

## DESTINATION AREA ASSESSMENT

# Brandon



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Cover front photo: Travel Manitoba

Cover back photo: Riverbank Discovery Centre





# Executive Summary

## Challenge

Brandon has long been successful as a destination for large agriculture, business and sports events but it does not fully see itself as a tourist destination. Brandon lacks established tourism assets, unique accommodations and interesting recreation amenities. It tends to undersell what is potentially unique, including the Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts and burgeoning riverbank amenities, and doesn't fully capitalize on its status as a regional hub to keep Westman visitors in the city for one more night or one more experience.

## Opportunity

Brandon's riverbank area is fast becoming the city's outdoor community hub. Can additional river-located activities also increase its potential as a tourism draw? Investment in and support for Brandon's ambitious *Back to the River* master plan could accelerate the development of new river-based visitor attractions. Already, summer experience development has started with a new dock allowing paddlers to launch canoes and kayaks. A huge opportunity exists to build a winter attraction for both residents and visitors – a river trail for skating, skiing, fat biking, rentals, cultural or culinary events, etc. The riverbank could be a year-round visitor attraction unique in Western Manitoba that aligns with a provincewide focus on trail development and winter experiences.

## Outcome

Backing the *Back to the River* plan would support the creation of a major community asset for Brandonites and fill a gap for both winter and family outdoor recreational facilities. It would also help develop a regionally unique and compelling visitor draw, attracting visitors from Western Manitoba, neighbouring Saskatchewan and potentially the border state of North Dakota. Development of the opportunity would also be a catalyst for further revenue-generating recreational entrepreneurship in Brandon.





Photo: Travel Manitoba

# 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.

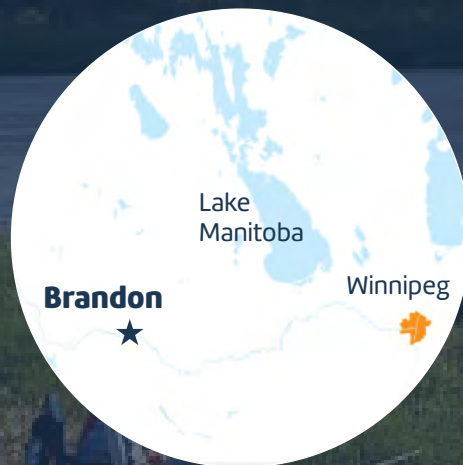
Probe Research and Sinclair Barnes Limited are extremely grateful to Brandon's tourism leaders and operators for the time they spent with us, their insights and their commitment to tourism development.

# The Basics

## Location

Brandon is Manitoba's second-largest city, located in the southwestern corner of the province on the banks of the Assiniboine River, approximately 214 km west of Winnipeg and 120 km east of the Saskatchewan border. It is close to the geographical centre of North America and 100 km north of the US border.

Brandon is the regional hub of Western Manitoba





and the primary hub of trade and commerce as well as government and health services for the Westman region. It also serves visitors from southeastern Saskatchewan and, to a small extent, from northern North Dakota. About 180,000 people live within a two- or three-hour drive of Brandon.

The City of Brandon was incorporated in 1882. Its colonial history is rooted in the Assiniboine River fur trade and its role as a major junction on the Canadian Pacific Railway. Known as **The Wheat City**, Brandon's economy is predominantly associated with agriculture, however it also has strengths in health care, manufacturing, food processing, education, business services and transportation.

## Population

With 51,000 residents, Brandon has seen steady population growth in the last two decades, thanks in large part to the arrival of about 600 new Canadians every year to the city. Brandon has particularly strong and growing Gujarati and Chinese communities, and the proportion of residents who are

Brandon residents who are New Canadians  
(Source: Statistics Canada)

**7%**  
2006

**16%**  
2016

immigrants more than doubled in the decade prior to the 2016 census. It's likely the most recent 2021 census will show similar growth in new Canadians.

## Top reasons to visit

Brandon's heritage is agriculture, and this still drives tourism, especially around the big agricultural fairs, most held at the **Keystone Centre**. Fairs include the **Manitoba AG-EX** (an all-breeds cattle show), **Manitoba Ag Days** (Canada's largest indoor farm show) and the **Royal Manitoba Winter Fair**. As well, the city's Indigenous community holds several annual fairs including the **Dakota Nation Winterfest**.

Brandon also has a strong military connection. Military personnel, military veterans and military families visit for events at sites such as the **Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum**, which is also popular as a wedding venue.

The third pillar of local tourism is sports – which are huge in Brandon. The **Brandon Wheat Kings** junior hockey team play out of the **Keystone Centre** and the city hosts many regional, provincial and national sports tournaments.

The **Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba (AGSM)** is a contemporary art museum, the oldest centre for visual art in Manitoba and one of the first in Canada. It has year-round exhibitions, produces regular public events and

offers a robust art education program with tours, workshops and classes for children, teens, and adults at all skill levels.

Visitors also come to Brandon in connection with Brandon's institutes of higher education including **Brandon University**, **Assiniboine Community College**, **Robertson College** and the **Manitoba Emergency Services College**.

## Getting there

Brandon is an easy drive from Winnipeg on the Trans-Canada Highway.

Driving times from key cities include:

- From Winnipeg – 2.5 hours (213 km)
- From Saskatoon – 6 hours (623 km)
- From Regina – 3.5 hours (363 km)
- From Minneapolis – 9 hours (908 km)

There is limited bus service via **Rider Express** and the **Brandon Air Shuttle** as well as somewhat inconvenient **Via Rail service to Rivers**, a \$60 cab ride from Brandon.

WestJet operates air service to Calgary from **Brandon Municipal Airport** – a relatively new tourism asset.

## Connectivity

As Manitoba's second-largest city and an important regional hub, cellular and hardwired internet access and speed are relatively good. Connectivity, including the ability to stream content, is comparable to that of Winnipeg.

# Brandon's Tourism Assets

## Natural features

Brandon is located in southwestern Manitoba, on the banks of the Assiniboine River in the aspen parkland ecoregion of the Canadian prairies. The terrain is generally rolling surrounding Brandon, and there is a large, picturesque valley located within the city. The Brandon Hills – from which the city gets its name – are located to the southeast.

