provinces are when you travel them by land. Manitobans who stand on the shores of Hudson Bay for the very first time are really impressed when they realize that they are still in their own home province.”

Frontiers North Adventures, a made-in-Manitoba tourism success story, first saw light of day when General Manager John Gunter’s parents started offering expert-guided trips to Churchill in the mid-eighties. “My folks started Frontiers North Adventures in 1986 by hosting guests in Churchill on all-inclusive beluga whales and polar bears tours,” says the general manager.



Meetah Building Supplies sells:

- Cement, rebar.
- PWF lumber and plywood.
- OSB, KB Board.
- Engineered floor joists.
- Engineered roof trusses.
- Shingles, hardboard siding.
- Aluminum Fascia Soffit.
- PVC windows.
- Steel-insulated doors.
- Insulation, poly.
- Floor coverings.
- Drywall and taping supplies.
- Panelling.
- Paint and accessories.
- Heating, plumbing, electrical packages.
- Sewer and water holding tanks.
- Adhesives, caulking, fasteners, nails, screws.
- Appliances.
- Complete housing packages.

Meetah Building Supplies manufactures:

- Kitchen cabinets.
- Bathroom vanities.
- Commercial millwork.
- Residential exterior doors.

Residential
and
Commercial



Box 416 Nelson House, MB R0B 1A0
Phone: 204-484-2340 Fax: 204-484-2855
www.meetah.ca

“Throughout the nineties, our company built products in Nunavut, hosting guests to view walruses, bowhead whales, musk ox, polar bears but most of our business, even today, is still out of the community of Churchill,” says Gunter. “We’ve got roots here and a lot of infrastructure.” The company is part owner of a local hotel and restaurant and manages a gift shop.

Train travel factors into a handful of popular Frontiers North programs where transportation by train from Winnipeg to Churchill is part of the packages. They include the northern lights tour in spring, the beluga tour in July and August and the polar bear tour in late fall.

The company specializes in hosting long-haul, high yield guests to Manitoba. “Our guests are coming from as far as the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and other distant locations,” says Gunter.

**WE’RE LOOKING FOR PEOPLE WHO SAY,
‘LET’S DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT NEXT
WEEK OR ON OUR SUMMER VACATION;
LET’S VISIT CHURCHILL!’ ”**

—FRONTIERS NORTH ADVENTURES
GENERAL MANAGER JOHN GUNTER

“This segment of our market we consider as high yield due to the time and money our travellers invest with us. The average Manitoba tourist will spend \$105 per day in Manitoba, while our average guests are spending approximately \$1,000 a day by comparison. It’s a much smaller pool of guests that travel with us, but that’s the niche that we focus on.”

Another important segment of the company’s market is targeted towards higher volume ad hoc guests. This market includes guests originating from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, northwest Ontario as well as Minnesota and North Dakota in the United States.

“These are the people who are going to be driving to Thompson, getting on the train there and travelling by rail to Churchill and spending a few days with us during the summer. Programs that we target for this market are classified as land-only packages. When we’re working to attract higher volume guests in the province, we’re doing so in local newspapers, with billboard advertising or posters in a community centre or train stations. We’re looking for people who say, ‘Let’s do something different next week or on our summer vacation; let’s visit Churchill!’” says Gunter.

“In 2013, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights will be opening in Winnipeg and it’s going to be directly across the promenade from the Via Railway station. Being participants in Manitoba’s tourism industry, we anticipate tourism in the province to increase substantially with folks coming to experience the museum. We’re building these programs to hopefully attract people to come all the way up to Churchill.” ♦

For more details on Via Rail service between Winnipeg to Churchill or rail travel tours in the north, visit www.viarail.ca, Rail Travel Tours at www.railtraveltours.com or toll free number 1-866-704-3528 and Frontiers North Adventures at www.frontiersnorth.com or toll-free North America number at 1-800-663-9832.