



Congratulations Winners of the 2018 Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence

Oct. 25, 2018, Windsor—Congratulations to all recipients of the 2018 Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence. The best of the best in Ontario tourism were celebrated at the annual Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence Gala on Wednesday, Oct. 24 at Caesars Windsor. These awards recognize tourism industry successes by honouring individuals and businesses that have made significant contributions to Ontario's tourism industry.

Jointly presented by the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario (TIAO), Destination Ontario, the Culinary Tourism Alliance (CTA) and Attractions Ontario, the Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence are divided into four respective categories:

The *Tourism Industry Awards of Excellence* are presented to organizations, businesses and individuals that represent the quality of outstanding offerings that make Ontario a destination of choice.

The *Tourism Marketing and Travel Media Awards of Excellence* recognize those who contribute to Ontario's tourism industry through impactful partnerships, marketing activities and media relations.

The *Culinary Tourism Awards of Excellence* celebrate the passion of those dedicated to advancing food tourism in Ontario, and recognize those who work hard to tell the stories of the province's growers, producers, winemakers and brewers.

Ontario's Choice Awards calls upon tourists and locals to vote for their favourite attractions in eight different categories, with the overall top-voted nominee earning the distinction of Attraction of the Year.

Congratulations again to the winners! Your dedication to outstanding service is what makes Ontario a place to discover for travellers. Thank you for your generous and diverse contributions to Ontario's tourism industry.

2018 Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence Winners

Ontario's Choice Award for Attraction of the Year

Top Attraction Ripley's Aquarium of Canada

Culinary Tourism Awards of Excellence

Culinary Tourism Leadership Award Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island

Culinary Tourism Experience Award Muskoka Lakes Farm & Winery

Culinary Tourism Event of the Year Award FUNKfest by Sawdust City Brewing Company

Tourism Marketing & Travel Media Awards of Excellence

Tourism Marketing Campaign Award Under \$50K Tourism Hamilton – #MyHamilton User Generated Campaign

Tourism Marketing Campaign Award Over \$50K Tourism Toronto – The Views Are Different Here

Tourism Marketing Partnership Award Brewery Discovery Routes – Brewery Discovery Routes 2017

Tourism Print Collateral Award Bay of Quinte Regional Marketing Board – Bay of Quinte Discovery Guide

Tourism Digital Marketing Award Kingston Accommodation Partners – Fresh Made Daily Digital Campaign

Travel Media Story Award Karon Liu – "A Pilgrimage to Cheese County"

Travel Media Photography Award Colin Field – Mountain Life Magazine Fall 2017 Snow Biker

Tourism Industry Awards of Excellence (TIAO)

Accessible Tourism Award	St. Lawrence Parks Commission
Sustainable Tourism Award	Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve
Tourism Employer of the Year	Tourism Toronto
Tourism Champion of the Year	Gord Brown
Tourism Innovator of the Year	Tourism Excellence North (TEN)
Tourism Event of the Year – Small Event	THE POLAR EXPRESS™ Train Ride – Waterloo Central Railway
Tourism Event of the Year – Large Event	ONTARIO 150 Tour – Water’s Edge Festivals and Events
Indigenous Tourism Award	Wikwemikong Tourism
Lifetime Achievement Award	J.J. Hilsinger

For more information on award recipients, please see the attached backgrounder.

Quotes

“I’m proud that our province is home to many diverse and exciting experiences that make Ontario a wonderful place for travellers to discover,” said **Sylvia Jones, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport**. “Congratulations to the recipients of the 2018 Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence. Your success contributes to a dynamic tourism industry that stimulates our economy and has a positive impact on communities across the province.”

“Congratulations to all winners of this year’s Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence! Your contributions to tourism represent what makes our province a destination of choice, and your excellence demonstrates that tourism matters in Ontario. The Tourism Industry Association of Ontario (TIAO) is proud to acknowledge the outstanding work of all 2018 recipients.”

Beth Potter, President & CEO, Tourism Industry Association of Ontario (TIAO)

“Congratulations to the 2018 Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence winners. Ontario is a globally recognized travel destination because of the inspiring experiences that our tourism industry offers. Destination Ontario is delighted to honour and celebrate the achievements of our tourism partners and the economic impact they deliver.”

Lisa LaVecchia, President & CEO, Destination Ontario

“The Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence winners are the best of Ontario. We're immensely proud of the food and drink experiences being offered and developed every day in this province. Congratulations to all of the finalists and winners that contributed to Ontario's food tourism success.”

Rebecca Mackenzie, President & CEO, Culinary Tourism Alliance (CTA)

“Ontario's Choice Awards recipients are voted on by consumers and visitors to Ontario. With a wide variety of attractions that participated this year, each attraction that was voted for deserves accolades. There were a total of eight categories to vote for, and the top three finalists honoured received the most votes across all categories. Big congratulations to Ripley's Aquarium of Canada for being named Attraction of the Year, and receiving the most votes overall.”