Brandon is an ideal staging ground to experience several nearby provincial parks such as Spruce Woods Provincial Park and Rivers Provincial Park. These are ideal daytrips from Brandon, which is a perfect accommodation hub for touring the region.



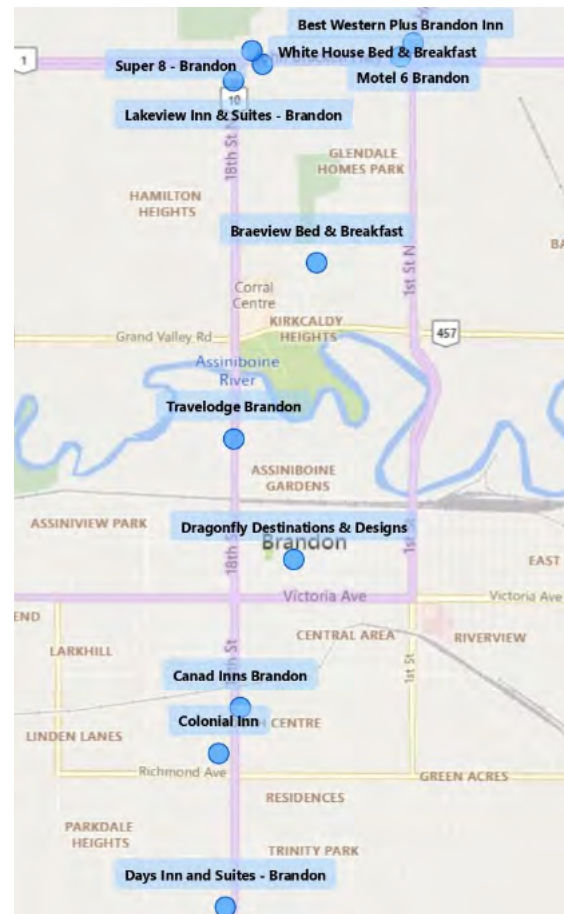


Photo: Days Inn &amp; Suites by Wyndham

## Accommodations

Brandon has extensive accommodations that cater to the crowds attending conventions, fairs and entertainment events at the Keystone Centre and other venues. Most are chain hotels and are fully market ready, and there are a few B&Bs and one rustic cabin option. Indeed, of

### Map of accommodations



Brandon's 22 accommodation options, nearly two-thirds are market or export ready. With approximately 1,400 rooms and an occupancy rate of about 60 per cent (prior to the pandemic), capacity is not an issue. However, there are opportunities to develop some interesting and unusual lodgings to compliment the somewhat run-of-the mill options Brandon currently offers.

### Main hotels include:

- Days Inn & Suites by Wyndham
- Super 8 by Wyndham
- Lakeview Inns & Suites
- Best Western Plus
- Canad Inns Destination Centre

### Motels include:

- Travelodge by Wyndham
- Motel 6
- Colonial Inn
- The Little Chalet Motel (perhaps Brandon's most unique accommodation option)

### There are three B&Bs:

- Braeview
- White House
- Dragonfly Destination and Designs

There is also Nature's Hideaway which has rustic cabins in a mature forest.





Photo: The Little Chalet Motel



Campgrounds include:

- **Meadowlark Campground**
- **Turtle Crossing Campground**
- **Grand Valley Provincial Park Campground** (8 km west of Brandon)
- **Bry-Mar RV Park & Campground** (10 km east of Brandon)

At last check, Brandon had approximately 80 listings on Airbnb - many of which are serviceable and modern but few of which are unique enough to be visitation drivers.

## Restaurants and food options

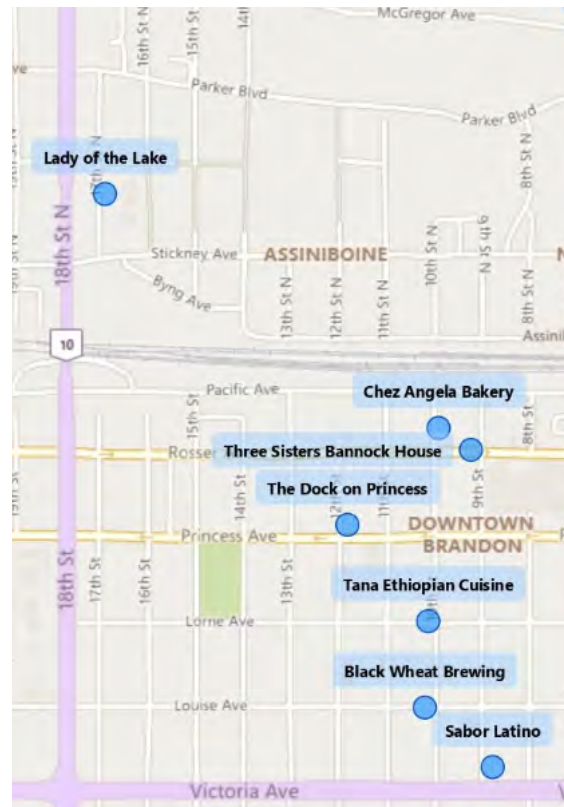
Brandon has a reasonably large selection of restaurants in every category, from family and fast food to more unique independent ethnic eateries to well-established pubs.

Some standouts that would most lend themselves to a tourism experience include:

- **Lady of the Lake** (a Brandon landmark that includes a home décor boutique)
- **Albert's Bistro** (Greek food)
- **Sabor Latino** (South American cuisine)
- **Tana Ethiopian Cuisine**
- **The Dock on Princess** (specialising in local food)

- **Dragonfly Delights Tea Room** (tearoom which also caters events such as birthday parties and bridal showers)
- **Chez Angela Bakery and Café** (pastries at this “local-first” bakery)
- **Black Wheat Brewing** (a new craft brewery and taproom)

## Map of restaurants and food options (downtown)



A recent notable opening is **Three Sisters Bannock House** located in the historic city centre and serving “First Nations comfort food”.

