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NEXT STOP

Calgary Exchanges Its Cowboy Duds for a Tuxedo

By SUSAN CATTO

THERE was a time, not so many years ago, when the only reasons most tourists would bother venturing into [Calgary](#) was for the two-week rodeo festival in July or as a stop on the way to the [Banff](#) mountain resort, some 80 miles west. But this rugged city in central [Alberta](#) is undergoing an energetic revitalization brought on by an oil boom, and its population, according to the Calgary Civic Census, has increased nearly 30 percent in the last decade, to almost 992,000.

For visitors, all this activity means a revived downtown core with restaurants whose chefs — and prices — could vie with those in [Toronto](#) or [Montreal](#); spruced-up, outlying neighborhoods; and new places to stay like the [Hotel Arts](#) near the cultural heart of the city, or, the west-end [Sandman Hotel & Suites](#), just across from [Canada](#) Olympic Park, site of the 1988 Winter Games. But perhaps most surprising, is that the Heart of the New West, as Calgary is billing itself these days, is becoming known as a center of culture, with diverse entertainment options and an expanding museum scene.

Calgary is home to Canada's biggest oil and gas companies and the administrative headquarters of the \$50 billion oil sands extraction projects centered 470 miles north in Fort McMurray, Alberta, and is certainly not the most obvious spot for a cultural renaissance. "We've always had this image as being a city without a history, or perhaps a city without real culture," said Kelly Lewis, a manager at Tourism Calgary.

Founded in 1884, Calgary's initial prosperity was based on sandstone quarries. Oil was discovered in 1914, and a boom-bust cycle repeated itself in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. During busts, the city hollowed out; during booms, it was the [Houston](#) of Canada, complete with cowboy hats and swagger. But even in good times, it never had much of a reputation for cultural innovation.

That is changing as quickly as everything else. Some of the biggest creative names in Canada are choosing to introduce their new works in Calgary. "Frobisher," an opera by John Estacio and John Murrell set in Canada's far north, had its premiere at the Calgary Opera Centre in late January. "The Fiddle and the Drum," a new ballet created by [Joni Mitchell](#) with Jean Grand-Maitre, the artistic director of the Alberta Ballet, opened to sell-out audiences last month. The downtown Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts houses — with style — several theater and performance groups and plays host to visiting performers. This year's annual festival of new Canadian plays presented by Epcor's resident company, the Alberta Theater Projects, had three world premieres by Toronto playwrights as well as two shows by Albertans. The theatrical event of the spring is Theater Calgary's April co-production (with troupes in Toronto and [Edmonton](#)) of "The Overcoat" by Morris Panych and Wendy Gorling, and based on stories by Gogol and [music](#) by [Shostakovich](#). And later this month, the [Glenbow Museum](#) will open a 24,000-square-foot gallery devoted to the modern history of Alberta. There is also a two-year-old gallery dedicated to Alberta's original inhabitants, the Blackfoot Indians, as well as an incongruous, but beautiful collection of early Asian sculpture.

"There's a commitment to the cultural sector, which is being backed up by money," said Beth Gignac, manager of the city's arts and culture division, who herself moved to Calgary only last July from the Toronto area.

If visitors can easily fill their nights with plays and music — for instance, the Beat Niq Jazz & Social Club has live shows most nights and the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra keeps a busy schedule that includes Saturday morning and lunchtime concerts — there's also plenty to see around town in the day. The honey-hued sandstone buildings lining the Stephen Avenue Walk, a pedestrian mall between First Street SW and Sixth Street SW, date from the late 1880s, after a disastrous fire led city officials to decree that all large buildings be sandstone. Today the street is filled with shops and restaurants, including the new Blink supper club and several pricey steakhouses, like the [Belvedere](#) and Saltlik, which serve the ubiquitous AAA Alberta beef, as well as the top-drawer seafood restaurant Catch. High-end Italian is Calgary's hottest flavor right now, with new restaurants like Capo in the Inglewood neighborhood and Pulcinella in Kensington garnering notice from both critics and diners.

As condominiums spring up along the Bow River, neighborhoods on the edge of downtown are becoming destinations, too. Among the standouts in Kensington, a trendy [shopping](#) and residential area just over the Louise Bridge, is an outpost of the Calgary-based chocolatier Bernard Callebaut; Livingstone and Cavell Extraordinary Toys, which, though small, lives up to its name; and the Higher Grounds Cafe, a bustling coffeehouse among numerous independent coffee shops in this caffeinated town. This is prime shopping and strolling territory for a population prosperous enough to afford the lobster lasagna or venison chop with wild boar bacon at the local favorite Muse, but young enough to desire a bit of bohemia in their shopping district.