Troy Young, CEO, Attractions Ontario

Backgrounder

Ontario's Choice Award for Attraction of the Year — Ripley's Aquarium of Canada

Located in the heart of downtown Toronto, and home to 20,000 aquatic animals, Ripley's Aquarium provides both fun and education for locals and tourists of all ages. This summer, this world class attraction welcomed its 10 millionth guest in just under five years of operation.

Ontario Culinary Tourism Leadership Award — Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island

Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island is committed to highlighting their 'Taste of Place' story through sustainable partnerships within their region. They've created sub-brands and resource hubs that celebrate their independent businesses including a 'Grown Right Here' movement, the Barrels, Bottles and Brews Trail and the EPIC Wine Route.

Ontario Culinary Tourism Experience Award — Muskoka Lakes Farm & Winery

Muskoka Lakes Farm and Winery has been growing cranberries in Bala since 1950. But they do more than just grow cranberries: they've created unique, immersive experiences for every season. Visitors are invited to do a 'Bog to Bottle Discovery', hike their Cranberry Trails or indulge in cranberry-themed cheese boards when they visit.

Ontario Culinary Tourism Event of the Year — FUNKfest by Sawdust City Brewing Company

Now in its third year, FUNKfest is an Ontario original, and the largest sour beer festival. It takes place at Sawdust City Brewing in Gravenhurst and brings together brewers and beer lovers from across the province with one thing in common: a love of all things funky.

Tourism Marketing Campaign Award Under \$50K — Tourism Hamilton – #MyHamilton User Generated Campaign

Hamilton's multi-faceted #MyHamilton campaign encouraged the creation and submission of compelling Hamilton stories from travellers and locals alike, all rallying around the #MyHamilton hashtag. Campaign elements included the #MyHamilton photo contest; compelling storytelling through #MyHamilton guest bloggers; a successful push to increase use of the #MyHamilton hashtag among social media users; and paid influencer partnerships.

Tourism Marketing Campaign Award Over \$50K — The Views Are Different Here – Tourism Toronto

Views are Different Here campaign was created in order to boldly introduce the assertion that Toronto is 'Canada's Downtown': a claim the organization feels only Toronto can make. The campaign surpassed all of its objectives, including 43 million views and 112 million impressions. It differentiated Toronto from other major metropolitan cities, and built on the Canada's Downtown brand. The campaign itself received national and international media attention and was nominated for, and was the recipient of, several awards.

Tourism Print Collateral Award — Bay of Quinte Regional Marketing Board – Bay of Quinte Discovery Guide

The fourth edition of the Bay of Quinte Discovery Guide was an attempt at breaking the mold of the typical regional guide. Bay of Quinte Regional Marketing Board wanted to create something that people would not only be excited to pick up, but that they wouldn't toss after the first read. The organization doubled down on design and used playful and energetic illustration as a driver. They also wanted it to be real, so local writers and photographers were hired to tell the story of their own region. The custom illustrations have inspired a new brand identity for Bay of Quinte.

Tourism Digital Marketing Award — Kingston Accommodation Partners – Fresh Made Daily Digital Campaign

Working closely with Kingston's culinary community, the Fresh Made Daily digital culinary campaign incorporated elements of editorial, influencer outreach, video and interactive digital ad units to showcase the authentic, creative side of Kingston's thriving food scene while telling a deliciously immersive story and creating compelling reasons for visitors to try a taste of Kingston. From musicians, to artists to jewelry makers the Maker's Guide to Kingston is the road map for how to meet and explore Kingston like locals do.

Tourism Marketing Partnership Award — Brewery Discovery Routes – Brewery Discovery Routes 2017

Brewery Discovery Routes brings together over 20 tourism and industry partners to celebrate the bounty of Ontario and its protected Greenbelt. It highlights premium breweries, cideries, distillers, FeastON designated restaurants and Farmers Markets. The handpicked establishments on the nine curated routes across the province reminds travellers that in the hardworking, passionate hands of local craftsmen, the earth provides the highest quality sustenance and so much to be grateful for.

Travel Media Story Award — Karon Liu – “A Pilgrimage to Cheese County”

Few things sound more appealing than the words “cheese trail”. Oxford County is rife with some of the country’s best cheesemakers that keep up centuries-old traditions, as well as putting their own spin on new classics. From traditional Dutch goudas to squeaky cheese curds, and yes, a cheese-themed playground complete with a Swiss-cheese park bench, the Oxford County cheese trail is well-worth the trip for locavores and Karon Liu captured this essence through his story “A Pilgrimage to Cheese County.”

Travel Media Photography Award — Colin Field – Mountain Life Magazine Fall 2017 Snow Biker

Colin Field is a photographer and writer specializing in outdoor adventure. The fat snow biker photo from was an in-depth task, with the main mission of trying to make fat biking look cool. All of Colin's images take a strong collaboration between athlete and photographer and this image captured what happens when everything aligns for the perfect experiential moment.