In addition to stand-alone restaurants, the **Riverbank Discovery Centre** is the site of the popular annual **Food Truck Warz** featuring over 20 food trucks, beer gardens, live music and a carnival.

A hidden gem in Brandon is the **Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts (MICA)**, which trains the next generation of chefs. It hosts several annual food events such as the **International Wine & Food Festival**, **Harvest on the Hill** showcasing pairings of locally produced beer and food, and the **MICA Holiday Buffet** around Christmastime. MICA’s annual fundraiser, the four-week **Great Grey Owl** fine dining restaurant, is one of Brandon’s most anticipated annual events.

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



Photo: Chez Angela Bakery & Cafe



Photo: Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts (MICA)





Photo: Travel Manitoba

## Shopping

Brandon is the shopping hub for southwestern Manitoba. It has two large shopping malls – the Corral Centre with a range of big box and grocery stores and the Shoppers Mall, which has anchor brands such as Sport Chek, Landmark Cinemas, Shoppers Drug Mart and Dollarama.

More interesting for tourists, the city has an increasing number of independent shops, many featuring local products. Notable shops include:

- **Lady of the Lake** (a 5,000 square foot home décor shop which features vintage and upcycled furniture)

- **The Green Spot Home and Garden Centre** with a branch of the Chez Angela Bakery
- **Cinnamon Tree Boutique** (women's fashions and accessories)
- **Charlow** (gift shop with unique products)

A hidden gem in Brandon is **Crow's General Store** – an experience as much as a shop. Located in Brandon's characterful East End, it is part antique and quirky collectibles store, part ice-cream shop and a memorable browsable outing.

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



Photo: Crow's General Store



## Events and festivals

Brandon has a strong lineup of at least 22 festivals and events throughout the year, several at the Keystone Centre. Some attract mostly local and regional visitors (such as the Food Truck Warz) while others appeal more widely to huge crowds (such as the Royal Manitoba Winter Fair and the other ag-related festivals mentioned earlier).

In addition, Brandon's Indigenous community hosts a sizable number of events including:

- Dakota Nation Winterfest
- National Indigenous Peoples Day
- Honouring the Good Road Gala
- Orange Shirt Day
- Sisters in Spirit

Other Brandon fairs and events include:

- **Brandon Scrapbooking Convention** (Manitoba's largest scrapbooking convention)
- **Culture Days** (free cultural events happening across the city)
- **Brandon's Big One Arts and Craft Sale** (at the Keystone Centre)
- **Westman Multicultural Festival** (in pavilions across the city)

The Fusion Credit Union Stage at the Riverbank Discovery Centre holds performances throughout the summer, from small cultural performances to large concerts.

## Tourism services

Brandon attractions and listings are featured in regional marketing materials produced by Westman Tourism, and Brandon Tourism has a storefront for visitors at the Riverbank Discovery Centre – a natural location as the centre is a community hub. The centre also has a

gift shop where tourism information is free and readily available.

Brandon Tourism is responsible for marketing information and communications. It produces extensive tourist information across print, online and social media. It has a good tourism brochure and a strong website.

The Brandon Tourism app is a user-friendly, complete and up-to-date guide on everything to see and do while in Brandon. Users can



Photo: Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba





Photo: Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum

bookmark favourites from the interactive map showing restaurants, shops and activities.

Brandon Tourism has done a particularly good job of creating interest-specific information leaflets with lists of sites to visit. They are available free at the Riverbank Discovery Centre. Interest areas include Family Fun, Reconnect with Nature, Aviation Adventures, Fine Arts, Date Ideas and Alternative Brandon – with listings of tattoo parlours and cannabis shops. Ideally, in future, budget could be found to create online versions of these leaflets.



Photo: Brandon Wheat Kings



# Enabling Environment

Brandon Tourism is the city's tourism promotional arm, and its staff are well integrated into other strands of the visitor ecosystem including Brandon First, which is a key collaborator on tourism itineraries as part of the city's pitch for events, conventions and tournaments. Brandon Tourism staff also sit on the regional Tourism Westman board.

Brandon's large Indigenous population has a separate tourism agency – Brandon Indigenous Tourism. It seeks to educate and open opportunities for building relationships with the land, with Indigenous peoples and with fellow citizens in Brandon. It works closely with Brandon Tourism, and many Indigenous events are held at the Riverbank Discovery Centre, including National Indigenous Peoples Day celebrations.







Photo: Riverbank Discovery Centre

Brandon has long been successful as a destination for large agriculture, business and sports events, which have been guaranteed revenue drivers for Brandon for many years. While confidence is high for the event business to return to pre-pandemic levels, the gap left by cancellations during the pandemic has negatively impacted the city's revenue but also prompted increased awareness of tourism's role in the local economy. While the view that tourism could bolster economic development is growing, it is not yet the prevailing opinion among elected officials.

However, even pre-pandemic, organisers of the city's big agricultural attractions saw a gap in creating and promoting tourism to support big events. Brandon First, the city's event attraction arm, was set up in part to fill this gap. It was



Photo: Riverbank Discovery Centre

recognised that, beyond the main events or conventions, the city did not have compelling tourism products that could create a complete experience for event attendees or entice them to stay longer in Brandon and spend money in the city itself. Brandon First's team now works to create packages and itineraries to add a tourism element to the big events.

As Brandon grows, it is putting considerable effort into amenities that improve residents' quality of life. A key driver is *Back to the River*, Brandon's ambitious 20-year (2015-2035) Assiniboine River corridor master plan. The non-profit Riverbank Discovery Centre, whose programming connects residents to nature, is at the heart of this project. It is a civic amenity and a community hub that could also be, with some investment, a tourism amenity. The Riverbank Discovery Centre is also well-positioned to be a key tourism driver because the Centre is home to Brandon Tourism's offices, allowing for natural partnerships and conversations about the Centre, its programming and its long-term tourism potential.

