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Festival du Voyageur Inc.

Not even the coldest winters in the world can keep Manitobans from celebrating the Festival du Voyageur! The internationally renowned 10-day festival is held in Winnipeg's Fort Gibraltar every February, and encourages visitors to celebrate Franco-Manitoban culture and the history of the Voyageur era. The festival is named for the French Canadian settlers (Voyageurs) who worked for the fur trade company.

The idea to create a Voyageur-themed event began among the citizens of St. Boniface in 1967, and by 1970 they had raised enough community support to launch the festival as part of Manitoba's centennial celebrations. A few decades later, a record 107,000 visitors and over 1,100 volunteers participated in the 2010 Festival. According to a study by Destination Winnipeg, the net economic impact on Manitoba's GDP of the 2010 Festival was over \$6 million. Re-

cently, this event has generated small surpluses for the non-profit organization (\$20,696 in 2009) which runs Festival. This success has allowed the festival to grow beyond its February event to support and coordinate smaller projects throughout the year.

Festival attracts tourists from around the world by providing live entertainment (including concerts, fireworks displays and a world-class snow sculpture contest), delicious French food and historical exhibits and displays. On-site interpreters tell stories, sing songs, and host the famous French 'kitchen parties.' Meanwhile, visitors are invited to join sled-dog races and fiddle, jigging and beard-grow- ➔



→ ing contests. Every year, more than 10,000 students sign up for Festival's Great-West Life School Program, which offers youth an entertaining and educational field trip to the site.

Festival du Voyageur Inc. is led by a self-appointed board of community directors and currently employs 12 full time staff, 4 summer students and about 185 part-time employees during the event. The festival is held at Fort Gibraltar, a North West Company fur trade post that was built in 1810 (although the festival rebuilt the Fort in 1978 across the river from its original location). Festival also offers entertainment at official 'trading posts' in and around Winnipeg in an effort to reach an ever-growing and more diverse audience. Most recently, the King's Head Pub, Club Regent Casino, and Chaboillé in Saint Malo joined the circuit. These win-win relationships create business for both Festival and local venues.

Festival organizers intentionally support community economic development; local businesses generate revenue as food vendors and in the artisan market-place at Festival, and at least 85 percent of the paid musical performers each year must be Manitoban (70 percent of those are French). In addition, all of the products from Festival's year-round souvenir shop are produced in Canada, many from small Manitoba companies like Etchiboy. Festival's classic red toques are purchased from their office's neighbour, who hand-knits them and donates the profits to the Heart and Stroke

Foundation.

The Festival organization is responsible for more than the fantastic February event. Other organizations often seek help from Festival, as they are one of the only francophone event planners in Winnipeg. More often than not, they volunteer to help animate workshops, run beer gardens, offer marketing support, or find volunteers. Festival was hired by

Célébrations 2008 to coordinate a 3-day outdoor winter market on Provencher. Festival has also managed the Assiniboine Credit Union River Trail for the past seventeen winters, and organizes shinny hockey, curling tournaments and other events on the 8.5 km stretch of ice. For the first ever Louis Riel Day in February 2008, Festival hosted workshops, plays and historical re-enactments at Voyageur Park. Recently, they have also organized francophone evenings with local pro-

sports teams. Some of these events help raise money for the non-profit festival; all of them help to promote French culture.

Festival encourages every Manitoban to embrace their joie de vivre! And at the same time, this community initiative is creating local jobs, opportunities for exposure and income for artists and musicians, revenue for local businesses, and cultural celebration for all Manitobans.

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