Accessible Tourism Award – St. Lawrence Parks Commission

The St. Lawrence Parks Commission has been investing in accessibility improvements at its historic sites, parks and recreational facilities consistently for many years. About \$175,000 has been invested in the past three years alone in specific accessibility improvement initiatives, with greater focus placed on improving visitor experience and on-site engagement. For example, virtual tours via iPad have been implemented at historic sites where installation of lifts to get to upper floors is not possible. The St. Lawrence Parks Commission also offers specialized tours for guests with a wide range of disabilities, including special event accessibility nights that cater specifically to special needs communities.

Sustainable Tourism Award — Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve

Haliburton Forest is a 100,000 acres of privately owned, multi-use, sustainably-managed forest that sits on the Algonquin Dome. The Forest is home to 100 lakes, 400 wetlands, 300 kilometres of multi-use trails, and over 350 campsites. With this comes a huge responsibility to conserve, protect, educate and get people excited about the natural world. Haliburton Forest does exactly this through merging what is traditionally not thought of as sustainable "Forestry" with research, education, recreation and of course, tourism.

Tourism Employer of the Year — Tourism Toronto

An industry leader for over 92 years, Tourism Toronto continues to be an employer of choice within the tourism community. A clear mission statement, six core values that guide important work being done to bring the Canada's Downtown story to the world, an average tenure of 10 years, a healthy employee culture and a recruitment model that brings new energy into the organization are reflective of a company that prides itself on continuous evolution, and Tourism Toronto is committed to renewing and evolving for the betterment of the organization, its employees and the greater tourism community.

Tourism Champion of the Year — Gord Brown

The late Gord Brown, former MP for the Riding of Leeds-Grenville—Thousand Islands—Rideau Lakes was also a strong voice in parliament for the Ontario tourism and hospitality sector. He was instrumental in bringing millions of dollars in funding to tourism products in his riding through his collaboration with the 1000 Islands Community Development Corporation and others. His influence was undeniable and his effect immeasurable, as witnessed by so many federal investments in support of such entities as the 1000 Islands Boat Museum, Port of Johnstown, Fort Wellington, Rideau Canal Locks, Brockville Aquatarium, Brockville Tunnel, Thousand Islands Playhouse, Skywood, Rockport Customs House, Brockville Airport, Mallory Coach House, and the list goes on and on and on. Gord passed away in May, leaving behind his wife Claudine, sons Tristan and Chance, sister Janice and brother Jeff.

Tourism Innovator of the Year — Tourism Excellence North (TEN)

Tourism Excellence North (TEN) is a development program for Northern Ontario's tourism industry, inspired by the success and impact of a similar program led by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) in Atlantic Canada. TEN training solutions include self-assessment tools, workshops and one-on-one coaching opportunities, all designed to strengthen the ability of tourism operators and destination communities to respond to changes in the marketplace, adapt to visitor quality expectations, develop innovative experiences that raise the bar on visitor value and deliver increased returns, in alignment with the region's product development priorities.

Tourism Event of the Year (Small Event) — THE POLAR EXPRESS™ Train Ride – Waterloo Central Railway

What's better than Christmas with your family? Immersing in dancing, singing, hot chocolate and cookies aboard The Polar Express™ Train Ride each and every year is a great start! After lengthy discussions with both Warner Bros and their rail events staff, Waterloo Central Railway secured a 3-year contract to bring joy and happiness to thousands of people each year. Extremely popular and highly-rated, Waterloo Central Railway also received the Warner Bros Polar Bell Award for "Best On-Board Experience", selected from 52 different railways.

Tourism Event of the Year (Large Event) — ONTARIO 150 Tour – Water's Edge Festivals and Events

During the summer of 2017, Water's Edge Festivals & Events brought the ONTARIO 150 Tour to six waterfront destinations throughout the province to celebrate Canada's 150th. The tour consisted of a unique interactive multicultural music and dance show called Rhythm of the Nation; an axe throwing and tree climbing event from the West Coast Lumber Jack Show; and the 61-foot-tall, 30,000 pound World's Largest Rubber Duck. Overall, the tour generated an economic impact of \$11.2 million and had an attendance of over 1 million visitors.

Indigenous Tourism Award — Wikwemikong Tourism

A department of the Wikwemikong Development Commission, Wikwemikong Tourism offers an array of Indigenous experiences that reflect the cultural lifestyles and traditions of the Anishinabek people of the Three Fires Confederacy. As Manitoulin Island's largest First Nation community and Canada's only officially recognized Unceded Indigenous Territory, Wikwemikong Tourism invites guests to delve into its rich culture and history through nature-based tours.

Lifetime Achievement Award — J.J. Hilsinger

J.J. Hilsinger has been an outspoken figure in Sault Ste. Marie's business and tourism community for decades. An active supporter of the city's growth since the 1950s, J.J.'s name has come to represent entrepreneurship and community spirit. After opening Sault Ste. Marie's first KFC franchise—which eventually expanded to additional businesses—J.J. built the Water Tower Inn in 1974. Still a family-run business, the Inn is known as a welcoming community meeting place in addition to a haven for visitors. Over the course of his expansive career, J.J. has promoted Sault Ste. Marie as a destination for both visitors and business development, and his commitment to hospitality and community engagement undoubtedly embodies the spirit of Ontario's tourism industry.

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