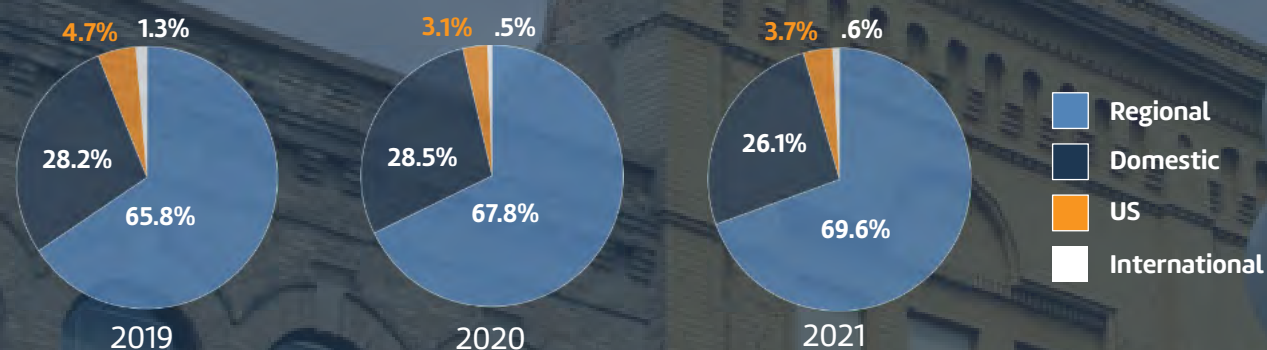
While progress on the river master plan has revived post-pandemic, the Riverbank Discovery Centre is also working to fill a gap mentioned often during our assessment visit: Brandon's lack of activities for families, particularly outdoor activities. Many of the potential family-friendly activities such as nature camps and paddling could also be tourism attractors.

# Target Markets

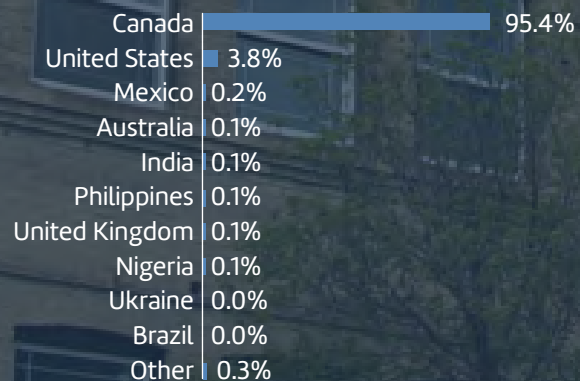
## Who visits now?

Brandon's visitation is generally steady year-round and is primarily regional. Prior to the pandemic, about six per cent of Brandon's visitors came from the United States or beyond, while the vast majority, about two-thirds, were Manitobans.

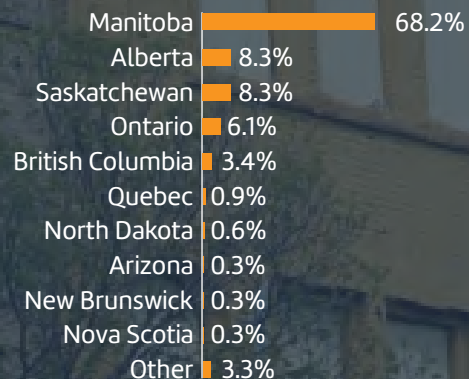
### Visits by Tourist Segment



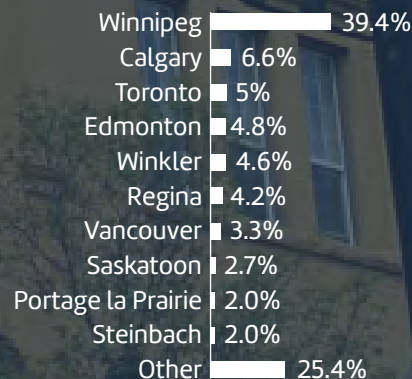
### Visitation by Country



### Visitation by Province or State



### Visitation by Metro Region



Source: Near mobile data



Brandon is not typically thought of as a vacation destination. Most people visit Brandon for business instead of pleasure – or for specific events such as the Brier national men’s curling championships, major hockey tournaments or ag fairs. This anecdotal impression reported by local tourism leaders is borne out by the data that shows about one-quarter of Brandon’s visitors are from other provinces, mostly Ontario and Alberta. This proportion of domestic visitors is higher than other place brand communities such as Portage la Prairie, Morden Winkler and Neepawa.

These visitors are important sources of revenue because they support key tourism amenities such as hotels and restaurants, but there is also an opportunity to convert these business visitors into more traditional tourists

by offering them experiences and amenities that make it worth staying overnight or an extra day or bringing a spouse or family along.

### Who could visit?

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

- **Nature lovers.** Nature is not far in Brandon, which could become a more effective staging area or hub for a variety of outdoor activities. The Riverbank Discovery Centre and the Assiniboine Food Forest, a unique conservation area, are within the city limits. Nearby, visitors can hike trails, camp, see birds and wildlife at the Brandon Hills Wildlife Management

Area and Grand Valley Provincial Park, both 15 minutes from the city.

- **Golfers.** Though golf courses abound in Manitoba, Brandon’s are strong, including Deer Ridge, Northern Pines Golf Course and Wheat City, which also has a golf simulator available year-round.
- **Foodies,** particularly to the events run by the Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts and to the Brandon Farmer’s Market, which is open year-round.

### Competitor Assessment

As the largest city in southwestern Manitoba, Brandon does not have key competitors among the smaller towns in the region. In fact, with its trading area of an estimated 180,000 people, it has opportunities to draw on them for tourism.

For events, which are not primarily tourism but have tourism elements, Winnipeg as a larger centre with significant event and convention facilities and tourism amenities is a competitor. Winnipeg is also a particular draw for younger people, especially in terms of nightlife and entertainment.

However, as a vacation destination, Clear Lake and Riding Mountain National Park may be Brandon’s nearest competitor. Indeed, many Brandon residents vacation in the park.



