

## **Okanagan Cultural Corridor**

*The Okanagan Cultural Corridor is a cultural tourism initiative encompassing 3 regional districts, over 25 communities, and more than 210 cultural providers. The Kelowna-based organization functions as a regional marketing and development vehicle for cultural tourism. It is working to develop cultural tourism routes in the region, set up a tourism performance tracking program for cultural attractions, and create a 'clearing house' of information, tools and advocacy for the entire cultural sector in the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys.*

### **An Update - March 2004**

**Written by Sandra Kochan for the Creative City Network of Canada**

A 3-year marketing plan and a strategic plan for product development are now in place. Marketing projects currently underway include ongoing distribution of a 48 page full-colour print guide profiling over 100 cultural attractions, enhancement of the Cultural Corridor website at [www.okanaganculturalcorridor.com](http://www.okanaganculturalcorridor.com), and refinement of the communications and inventory database. Product development projects still require funding for full implementation, but a series of regional consultations during the week of March 22-29 will assist in identifying key participants and potential 'pilot' packages.

A research project coordinated by Tourism BC with the support of Community Futures Development Corporation of the Central Okanagan and the Canadian Tourism Commission is also continuing. Several of the reports generated by this research are posted on the Cultural Corridor website. 2004 research activities include visitor tracking at attractions and baseline measurement of cultural tourism activity within the travel trade.

The City of Kelowna has taken a prominent lead in its support of arts and culture. Other communities in the Okanagan are now starting to explore similar opportunities. "Cultural tourism is poised for significant growth in the next 20 years," says Coordinator Sandra Kochan, "and the Okanagan has the ideal combination of amenities to make it a fascinating cultural destination. But the development process doesn't happen overnight, and it's much easier to talk about working regionally than it is to actually make it happen. A regional approach means looking at the big picture; sometimes the direct benefits of being a part of a much larger group aren't immediately apparent. It's up to us to deliver tangible results and to ensure that we build strong links between the cultural, business and tourism sectors. We all have a lot to learn from each other."

Partnerships are an important (and sometimes the most challenging) part of the development process. Stakeholder involvement in the Okanagan Cultural Corridor includes the wine industry, the tourism sector, Okanagan University College, the City of Kelowna's Cultural District and Cultural Services department, regional and municipal government, funding agencies and institutions, and the cultural community. Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development offices and downtown improvement areas are

also on the list. The Corridor also liaises with the local Olympic organizing committee, provincial and national tourism agencies, and other organizations such as the U.S.-based Cultural & Heritage Tourism Alliance. Kochan quips, "Someone once called me MissInformation, and I wouldn't have it any other way. The more information I can circulate, the better...and most of the time the information is accurate!" A standard day may include a visit to an artist's studio, a meeting with a visiting MLA from Yellowknife or making a presentation to a group of local fruit growers who are interested in agritourism (an important part of the Okanagan's heritage and tourism profile).

Chronic underfunding of the cultural sector has put it at a disadvantage compared to other mainstream tourism sectors such as golf, wine, ski and recreation. Because many cultural attractions are focused on providing experiences rather than generating retail or sales revenue, their ability to 'pay to play' in marketing and development initiatives is compromised. The diversity of activity and market readiness (everything from multi-million dollar wineries to back-yard pottery studios) within the Corridor also means that a 'one size fits all' solution will not work. "We've had to take a close look at our organizational model," says Kochan. "Membership in yet another organization is not an appealing option for anyone these days. We chose to develop a package of services and projects which are, in essence, a shopping list for the cultural tourism sector. Providers or organizations can pick and choose those programs that work for them. There's a logical progression in the way these programs fit together; as the attraction's business develops and grows, its choice of services will change."

*For more information about the Okanagan Cultural Corridor, visit [www.okanaganculturalcorridor.com](http://www.okanaganculturalcorridor.com) or contact Sandra Kochan at 250-860-1988, [kochan@shaw.ca](mailto:kochan@shaw.ca) OR [info@okanaganculturalcorridor.com](mailto:info@okanaganculturalcorridor.com)*