Inglewood, often cited as the next Kensington, remains a neighborhood in transition. To reach the increasingly upscale blocks of antique stores, home furnishing shops and quirky boutiques, you'll have to pass notably ungentrified blocks with dive bars, and local people say, the occasional crack house. But it's worth the walk for destination restaurants like Spolumbo's, a casual sausage house and deli founded by some local football heroes, or Rouge, a romantic high-end French restaurant in a historic house.

The [Calgary Zoo](#) in Inglewood has not been excluded from the development surge either: with \$35 million from the provincial surplus, it has opened new sections devoted to African and nocturnal animals. A new elephant area opens this summer, and a massive indoor northern ecosystem with a saltwater aquarium is planned.

Calgary also has a small Chinatown — no longer the main sign of cultural diversity in a city that has African, Latino and Reggae festivals as well as a full complement of international restaurants.

“I've been saying since I got here, I wish they could lift off the white cowboy hat,” said Ms. Gignac, who, like many newcomers, initially expected the city to be all western, all the time. “There's a lot going on beneath that cowboy hat,” she added.

While the beneficiaries of Calgary's boom are easy to spot, it's not all good news for long-term residents. Tom Booth, a young lawyer who was buying wine on Stephen Avenue, noted that the population influx has meant a huge rise in living costs and an encroachment on the space and independence Calgarians once took for granted. Downtown parking lots charge up to \$30 a day and homes in former working-class suburbs are selling for close to \$850,000, pushing out the middle class, not to mention the poor. “It's forced Calgary to think about how to be a big city,” Mr. Booth said.

Meanwhile, at the long tiled bar at the fashionable Metropolitan Grill on Eighth Avenue SW at the top of Stephen Avenue's sandstone row, casually dressed young professionals — many recent arrivals from someplace else — were meeting and eating. But will they still be here if and when the most recent oil boom ends?

Gonzalo Vivanco, an engineer who came here as a child, thinks they will.

“We had a boom in the '80s, but not like this,” said Mr. Vivanco, who was enjoying a steak. “It's just so much bigger.”

Like many residents here, Mr. Vivanco believes that this time, with new investments — and hard-earned wisdom — Calgary has finally created an economy and culture appealing enough to keep newcomers in town, even if the oil boom slows.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Flights from New York to Calgary begin at about \$440 round trip on United or Air Canada.

WHERE TO STAY

Kensington Riverside Inn, 1126 Memorial Drive NW; (877) 313-3733; www.kensingtonriversideinn.com. Just across the Bow River from downtown, this intimate 19-room hotel has the look of a genteel private club and the comforts of a bed-and-breakfast. Even before the large breakfast (included with the price), guests wake to coffee and a freshly baked treat outside their doors. Rates start at about 280 Canadian dollars, or about \$235 at 1.19 Canadian dollars to \$1.

Hotel Arts, 119 12th Avenue SW; (800) 661-9378; www.hotelarts.ca. This 185-room boutique hotel has art installations in the lobby and minimalist chic bedrooms. While the sushi bar and pool wouldn't look out of place in [Miami's](#) South Beach, the friendly service is more Midwest. The hotel's bistro, the St. Germain, is a destination for local gourmets. Rates start at 129 Canadian dollars.

Sandman Hotel & Suites Calgary West, 125 Bowridge Drive NW; (403) 288-6033. The Sandman chain has a new 121-room hotel on the western edge of town 20 minutes from downtown. Rates start at about 160 Canadian dollars.

Rouge, 1240 Eighth Avenue SE, (403) 531-2767; www.rougecalgary.com. The chef Paul Rogalski's tasting menu (95 Canadian) is considered one of the highlights of Calgary's new dining scene. At lunch, seafood chowder with homemade bacon and fresh herbs is 17 Canadian dollars; at dinner, elk medallions with horseradish-spiked rösti and marjoram crème fraîche is 35 Canadian dollars.

[Murrieta's Westcoast Bar & Grill](#), 808-First Street SW; (403) 269-7707; www.murrietas.ca. A huge skylight warms the sandstone and mahogany dining room of this downtown stalwart. For lunch, the portobello mushroom pasta or crab cakes are 11 to 14 Canadian dollars, and burgers are 10 to 14 Canadian dollars.

Metropolitan Grill, 318 Eighth Avenue SW; (403) 263-5432; and 880 16th Avenue SW; (403) 802-2393. Classic steakhouse menus with AAA Alberta beef. Steaks range from 28 to 38 Canadian dollars.

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