Photo: City of Brandon

# SWOT Analysis

Based on interviews, site visits as well as desk and market research, we've identified several strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. These are summarized here and explored further below.

| <b>S</b><br>Strengths   | <b>W</b><br>Weaknesses   | <b>O</b><br>Opportunities  | <b>T</b><br>Threats   |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong development plans in place</li> <li>• Events deliver a consistent source of visitation</li> <li>• Reliable visitor basics (accommodations, restaurants)</li> <li>• Easy access/ transportation links</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-perception as not a tourism destination</li> <li>• Tourism attractions only now being developed</li> <li>• Few unique stays or destination accommodations</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial focus on Brandon as a regional hub</li> <li>• Support <i>Back to the River</i></li> <li>• Strengthen marketing</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global disruptions (pandemic, recession, etc.)</li> <li>• Skills and labour shortage</li> <li>• Loss of momentum on <i>Back to the River</i> as the city's major differentiator</li> </ul> |

## Strengths

### Strong development plans in place, particularly for the Assiniboine River Corridor:

- *Back to the River* – an ambitious and creative plan to create a recreational destination for both locals and tourists. This plan has broad buy-in and helps to ensure momentum for the long-term project.
- The Riverbank Discovery Centre as a keystone – a strong non-profit at the heart of the plan.
- Good progressive tourism team in place, including Brandon Tourism, Brandon Indigenous Tourism, Tourism Westman, Brandon First.

- A growing population – so more support for economic development and the creation of good local amenities that can do double duty as tourism draws.

### A wide range of events that deliver a consistent source of visitation:

- Significant number of visitors coming to the city throughout the year, though many for non-tourism reasons.
- Good tourism teams in place to add tourism days to event-related visitors.

### Reliable visitor basics:

- Accommodations are particularly plentiful, good quality and family friendly.

- A central location in Westman that ensures it's a hub for a relatively large catchment area of 180,000 for business, shopping and potentially tourism.

### Good transportation links:

- Car to Winnipeg and Regina via the Trans-Canada Highway.
- Air links to Calgary.

## Weaknesses

### Self-perception as not a tourism destination:

- Historically, Brandon has focused on events not tourism, and tourism is not seen as a key economic development driver.



Photo: Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts (MICA)



- A reticence among some city leaders hampers tourism investment and development.
- Attractions are not top of mind for locals, including hotel staff who are not always able to provide good local recommendations for things to do and see.

#### **Tourism attractions only now being developed:**

- Promising new elements, such as the new canoe/kayak launch at the Riverbank Discovery Centre are a start, but much more is needed.
- Insufficient attractions for families, especially in winter.
- Insufficient nightlife for younger visitors. Younger Brandon residents tend to look to Winnipeg for entertainment, concerts, nightlife.
- Some potential attractions being undersold, including MICA.

#### **Few unique stays or destination accommodations:**

- Chain hotels predominate, which work well for event and business travellers but are not destinations in and of themselves.
- No boutique hotels, interesting B&Bs, glamping opportunities in the Assiniboine Food Forest, etc.

### **Opportunities**

Travel Manitoba has identified several key opportunity areas for provincial product and experience development. Several of these opportunity areas, such as Francophone, human rights and northern experiences, are not applicable to Brandon at the time of assessment.

However, Indigenous tourism is one opportunity area that aligns well with Brandon's population and its events. Already, nearly a dozen tourism assets in Brandon are either Indigenous owned and operated or offer Indigenous cultural experiences. For example, Brandon Indigenous Tourism is well established with its own brand and several successful annual events such as National Indigenous Peoples Day, Honouring the Good Road Gala and Orange Shirt Day. The 2022 Truth and Reconciliation Week scheduled for September 2022 at the Riverbank Discovery Centre will be one of the largest such events in Canada.

As well, water and winter experiences are two additional opportunity areas that align well with Brandon's tourism potential and will be discussed below as part of our lead recommendation.

There are several additional opportunities, including:

#### **An initial focus on Brandon as a regional hub:**

- Capitalise on the visitors already coming to Brandon from Western Manitoba and

parts of Saskatchewan for business (such as the agricultural fairs), sports (the various tournaments and Wheat Kings games) and to visit the post-secondary institutions.

- Create itineraries to encourage these existing visitors to stay an extra few days, engaging more with the city and its amenities.

#### **Strengthen marketing:**

- Brandon Tourism is already effective but would benefit from being amped up to increase awareness of Brandon's gems, particularly for Westman residents already visiting for business, health, education or sport-related reasons.
- The following tools and tactics, many used now for event audiences, could be further directed at potential visitors, such as:
  - **Targeting.** For example, reaching out to visiting sports teams through their clubs with promotions, discounts to eat at local restaurants, outdoor experiences and rentals, etc.
  - **Itineraries.** For example, for birders and wildlife enthusiasts with trail maps of nearby wildlife areas.
  - **Packages.** For example, packages for partners and families of Ag Fair attendees that includes discounts at restaurants, activities for children, deals at hotels with waterslides, etc.

- **Internal familiarisation tours** for hotel, restaurant and other frontline tourism staff to create “ambassadors” and increase awareness of local attractions, hidden gems and, longer-term, Brandon’s tourism potential.

#### Support *Back to the River*:

- Use the Assiniboine River and its recreational opportunities as a “hero” asset that sets Brandon apart from other Westman communities and creates a reason to turn a day trip into an overnight stay. The *Back to the River* strategy already has broad-based buy-in from city leaders, but was viewed as an attraction that needs significantly more development and investment (as opposed to being a hidden gem that only requires better marketing and awareness).
- Already has a clear list of assets requiring build-out to guide investment and next steps.
- Outdoor, river-based, community-backed experiences have strong visitor preference alignment and offer both summer and winter activities.
- Key infrastructure to develop this concept is already in place, including the Riverbank Discovery Centre and strong tourism teams that work well together.

The *Back to the River* concept, if developed and expanded, could be Brandon’s lead opportunity

for tourism development. We discuss this in more detail below.

### Threats

There are no significant threats that are particular to Brandon. 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. The pandemic saw hotel occupancy in Brandon drop from about 60 per cent to closer to 40 per cent. Staffing challenges and additional COVID-related protocols made the pandemic a very intense time for operators, and 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. 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 dampen tourism

generally, particularly among short-haul target markets. However, rising gas prices and costly international travel may also present an opportunity for Brandon to highlight the enjoyable elements of a staycation in Western Manitoba.

- A slowdown in the development of a tourism focus for Brandon and in building additional infrastructure such as riverbank and river-related assets. Similarly, as Brandon grows and as the need for local amenities increases, spending priorities facing city council might crowd out efforts to develop tourism.



Photo: City of Brandon



# Destination Development Recommendations

## Lead Opportunity: *Backing Back to the River*

Brandon's riverbank is fast becoming the city's outdoor community hub, connecting people to nature and the community to one another. Although mostly still a local attraction, it draws visitors from nearby towns in Western Manitoba and from further afield for events such as Canada Day and National Indigenous Peoples Day.

A huge opportunity exists to build a winter attraction for both residents and visitors – a river trail for skating, skiing, fat biking, rentals, cultural or culinary events, etc. The riverbank could be a year-round visitor attraction unique in Western Manitoba that aligns with a province-wide focus on trail development.





As mentioned, *Back to the River* is Brandon's 20-year master plan to develop the Assiniboine River corridor and is the engine driving riverbank development. River-located recreational activities are a key part of the plan. While the pandemic slowed progress, several new initiatives are now in place, including:

- Assiniboine Cove, a fully accessible kayak and canoe dock to the south of the Riverbank Discovery Centre. People will be able to rent canoes and kayaks or use their own at no charge. Enhanced wetlands will provide opportunities for

students and visitors to get up close with a variety of plants and animals that call the riverbank home.

- The All Nations Sharing Circle. Located at the Riverbank Discovery Centre and developed by Indigenous residents, this traditional circle offers participants the opportunity to speak and be heard. The sharing circle is part of Brandon's strategy to dedicate more public space to Indigenous culture and traditions for sharing with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

These and other developments will fill gaps in Brandon for inclusive, family activities and outdoor recreation, but the spin-off benefit is that they will also create new, year-round visitor attractions that would differentiate Brandon and be unique in Western Manitoba. The challenge is to maintain the momentum and focus investment, especially in winter-related river-based outdoor activities that locals are asking for and that could also serve as a hidden gem experience for visitors.

Indeed, a significant opportunity exists to build a winter attraction – a river trail for skating, skiing, fat biking and more that is similar to Winnipeg's Nestaweya River Trail but still authentic to the Wheat City. Winter river trails are an increasingly popular recreational asset, and Brandon can learn from experiences in cities such as Ottawa, Edmonton and most significantly, Winnipeg's Nestaweya. Elements could include trails with interpretive signage linked to Brandon's history or to local natural features such as the wetlands that are already part of the Riverbank Discovery Centre's programming. Additional ideas include warming huts, ice sculptures, art installations and pop-up attractions such as restaurants (perhaps a winter version of the Riverbank Discovery Centre's summer Food Truck Warz) and musical events.

Additionally, the summer version of the trail, now accessible from Assiniboine Cove, has



Photo: City of Brandon, Facebook



potential to be further built out especially by linking with the nature programming and wetlands location. Land-based elements such as viewing areas and picnic and BBQ spots along the riverbank could make the area a year-round visitor attraction unique in Western Manitoba that aligns with a provincewide focus on trail development and accessible outdoor experiences.

As a concept, it has these advantages:

- The concept aligns with the existing, agreed-upon city strategy and plan – *Back to the River* – focused on exactly this type of development.
- It can be supported by existing established infrastructure, including the Riverbank Discovery Centre, with significant amenities, programming and expertise already in place.
- It aligns with key visitor motivators such as outdoor recreation and winter activities. Initial soundings including our site visit assessment have shown enthusiasm for both summer and winter recreational river trails.
- It maximises the potential of the river, a recognised but not yet fully developed Brandon asset and Brandon's best bet to create a regional tourism asset.

- It helps to update Brandon's image, shifting internal and external views of Brandon as "not a tourist destination" to a "must visit". Indeed, according to metrics gathered by Destination Canada's Global Tourism Watch survey, one of Brandon's few brand attributes is its ability to combine outdoor activities with city experiences. So, there is already some foundational brand awareness upon which Brandon can capitalize.
- It provides a platform for new programming and a chance for the community to participate in development and use such as creating local arts displays or running science experiments on the river.
- It creates opportunities for profile-raising events such as an architectural warming hut contest similar to, or linked to, Nestaweya.
- It creates revenue opportunities for local businesses such as equipment rentals, skating lessons, pop up restaurants, etc.
- It creates a new, high-profile amenity that is attractive to businesses to support and sponsor, attractive to media to cover and offers the potential for Instagrammable moments.
- It can be implemented in the short to medium term, starting with building out

the structure and activities around the newly created Assiniboine Cove dock as well as conducting a feasibility study to examine the logistics of a winter trail, with a possible pilot in winter 2022-2023.

## Next steps

### Products & Experiences:

- Review visitor experiences at successful river trail initiatives such as Nestaweya to create an ideas bank of possible elements and what's needed to build them out in the short-term in Brandon.
- Consider supporting amenities such as equipment rentals, seating and viewing areas near the launch and along the river trails, rest stops on the trail itself, warming huts for winter, art installations such as ice sculptures, interpretive signage, and food options (permanent or pop-up).
- To build momentum, integrate the trail into existing activities at the Riverbank Discovery Centre including kids' nature camps, celebrations for National Indigenous People's Day, Canada Day, etc.

### Enabling Environment:

- Build on Brandon's strong tourism leadership to move the recreational and trails elements of the riverbank plan forward. This means determining budgets,

funding sources, marketing, logistics and an outline of benefits to the city both in terms of tourism and Brandon's overall quality of life.

#### **Infrastructure:**

- Review, prioritize and secure funding for key infrastructure improvements laid out in the *Assiniboine River Corridor Master Plan 2015 – 2035*, including trail loops, sculpture park, a winter park, etc. Significant study will be required to develop a full, completed river trail facility, including logistics, safety, environmental aspects, etc.
- With an eye to sustainability, additional oversight will be needed to monitor river conditions and trail quality.

#### **Target Audience:**

- Target visitors from Western Manitoba, border areas of Saskatchewan and North Dakota who will not have a competing river trail.
- Work with Brandon First to target existing business, governmental or health-related visitors.
- Create packages, itineraries and incentives featuring the river trail to encourage visitors to extend their stay and/or bring their families along.

### **Additional Recommendations**

In addition to our lead recommendation, Brandon's tourism development would benefit from the following:

- Create themed itineraries around Brandon's arts and culture assets. While the Keystone Centre is known for large music events, Brandon has other assets which do not get enough attention. Hidden gems such as the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba and the concerts held at the Fusion Stage could draw additional and different audiences to Brandon or provide a reason for business visitors to stay longer. Packaging them versus promoting them in isolation could pay dividends.
- Capitalize on the Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts and its year-round events. Culinary tourism is a huge draw globally and attractive to visitors searching for a uniquely local experience. As well, according to metrics gathered by Destination Canada's Global Tourism Watch survey, one of Brandon's stronger brand attributes is its diverse dining and culinary experiences. MICA's culinary events are a local gem held in a very pretty setting, but a lack of space, staff and student resources means these are usually limited to a small and largely local audience. Brandon Tourism could work with MICA to create and promote both larger and more intimate events such as food festivals, culinary workshops and fine dining experiences that would inspire visitors and serve students.
- Support National Reconciliation Week, being developed to run at the Riverbank Discovery Centre in fall 2022. Organized by the Brandon Urban Aboriginal Peoples Council, this new event aligns with Brandon's goals for increased Indigenous participation in the city's events and also aligns with Travel Manitoba's core opportunity area of expanded Indigenous-led tourism.
- Look at increasing the accommodation capacity, especially with unique stay options such as B&Bs, boutique motels, etc. Equally, look at the possibility longer term of a new hotel.





Photo: Riverbank Discovery Centre





Photo: Riverbank Discovery Centre

# Appendices

## Stakeholder and Operator Interviews

- Michelle Frechette, *Tourism Westman*
- Cassandra Jamieson, *Moonlit Canopy*
- Michèle LeTourneau, *Brandon Urban Aboriginal Peoples' Council*
- John Pearen, *Days Inn Brandon*
- Eileen Trott, *Daly House Museum*
- Sandy Trudel, *City of Brandon*
- Jennifer Watson, *Brandon First*

## Tourism Asset List

This inventory of 146 assets focuses on those that are positive visitor demand generators – those assets that are in themselves reasons to visit or help complete a tourism experience. 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                  |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 26th Field Regiment RCA/XII Manitoba Dragoons Museum                | Visitor Ready         | Museums & Galleries     |
| 34th St Bar & Grill   | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink            |
| 4B Ranch & Equestrian   | Visitor Ready         | Attractions             |
| A&L Cycle   | Visitor Ready         | Other                   |
| Aaltos and Tavern United  | Market Ready          | Food & Drink            |
| Albert's Bistro, Mini-Golf, Climbing Wall                           | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink            |
| Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba                                | Market Ready          | Museums & Galleries     |
| Artist Heart Studio & Gallery                                       | Doors Open            | Museums & Galleries     |
| Assiniboine Food Forest   | Market Ready          | Attractions             |
| BDNMB.ca Food Truck Warz  | Market Ready          | Food & Drink            |
| Benny's Restaurant  | Market Ready          | Food & Drink            |
| Best Western Plus Brandon Inn                                       | Export Ready          | Accommodations          |
| Black Wheat Brewing   | Market Ready          | Food & Drink            |
| Blue Hills Bakery & Deli  | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink            |
| Braeview Bed & Breakfast  | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations          |
| Brandon Farmer's Market   | Market Ready          | Shopping                |
| Brandon Festival of the Arts  | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events      |
| Brandon Flight Centre   | Market Ready          | Tours                   |
| Brandon Folk, Music & Art Festival                                  | Export Ready          | Festivals & Events      |
| Brandon General Museum and Archives                                 | Market Ready          | Museums & Galleries     |
| Brandon Hills Wildlife Management Area                              | Visitor Ready         | Parks                   |
| Brandon Home & Leisure Show   | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events      |
| Brandon Jazz Festival   | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events      |
| Brandon Residential Walking Tours                                   | Visitor Ready         | Tours                   |
| Brandon Tourism and Brandon Riverbank Inc.                          | Market Ready          | RTA, DMO & Associations |
| Brandon University All Nations Graduation Pow Wow                   | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events      |
| Brandon University Astronomical Observatory                         | Doors Open            | Attractions             |
| Brandon's Big One Arts & Craft Sale                                 | Market Ready          | Shopping                |
| Brown Sugar Produce   | Doors Open            | Shopping                |
| Canad Inns Brandon Destination Centre                               | Export Ready          | Accommodations          |
| Canadian Nationals Arabian and Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events      |
| Carousel & Dolls Doll Museum  | Visitor Ready         | Museums & Galleries     |
| Carriage House Antiques & Collectibles                              | Visitor Ready         | Shopping                |
| Charlow   | Visitor Ready         | Shopping                |
| Chez Angela Bakery and Café   | Market Ready          | Food & Drink            |

| Asset  | Readiness (estimated) | Sector              |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------|
| The Chilli Chutney                           | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Cinnamon Tree Boutique                       | Visitor Ready         | Shopping            |
| Clarion Hotel & Suites Brandon               | Market Ready          | Accommodations      |
| Coffee Culture Café & Eatery                 | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Colonial Inn                                 | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations      |
| Comfort Inn Brandon                          | Market Ready          | Accommodations      |
| Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum        | Market Ready          | Museums & Galleries |
| Coronation Park                              | Doors Open            | Parks               |
| Courtney's Cake Creations                    | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Crow's General Store                         | Visitor Ready         | Shopping            |
| Dakota Nation Winterfest                     | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events  |
| Dakota Nation Winterfest Competition Pow Wow | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events  |
| Daly House Museum                            | Market Ready          | Museums & Galleries |
| Days Inn and Suites                          | Market Ready          | Accommodations      |
| Deer Ridge Golf Course                       | Market Ready          | Attractions         |
| Designated Municipal Heritage Sites          | Visitor Ready         | Other               |
| Dinsdale Park                                | Doors Open            | Parks               |
| Downtown Cruise Night                        | Doors Open            | Festivals & Events  |
| Dragonfly Destination & Designs              | Market Ready          | Accommodations      |
| ECHO Restaurant & Wine Bar                   | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Empire Inn                                   | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations      |
| Eras Antiques & Art                          | Visitor Ready         | Shopping            |
| Evans Theatre                                | Visitor Ready         | Attractions         |
| Forbidden Flavours                           | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Fun N' Games HQ                              | Market Ready          | Shopping            |
| Fun Time Pottery                             | Market Ready          | Shopping            |
| George Strange's Prairie Showcase & Bookmart | Visitor Ready         | Shopping            |
| Georgie's Lounge                             | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink        |
| Glen Lea Golf Course                         | Market Ready          | Attractions         |
| Global Market                                | Visitor Ready         | Shopping            |
| Gondola Pizza                                | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Grand Valley Provincial Park                 | Market Ready          | Parks               |
| Great Western Roadhouse                      | Market Ready          | Food & Drink        |
| Green Spot Home & Garden                     | Market Ready          | Shopping            |
| H Coffee                                     | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink        |
| Holiday Inn Express                          | Export Ready          | Accommodations      |
| Houstons                                     | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink        |

| Asset   | Readiness (estimated) | Sector                 |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Jo-Brook Outdoors                                   | Visitor Ready         | Shopping               |
| Joe Beeverz Bar & Grill                             | Market Ready          | Food & Drink           |
| Just4Kidz Arcade Playland                           | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Keystone Alpaca Classic                             | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events     |
| Keystone Centre                                     | Export Ready          | Festivals & Events     |
| Keystone Motor Inn                                  | Market Ready          | Accommodations         |
| Kickin' Axe Throwing                                | Market Ready          | Attractions            |
| Komfort Kitchen                                     | Market Ready          | Food & Drink           |
| Kristopher Campbell Memorial Skate Plaza            | Doors Open            | Sports                 |
| Labyrinth of Peace Brandon Riverbank                | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Lady of the Lake                                    | Market Ready          | Food & Drink           |
| Lakeview Inns & Suites - Brandon                    | Export Ready          | Accommodations         |
| Learning from the Land Indigenous Interpretive Tour | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Los Brothers Street Food                            | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| Manitoba AG-EX                                      | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events     |
| Manitoba Agricultural Hall of Fame Inc              | Doors Open            | Museums & Galleries    |
| Manitoba Ag Days                                    | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events     |
| Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts                 | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| Manitoba Potato Production Days                     | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events     |
| Manitoba Summer Fair                                | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events     |
| Maple Syrup Tours                                   | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Marino's Pizza and Pasta                            | Market Ready          | Food & Drink           |
| Meadowlark Campground                               | Visitor Ready         | Campgrounds & RV Parks |
| Melba's Restaurant                                  | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| Midway Motel  | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations         |
| Motel 6 Brandon                                     | Market Ready          | Accommodations         |
| Mulligans Driving Range & Practice Centre           | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Murals Walking Tour                                 | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Music in the Park                                   | Doors Open            | Festivals & Events     |
| Nature's Hideaway                                   | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations         |
| North Hill Inn                                      | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations         |
| Northern Pines Golf Course                          | Market Ready          | Attractions            |
| One & Only Design Studio                            | Market Ready          | Shopping               |
| Open Garden Tours                                   | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Phoenix Ranch Stables & Equestrian Centre           | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Prairie Con   | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events     |

| Asset                                   | Readiness (estimated) | Sector                 |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Purple Martin Tours                     | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Queen Elizabeth Park                    | Doors Open            | Parks                  |
| Redwood Motor Inn                       | Doors Open            | Accommodations         |
| Riverbank Discovery Centre and Grounds  | Market Ready          | Outdoors               |
| Royal Canadian Artillery Museum         | Visitor Ready         | Museums & Galleries    |
| Royal Manitoba Winter Fair              | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events     |
| Sabor Latino                            | Market Ready          | Food & Drink           |
| Shady Lane Tea Room                     | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| Smitty's Family Restaurant              | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| Southview Flea Market and Market Garden | Visitor Ready         | Shopping               |
| Stream N Wood                           | Market Ready          | Shopping               |
| Sunnyside Golf Club                     | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Super 8 - Brandon                       | Market Ready          | Accommodations         |
| Sushi Hut                               | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| Tana Ethiopian Cuisine                  | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| T-Birds Food, Fun, Games                | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Ten Thousand Villages                   | Market Ready          | Shopping               |
| The 40                                  | Visitor Ready         | Food & Drink           |
| The Batchery                            | Doors Open            | Food & Drink           |
| The Dock on Princess                    | Market Ready          | Food & Drink           |
| The Glen P. Sutherland Gallery of Art   | Visitor Ready         | Museums & Galleries    |
| The Little Chalet Motel                 | Visitor Ready         | Accommodations         |
| The Little Shoppe                       | Doors Open            | Shopping               |
| Three Sisters Bannock House             | Doors Open            | Food & Drink           |
| Tipi Tour Legacy Project                | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Toymasters                              | Market Ready          | Shopping               |
| Travelodge Brandon                      | Market Ready          | Accommodations         |
| Treesblood Farm                         | Visitor Ready         | Tours                  |
| Tripvia Tours (app)                     | Doors Open            | Tours                  |
| Tubin' at Grand Valley                  | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Turtle Crossing Campground              | Visitor Ready         | Campgrounds & RV Parks |
| two farm kids Natural Foods             | Visitor Ready         | Shopping               |
| Victoria Inn Hotel & Convention Centre  | Market Ready          | Accommodations         |
| Western Manitoba Centennial Auditorium  | Market Ready          | Festivals & Events     |
| Westman Multicultural Festival          | Visitor Ready         | Festivals & Events     |
| Westman Reptile Gardens                 | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |
| Wheat City Golf Course                  | Visitor Ready         | Attractions            |

Design: simplelifedesigns.ca





Photo: Food Truck Warz



